Chapter 5
Continuity and Change in Decentralist Urbanisation: Exploring the Critical Potential of Contemporary Urban Theory Through the London Docklands Development Corporation

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Abstract The task of this paper is twofold: The first is to parse out aspects of continuity and change in the decentralist urbanisation of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), through utilising an experimental methodological combination of two urban epistemologies: planetary urbanisation and assemblage urbanism. The second task, responding to the first, is to reflect on this theoretical approach and thus assess these much-debated epistemologies of the urban. To contextualise decentralism, this chapter includes a brief review of the new towns, an influential type of urbanisation, which preceded the LDDC, and of the lobbying activity of their representative organisation, the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) amidst the 'crisis of the inner city' in the 1970s and 1980s, and briefly surveys plans for Docklands from the 1970s. This history of decentralism, as a form of urban transformation, is framed in light of reification and the idea of second nature. The assemblage urbanist side of the methodology utilised by the chapter places particular focus on the retaining wall—an overlooked infrastructure that was key to the rehabilitation of both docks and rivers in East London. The chapter shows how retaining walls were subject to a perpendicular reorientation under the tenure of the LDDC, where a decentralist typology persisted within the post-industrial context. The chapter concludes that despite their political differences, the LDDC in fact came closest to realising plans for the 'decongested', low-density inner city advocated for by the TCPA in the 1970s, and ends with a reflection on the approach utilised and its future potential.

Keywords London Docklands Development Corporation · Planetary urbanisation Assemblage urbanism · Decentralism

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5.1 Introduction

The London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC, 1981–1998) was an Urban Development Corporation, set up early in the government of Margaret Thatcher and funded directly by the national government, with authority over large areas of disused and derelict land in East London. Although not the first, it became the most notable of the Urban Development Corporations, which had been conceived of 1 year earlier to initiate the redevelopment of areas of cities in the UK affected by economic and social decline. The LDDC's geographical scope included the linear, self-contained area of docks—enclosed, private areas of large land use, connected by peripheral roads which served essential community functions. This designated area of East London, referred to here as Docklands, encompassed a wide, roughly linear area around the River Thames, spanning from Tower Bridge, just east of the City of London, to encompass the Royal Docks at Beckton.

Historically, the LDDC constituted both an early case study of 'urban regeneration', and a notable urban space in its conditioning of the emergence of this new type of apparently re-centralist urbanisation—the dominant solution to the contemporaneous issue of inner-city decline. By extension, the LDDC is widely seen to have been indicative variously of 'neo-liberalism', 'late capitalism' and the fall of social democracy (Weaver 2015; Cochrane 1999). Often overlooked, however, is that despite its apparent significance in constituting a re-centralist urbanisation, the LDDC manifested important inheritances and legacies from prior forms of urban development, in particular, the new towns programme of 1946–76, the then-inevitable form of decentralist urbanisation in the West.

This chapter starts from the premise that decentralist urbanisation is a process which contains within itself a core spatial contradiction which is itself a phenomenon worthy of study: urbanisation is by definition a process of (economic, cultural, communicative) integration and consolidation, yet in its decentralist form, growth occurs not at the centre, but on the periphery, proximate to the undeveloped. Following the exposition of implosive and explosive urbanisation as laid out by Brenner (2014), this chapter rejects simplified historical–geographical narratives of the Thatcher–Reagan revolution as constituting a simple return to the city and to centralist urbanisation, and instead attempts to parse out aspects of continuity and change in the decentralist urbanisation of the LDDC and its inheritances.

In order to do this, Sect. 5.2 makes the case for an experimental and self-reflexive methodological combination of two contemporary urban epistemologies, both also utilised as methodologies: 'Planetary Urbanisation' and assemblage urbanism. The former, following Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2015), posits that urbanisation is a totalising phenomenon, whose intensity and spatiality varies around areas of concentration and extension, and which, I argue, has the potential to make sense of urbanisation historically as a phenomenon and physical manifestation of capitalism. The latter, assemblage urbanism, following Colin McFarlane (2011a) and AbdouMaliq Simone (2011), gives priority to the exploration of the specificity of local systems. Working in tandem with planetary

urbanisation, assemblage urbanism here is used to unpack the complex historical-spatial dynamics embedded in certain localised phenomena. This discussion is continued in Sect. 5.2 through presenting and engaging relevant scholarly literature to the end of reaching a point of relative methodological clarity, but the brief scope of the present paper means that this is inevitably restricted. This chapter, as such, can be best conceived of as an expository experiment into the potential for methodological and epistemological self-reflexivity in the use of an exemplary and recently historical case study.

Section 5.3 takes a historical approach to contextualising the object of study, the LDDC, through a brief but necessary rehearsal of the history of decentralist planning in post-war Britain. This is understood through the spatial categories of centrality and peripherality. Focus is placed on the lobbying activity of their representative organisation, the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) amidst the specific historical context out of which the LDDC arose: the 'crisis of the inner city' in the 1970s and 80s. Although different in geographical situation, planning approach and more, both were state-led and arms-length, and, on the whole, produced a decentralist urban typology. In the LDDC, however, this was located in the inner city, and oriented around the waterfront spaces of docks, now reified as a second nature of the city. I argue that this was the result of processes of urbanisation which, in contradiction with their relatively central location within the traditional urban unit, valorised the peripherality of disused infrastructure.

To make this claim, the chapter utilises an assemblage urbanist methodology which pays close attention to the retaining wall, a core infrastructural feature of both docks and rivers in East London in creating a vertical interface between land and water. The final Sect. 5.4, shows how retaining walls were subject to a perpendicular reorientation under the tenure of the LDDC, when they shifted from interfacing land and water in private dockyards, to existing as the linear guidelines of spectacular promenades.

The conclusion, Sect. 5.5, argues that despite their political differences, the LDDC, in fact, came closest to realising plans for the 'decongested', low-density inner city advocated for by the TCPA in the 1970s—an assertion which troubles dominant political narratives of planning in the twentieth century. This leads into a reflection on the methodological combination of planetary urbanisation with assemblage urbanism.

This chapter comes out of research conducted for a recently completed dissertation in urban studies, which focuses specifically on how the adaptive reuse of infrastructure was constitutive of a changed inner-city-built environment (Mountain 2017). In relation to this empirical research, I here take a step back and consider how this recently historical, pivotal and exemplary case study can operate as a kind of litmus test for a specific combination of contemporary urban epistemologies. As such, this chapter is restrained in its use of empirical material, instead of attempting to move self-reflexively between empirical and theoretical modes as a form of historically grounded theoretical research.

5.2 Urban Epistemologies and Methodologies: Planetary Urbanisation and Assemblage Urbanism

The primary result of planetary urbanisation's departure from the urban spatial unit of analysis is a non-cartographic epistemology of the urban. This de-dichotomisation of 'urban' and 'rural' can be considered as a form of immanent critique of the discipline of geography and its influence on urban studies: following in the school of thought of David Harvey (1989), planetary urbanisation favours a theoretical approach to urbanism privileging the generalised form over the specific: 'urbanisation' over 'the urban'. For Brenner and Schmid (2015: 154), 'the erstwhile boundaries of the city—along with those of larger, metropolitan units of agglomeration—are being exploded and reconstituted as new forms of urbanisation reshape inherited patterns of territorial organisation, and increasingly crosscut the urban/non-urban divide itself'. Urbanisation is thus, today and perhaps historically, to be considered as an extensive dynamic that has come to encompass capitalism—the totality of the development of human society.

How might 'the urban' be conceived of without a categorical opposition? Brenner and Schmid (2015: 166) postulate that urbanisation is a process which occurs variably in patterns of '"implosion-explosion" that underpin the production and continual restructuring of sociospatial organisation under modern capitalism. [...] Conceptualisations of the urban [...] must [...] investigate how urban configurations are churned and remade across the uneven landscapes of worldwide capitalist development'. A specific statement from the critique of assemblage urbanism by Brenner et al. (2011) helps specify this broad-brushed approach to study: 'a key challenge for any critical theory is to explicate reflexively its own conditions of emergence—not simply as a matter of individual opposition or normative commitment, but in substantively historical terms, as an essential moment within the same contradictory, dynamically evolving social totality it is concerned to decipher and ultimately to transcend' (Brenner et al. 2011: 236). It is between these quotes that Brenner's innovative intellectual contribution can be found: of inverting the New Left Marxian geographical tradition upon which planetary urbanisation is grounded. Whereas the key intellectual contribution of David Harvey (1989) was to instate a geographical approach within Marxism [which up until then had given total primacy to the dimension of time over space (Soja 2011)], the most significant ramification of the de-dichotomising of the urban is the imposition of a processual understanding of the urban; this means instating, implicitly, a Hegelian philosophy of history within geography.

In contrast to planetary urbanisation, the conception of the urban in assemblage urbanism takes inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) influential work of poststructuralist theory—'A Thousand Plateaus'. The authors committed to this school of thought variously seek to view cities as ordinary systems of modern life (Robinson 2002), as surfaces (Simone 2011), or through materiality (McFarlane 2011a). Such approaches assign a value to everyday experiences of a plurality of modernities—as cited in the modern urban experience of Paris depicted by

Baudelaire and Benjamin (Robinson 2002)—that is at the same time global and non-specifying. Brenner et al. (2011), following Andrew Sayer, refers to assemblage urbanism as 'naïve objectivism'; this chapter takes assemblage urbanism to be primarily characterised by a pluralistic assignation of significance to the everyday.

Assemblage urbanism is associated with a wider project of comparative urbanism, where it is taken as a principle through which to integrate the specificities or uniqueness of different urban experiences in the aim of producing a bidirectional exchange of urban theory between Global North and South. However, this chapter sees the potential for assemblage urbanism to lie not on the global scale, but on the micro: assemblage can be thought of as a tool for thinking about how different parts of a system constitute a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts. A well-cited example which illustrates this basic, small-scale concept of assemblage is by Gregory Bateson (1972: 324):

> Or consider a blind man with a stick. Where does the blind man's self begin? At the tip of the stick? At the handle of the stick? Or at some point halfway up the stick? These questions are nonsense, because the stick is a pathway along which differences are transmitted under transformation, so that to draw a delimiting line across this pathway is to cut off a part of the systemic circuit which determines the blind man's locomotion.

This consciously naïve suspension of historical interpretation is argued by AbdouMaliq Simone (2011) to allow for localised analyses which assign primacy to the identification of the systemic constitution of specific surfaces. This vision is expressed concisely in a close reading of the paradigmatic bounded space of the Tanah Abang market in central Jakarta (Simone 2011: 362): 'entire surrounding neighbourhoods have become extensions with their own niche products, prices and conditions; hundreds of office and residential spaces have been converted into warehouses'. This visceral description of the interconnectivity and spatial and economic extensibility of an urban market is indicative of the potential for assemblage urbanism to be used as a methodology to analyse urbanisation, both historical and present day.

The present line of research is strongly influenced by a current rise in scholarly investigation into the history, function and epistemology of infrastructure itself, as a qualitative phenomenon (Gandy 2014; Belanger 2016; Minuchin 2016) and which constitutes a contemporary 'material turn' in the humanities and social sciences (Bennett and Joyce 2013). There is, however, a self-conscious contradiction to studying infrastructure and urbanisation through an assemblage epistemology. Infrastructure is the very medium of urbanisation (Mabogunje 1993) and has a political-economic function greater than its material form. To take a magnifying glass to infrastructure so as to study its form, therefore, constitutes an immanent materialisation of a reified manifestation of social relations. As such, assemblage urbanism, in its material-based ontology, is itself an intellectual approach premised on the reification of the urban as second nature—a double reification which is itself a peculiar and historically specific phenomenon. Brenner et al. (2011) argue somewhat contradictorily that this reification elides thinking about the totality of capitalism, yet in the same paper they concede to a methodological use of

assemblage. The present chapter stands firmly by such a self-consciously methodological use of assemblage—such a methodology can make the epistemological provocations of planetary urbanisation workable in a grounded way. Assemblage urbanism is, therefore, utilised in this chapter as a way of drawing links between select, telling, ordinary phenomena and complex historical changes.

In 2011, a debate within the pages of City journal between Colin McFarlane, an urban geographer associated with assemblage urbanism and interested in a materialities approach to geography, and Neil Brenner et al. clarified some of the differences present between these intellectual traditions. Brenner et al. (2011) argue that the methodological use of assemblage can be a useful strategy for research, but assert the necessary centrality of questions of political economy to critical urban analyses. There is also a sense—acknowledged most concisely in McFarlane's (2011b) response—that Brenner et al. are in fact not so much critical of assemblage urbanism per se, but rather are dissatisfied with McFarlane's appeal to academic pluralism within the discipline. Brenner et al. (2011) mediate the issue by highlighting the generative potential of their disagreement, and this is further argued in a more recent article (Brenner 2017). However, Brenner is simultaneously unapologetic; critical urban theory must find a way to avoid speaking at cross-purposes, and it is necessary, he implies, to base a critical urban theory on a political-economic framework, thus maintaining the analytical centrality of the concept of capitalism. In the meta-text of the McFarlane-Brenner exchange, the 'elephant in the room' is the definition and significance of capitalism and modernisation, terms of reference for Brenner, but points rather more avoided by McFarlane. The absence of processual thought in McFarlane's provocation is typical of the pitfall of assemblage urbanism—that when utilised alone, it affirms already-existing categories and fails to recognise transformation, and historical significance.

The shortcoming of Brenner and Schmid's exposition is the implicit extent of planetary urbanisation's unapologetic assertion of the primacy of political-economic frameworks of analysis without properly defining the intellectual basis of the contemporary political economy. The reason for this criticism is that it is precisely the one-sidedly political-economic bent of the majority of existing scholarship on the LDDC, which obscures a more sober assessment of what was to become the corporation's historical significance—for example in the lack of insight into the critique of state power which deeply informed the politics of the New Left barely two decades prior—in the oppositionary political-economic work of Sue Brownill (1990), for example.

The much existing literature on the LDDC, both contemporaneous and retrospective, follows such uncritically oppositional standpoints—for the Labour Party and others on the left, the experience of opposing the LDDC was a significant one, and consolidated numerous political and academic networks. Following a focus on the LDDC's impact, this chapter takes a conscious departure from the wealth of literature which criticised the LDDC's legitimacy and undemocratic nature. Instead, I here begin with a recognition of the organisation's historical significance manifested in its continued use in the education of planners and geographers subsequently. It is for this reason that I take a lens of historical distance which affirms the

reality of the organisation's success in forming the contemporary urban landscape of London, and in actively constituting contemporary practices and protocols of urban development much more widely. In order to do this, the aspects of the LDDC's impact which are here considered historically significant to urban development—namely the reification of the post-industrial which created a contradictorily decentralist form of inner-city urban regeneration—are thoroughly contextualised within the history of twentieth-century planning in the UK in the next section.

This approach may be frustrating to those who disbelieve the originality of any of the decisions taken by the LDDC; several significant actors interviewed believe that the LDDC was a wholly opportunist organisation—an assessment that does not appear to be incorrect. But opportunism does not negate the significance of the historical impact of the organisation subsequently; changes which when comprehended I hope will, by extension, create a particularised comprehension of the specificity of broader historical changes.[1]

It should be noted that the attempt to self-consciously combine these intellectually oppositional methodologies has significant philosophical ramifications. Given what may be the ultimate philosophical irreconcilability of a Hegelian method with the pluralism of a poststructuralist approach, the investigation continues with a level of methodological caution and self-reflexivity, allowing for a certain amount of epistemological reflection, seen through the lens of a recent historical case study. Finally, it is important, procedurally, to make explicit an authorial bias which is manifested in the self-conscious selection of the LDDC, as a large, politically significant and already well-researched case study. It is sufficient to state that to make such assessments of historical significance is potentially at odds with post-structuralist approaches, which often tend towards a pluralising of history and prioritising of the ordinary.

5.3 Post-war Decentralism and the Genesis of the LDDC

This section seeks to contextualise the LDDC within the history of decentralism in urban development, and thus follows a chronology of planning history in the UK leading up to the creation of the LDDC. Due to space, this is selective and heavily abridged. 'Decentralism' is here used to refer to the promotion of urban decentralisation, encompassing political decentralisation. Particular focus is placed on green belt legislation, which arose out of specific circumstances at the turn of the

[1]The most pressing example of a disputed historical narrative for the present chapter came during an interview with David Chesterton (2016), who disputed the LDDC's claim to the originality of the decision to preserve the docks, and instead attributed this to their lack of funding for dock-filling. Whether this is true or not, it does not affect the more interesting point, which is the fact that relatively soon afterwards, the LDDC saw it as having been the 'right' decision, and it continues to be an important part of the inherited narrative of this organisation's view of its contributions.

twentieth century, and which has been heavily constitutive of subsequent forms of urbanisation. I focus in particular on the post-war new towns programme, here considered as a predecessor form of urban development to the LDDC. Via a brief look at plans for Docklands produced in the 1970s, this leads to an exposition of the decentralism of the LDDC through the innovation of its influential first CEO, Reg Ward, and sets out for the following section some of the ways in which infrastructure is analysed using the methodology outlined in the previous section.

'Urban sprawl' is a term which conveys a long-standing reaction to unplanned urban expansion. Along with the wider concern for the 'protection of natural landscapes', such attitudes have always been manifestations of an ambivalent response to industrialisation and to the physical manifestation of capitalist expansion in the nineteenth century. This chapter follows Denis Cosgrove (1984) and Theodor Adorno (1997) in considering the spectacle of the rural landscape as a specifically modern phenomenon. As such, the rural landscape is necessarily the product of a modern social subject position that is fundamentally removed from agrarian life by capitalism, and which has become a form of second nature—a projection which expresses both discontent with modernisation, and an unconscious image of the domination of capital; the total urbanisation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. This ambivalent bourgeois reaction to urban expansion came to a fore in the 1930s in response to decades of speculative housebuilding, a notable example being developments along the Metropolitan Railway in northwest London, coined 'Metroland'. Attempts to redress the rapid speculative encroachment of London into the surrounding countryside in the 1930s, such as Metroland, were concretised in the creation of an area of land designated 'rural' and preventing further urbanisation in the 'green belt'. This was first laid out in policy in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which continues to strictly control development within a wide doughnut-shape surrounding Greater London.[2] The motivation behind the creation of the Metropolitan Green Belt was to preserve the geography and character of outlying rural areas from agglomerative urbanisation, and thus was based on a commitment to preserving the distinction between town and countryside.

The majority of so-called rural England, alongside national parks and other conservationist operations, has been deeply affected by a long history of agglomerative and extended urbanisation. This has been true since the nineteenth century—when canals and railways were the speculative infrastructural projects upon which the growth of mining, forestry, mass agriculture and the deeply political enclosure of common land was based. As such, we can say with some confidence that the 'countryside' of twentieth-century England has never been 'rural'. Rather, in the twentieth century, the countryside was predominantly urban; a condition that has been expressed a growing middle-class neo-pastoralism made possible by the expansion of the motor industry and associated infrastructure. The perspective of

[2]The Metropolitan green belt has been subsequently expanded to in fact surround many of the new towns which were formerly outside of its area. None of the major 2016 Mayoral election candidates expressed an intention to loosen green belt legislation.

planetary urbanisation thus has much to offer analyses of the geography of urbanised countries such as the UK in its function of instating an expulsion of the myth of the countryside—a cultural phantasm which embodies an ambivalence regarding the bourgeois revolutionary tradition leading to the self-consciously false projection of an 'outside' (Anderson 1964, cited in Wiener 1981).

As well as seeking to prevent the densification of rural areas surrounding London and preserve an idea of the English countryside, the Metropolitan green belt also functioned to conserve the idea of the city. This constituted an attempt to salvage cultural meaning in the urban unit in response to industrial capitalism and its tendency toward what appeared to be the limitless agglomerative consumption of the rural, and has a tendency of merging the identities of individuated settlements into industrial conurbations. In that it sought to concentrate the urban, the green belt, therefore had, and continues to have, a centralising function in urban development (Hebbert 1998). But the mid-century forces of agglomerative urbanisation persisted regardless, and the post-war population growth (the 'baby boomers') necessitated large-scale state-sponsored urbanisation.

The programme of new town development was initiated in the UK in 1946 in order to alleviate housing shortages which had been created by the Second World War, and became the most notable form of decentralist urban development in the post-war period. The two purposes of the designation of such settlements is described in an official document from 1948 to be 'to provide satellites for the decentralisation of "overspill" population from congested areas, and to create living accommodation for the workers in new centres of employment' (Hart 1948: 153). Like Ebenezer Howard's original conception of the garden city, the new towns were premised not only on the overall preservation of the rural–urban distinction, but also on ideas of the healthy integration of society with nature—combining modern work and culture through planning to avoid the health risks of pollution and overcrowding. Alternative approaches such as planning satellite suburbs (the post-war model adopted by the French government) or relying on unplanned agglomerative expansion would have encroached on the green belt. Instead, entirely new towns, which notably included industrial employment, were to be constructed near key transportation links to the 'parent city' from which former residents were relocating.

In the 1950s and 60s, the new towns succeeded in their aim to attract residents with affordable family houses, as well as industrial enterprises, which relocated to modern facilities that were well connected to road networks with an attractive employment base. This was evidenced in the second and third waves of new town development, which began at the start of the 1960s. By 1978, the new towns were seen by economic geographers such as Lloyd and Mason (1978: 67) as part of a general tendency towards decentralisation:

> The suburbanization or decentralization process associated with the centrifugal movement of people and manufacturing jobs and the transfer of the momentum of growth from the central city to the peripheral suburbs and to ex-urban expanding towns. […] There is sufficient generality across major metropolitan complexes in Western Europe and North America for it to be described as fundamental to the late- and post-industrial periods in Western capitalist society.

It was this historical context in which Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) made his original thesis of the planetary urbanisation of society, and which was, in the terminology of Brenner and Schmid, explosive; made possible by an active policy of decentralisation, which was state-led in its widespread infrastructural support, within what was becoming an increasingly automotive industrial and distribution-based economy.[3]

The majority of new towns were planned around the idea of the decentralised 'neighbourhood unit', where the town is constituted of small village-like communities with local centres, creating, by choice, a quasi-rural environment which prioritised the idea of the local community. In the 1970s, the internal decentralism of the new towns were criticised for being vacuous, lacking an elusive 'civic pride', and the phenomenon of the 'New Town Blues' was widely cited, referring to cases of depression caused by a lack of cultural activity or social life (Gosling 1996: 119). At the same time, in the inner cities, there began an increase in the rate of economic decline, which was likely to have been exacerbated by the new towns and their role in the state-incentivised industrial decentralisation of the economy. It should be noted, however, that the TCPA argued vehemently against this view—that regional and urban planning was a zero-sum game—instead polemicizing against the inadequate decongestion of the inner cities (Booth 1976), and placing the blame for the inner-city economic decline of the 1970s with the failure of inner-city redevelopment policy. Speaking on this issue at the 1978 Annual General Meeting of the TCPA, the inaugural chair of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation, Lord Campbell, argued against directly state-led urban redevelopment in Docklands and other inner cities such as had been attempted in the 1970s. Instead, he presciently spoke in favour of an arms-length approach to inner-city redevelopment, which would be able to rectify the mistakes of inner-city post-war planning, and supposedly take full advantage of the conditions of population density reduction created by the ongoing urban population exodus (my emphasis):

> I am told that inner cities have already received public investments on a scale that far exceeds the nation's investment in all our post-war new towns, and when one compares the results doesn't this suggest that the inner city has not wanted for money, *but has lacked the imagination and institutional equipment to make something out of the opportunities offered by voluntary dispersal?* I am among those who unashamedly believe that some version—if you like some democratized, some partnership version—*of new town machinery is needed in inner city areas if these opportunities are ever to be seized.* (1978: 342)

This magnified a long-lasting discontent with the paternalism of modernist architecture and planning solutions which were bound up with post-war slum-clearance across the country and more widely. Milton Keynes, the last and largest new town development, notably responded to these political developments and sought to move away from planning based around local centres, and to instead facilitate access to a wide range of opportunities in the city centre (Walker 1982).

[3]It should be noted that urbanisation in France has a very different history to in the UK, and that the decentralisation of its urbanisation did not take place with quite the same generality.

This shift was the first marker of a significant departure, here under study, away from the ideological decentralism of the new town philosophy, and the beginning of a late twentieth-century valorisation of the idea of the city and the urban—eventually to lead to the present phenomenon of high-density development referred to by Brenner and Schmid (2015) as implosive planetary urbanisation, and a generalised ideology of 'urban triumphalism'.

Two events in 1976 together signalled the demise of the new towns programme: a speech made by the newly appointed Labour Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Shore, on the crisis of British inner cities (Campbell 1978); and, second, the cancellation of Stonehouse, a designated new town near Glasgow, which led to the immediate redirection of funds for the first time to the redevelopment of the proximate inner city. For historian Anthony Alexander (2009: 50), this latter event was a historical moment with wide ramifications, as it effectively ended what he terms 'the government policy of decentralisation first formally initiated thirty years earlier in the 1946 New Towns Act'. Three years before the election of Thatcher, the end of the new towns programme signalled a move away from the extensive urbanisation as a solution to social problems, and towards a continuing legacy of centralised investment.

In Docklands, several plans were commissioned and produced for redevelopment during the 1970s, and were guided by the problems of widespread dock-closure, land availability and unemployment. Most notable were the London Docklands Study Team (LDST) report, compiled by consultant Travers Morgan and commissioned by the Secretary of State for Environment, and the London Docklands Strategic Plan of the Docklands Joint Committee (DJC—a coalition of Greater London Council (GLC), municipal authorities and others) in 1976. Both plans demonstrate an attention to the role of water in public space, but both assume the filling in of docks for development as industry, leisure or residential development.

The LDST (1973) was produced during the Conservative government of Edward Heath, and its proposals were to be delivered by an organisation modelled on the New Towns (Brownhill and O'Hara 2015). It arrived at five alternative proposals for the widespread redevelopment of Docklands under different spatial planning strategies, with varied configurations of public and private housing, industry, amenities, transport and, most significantly here, water. One particularly imaginative option involved developing an urban typology by shrinking the existing docks; this comprised a network of linear waterways, which even gave houses private water frontages for boat access. It is from this plan, named 'Waterside', that much of the spatial planning of the London and Surrey Docks likely originated.

The 1976 plan of the DJC was written during the first years of Harold Wilson's Labour government. Development of new transport infrastructure was central to its planning, which was organised around existing population centres.[4] In comparison

[4]Most dramatically, the Jubilee line extension, eventually opened in 1999 with a station at Canary Wharf, was planned to serve the centre of the Isle of Dogs rather than the northern location of Canary Wharf. This aspect of the DJC's plan bore a strong resemblance to the 'City New Town' plan of the LDST (1973).

to the LDST, it was directed and functionalist, advocating for the complete filling in of docks in order to maximise functional land for light industry—such land uses were the most appropriate for the employment opportunity of local residents given a localised shortage of skills and training. While the docks were treated with the utmost utilitarianism, the report foresaw the opening up of the banks of the Thames to public access in a way which appeared to prioritise natural amenity and views. This can be found detailed in a section entitled 'A Riverside Walk', where a picture is drawn of the dynamic experience of movement through future walkways built alongside the Thames, cutting through both active industry and housing. The emphasis on natural, public amenity fits into a history of incorporating ideas of nature into modernist planning, but the idea of conserving the infrastructure of the docks goes unmentioned at this time, and evidences the persistence of a firm ideological distinction between nature and history which was later to be bridged.

The first and most notable chief executive of the LDDC, Reg Ward, is regularly described as having been a 'reckless maverick' (Builder Group 1998) or an 'irrepressible mastermind' (Daily Telegraph 2011); he is said to have been responsible for creating the entrepreneurial spirit whereby the LDDC could fulfil its radical aim of 'simply getting things done'. This assertion of agency was consciously oppositionary to an idea of the 1970s, when it was said by the LDDC that things were endlessly planned, but that nothing ever actually changed (Foster 1999: 51). One of Ward's first strategic decisions was to halt the infilling of the area's now disused infrastructure, the docks (known as 'dockfilling'). This process—draining of water and silt, and some ground levelling—had already proceeded in two areas: throughout the London Docks (Wapping) and in the majority of the Surrey Docks (Rotherhithe). Ward's act was both opportunistic (dockfilling is an expensive process) and visionary, and was to become foundational to his legacy. His rationale is explained in an interview with Janet Foster (1999: 173), where he narrates how he was taken for lunch in the NatWest Tower in the City of London by a minister on his first week at the LDDC. He describes how, sat at an east-facing table overlooking Docklands:

> I could not help saying "But where's the bloody problem?" It was the most magnificent waterscape you could ever have hoped to see and yet it was seen as a problem. […] The problem, in my view, was one of perception, of actually seeing the area differently.

But he knew well the problem: that despite its geographical proximity to the City of London, for developers and businesses, the 'East End' had a chronic image problem: 95% of housing was socially rented, and there was a severe lack of transport infrastructure connecting the area with its surroundings (Foster 1999: 60). To investors, the docks and their locale was not only associated with militant working-class trade-unionism, inner-city poverty and post-industrial deprivation (Barnes et al. 1996), but also with an isolated and inward-looking community—the Isle of Dogs, for example, is regularly described as being 'close-knit' or 'insular' (Foster 1999: 214).

The dominant view of the area was a social one, but what Ward perceived from the NatWest Tower was a geographical spectacle. This was the result of a

suspension of disbelief in the social basis of the city and of the political basis of urbanisation, believing this to be restrictive of possibility. In his radical decision to conserve and re-imagine Docklands' derelict infrastructure, Ward created 'Docklands' out of 'the East End' and initiated a practice that became known as property-led urban redevelopment. Ward's imagination of the city was premised on making the city phenomenological in a way that demonstrated a perspective which shared much in common with assemblage urbanism. It is with non-accidental irony that, given that the early LDDC was so poorly served by infrastructure due to the Conservative Party's anti-planning philosophy termed 'demand-led planning' (Church 1990), such a significant early action of the LDDC was to conserve and aestheticise pre-existing, outmoded infrastructure. What Ward achieved was to reify now-historical infrastructure as second nature; to radically reformulate the post-industrial inner-city as a desirable internal waterfront periphery. This 'de-congestion of the inner-city'—the material reuse of an outmoded economic geography—had been for so long prophesied by the TCPA, and was to become the dominant approach to urban redevelopment at a moment that heralded the start of a move away from the mid-century tradition of decentralist urbanisation, albeit at this point with an inner decentralist logic, much like the typology of the early new towns. In their prioritising of the material of urbanisation over economics, assemblage approaches are necessary in order to understand this urban product on its own terms.

5.4 Retaining Walls and the Reification of Infrastructure in the LDDC

Following Reg Ward's preservation of the docks, this section focusses specifically on the reimagination of the relationship between architecture and water; to the adaptation of the docks' material, infrastructural legacy to new ends, namely to facilitate what was to become an early example of market-led development of a deindustrialised inner-city.[5] This section focuses more specifically on the retaining wall—the defining and constitutive infrastructural feature of the docks, which functions, from the assemblage perspective utilised here, as an indicative microcosm containing much more general social change. In engineering terms, such walls created a vertical interface between river, and rail or road transport, define and support the docks, and previously entailed a perpendicular direction of movement

[5]Similar transformations occurred in other infrastructures: for example, freight railways lines which had previously served the docks were rehabilitated and rebranded as car-free paths and as the Docklands Light Railway (DLR)—the UK's only elevated, automated passenger rail system; a system chosen to foreground contemporaneous imaginations of high-tech urban development (Reid 1987). Similarly, a fast passenger boat service was instated along the river, an ancient infrastructure which had long been subordinated to freight traffic and which had developed a correspondingly functional imagination in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

of goods between water and land. Using an assemblage methodology, as previously argued to be appropriate, I here look at the ways in which the reuse of retaining walls has been responsible for a blurring of distinctions in the urban development of infrastructure and nature as a new form of second nature. This is in order to show how, through the preservation and adaptive reuse of outmoded infrastructure generally, and retaining walls specifically, the LDDC produced a model of newly centralised inner-city urban development which manifested a new interest, idea and image of the urban. Contradictorily to its location, this model was made possible through a peculiar form of post-infrastructural decentralist peripherality, capitalising on the natural and on historical and infrastructural context, to the end of waterfront urban redevelopment.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embankments and retaining walls were built into rivers in order to allow for the construction of docking facilities, and often simply to strengthen river walls. The extent to which this type of encroachment has occurred in London is clear from historic maps, which show a much wider river throughout the centre and east of the city. Such walls created a vertical interface between river, and rail or road transport, and entailed a perpendicular direction of movement of goods between water and land. This overall similarity between the structure of river and dock means that the retaining wall has blurred the geological boundary between natural water and artificial infrastructure profoundly—the enclosed river has become a kind of second nature.

While the docks had previously been a significant site of centrality for international trade, in terms of road and public transport—and by extension in terms of the image, idea and experience of the city—they were highly peripheral. Through a gradual process of monopolisation and nationalisation as the Port of London Authority, the docks had increasingly receded into existing as a functionalist service area for the economy of the nation; Docklands had become a socially peripheral locus for the movement of goods. It was a function of this economic significance and the value of the goods handled that the urban spaces of the docks had existed for their active lifetime in the private sphere of the city—closed-off behind high walls to protect valuable goods from theft; invisible and inaccessible except to those who worked on the docks or on shipping. The LDDC's self-conceived task was positioned as an attempt to redress this cultural marginality: to reinvent Docklands as a formal, cosmopolitan entranceway to a new kind of city (Hollamby 1990). Paramount within this project was the fundamental repositioning of the threshold of water in urban space and movement. Along with auxiliary cranes, warehouses and walls, the docks were stripped of their economic function and spatial isolation within the scheme of public access, to be transformed into markers of luxury, heritage and historical authenticity.

Opening up dockside land to public access allowed for the reuse of dock walls as walkways or promenades and, later, cycle paths. In 1982, Hollamby and two influential urban designers produced a 'guide to design and development opportunities' for the Isle of Dogs are of Docklands. Although this plan was not formally adopted by the LDDC, it is commented on by Brian Edwards (1992: 62) that 'a close reading of the report does, however, suggest that certain ideas which have

become common currency in Docklands have their origin in the proposed guide. First, the guide advocated formal treatment of the rectangular dock basins. The idea of picturesque groupings was discarded in favour of strict geometries and deliberate symmetry'. These spectacular, car-free corridors used a standardised design featuring brickwork paving, metal benches and railings, and distinctive spherical streetlights, and formed a quiet, spectacular network of pedestrian and cycle routes which implicated a regular urban layout, itself to become a new network of movement through Docklands, which were oriented around the creation of a networked peripherality of development, intentionally located adjacent to post-infrastructural water (Hollamby 1982).

A perpendicular shift was implemented in retaining walls in Docklands: this mundane infrastructure no longer defined an interface between transport media, and instead aligned a route, running parallel to the dock edge. As such, the docks moved from being the peripheral location of work and the interface of long-distance goods transport, to perpendicularly orientating new thoroughfares. These were linear, offering a conscious proliferation of cityscape perspectives, capitalising on the visual space provided by the horizontal water, and experienced physically as infrastructure through bodily movement along post-industrial walkways. This was the creation of an urban perspective on to the urban itself which was raised, accessible and traffic free. This self-contradictory idea of the urban—the view over the city itself—is seen from a distance as a spectacle, much like the modern phenomenon of the rural landscape. One is confronted with a decidedly post-functionalist urban imaginary, fundamentally different to the visions of the 1970s for Docklands.

While this new network of movement through formally private space was opened up around the docks, the early LDDC was far less authoritative when it came to riverside walkways—it was not until the end of its tenure that the value of riverside walkways was made a component of its planning strategy.[6] In contrast to Hollamby's vision for the docks, he explicitly states that the 'creation of a continuous Thames promenade' is not 'a practical proposition' (1982: 37)—an approach which was influential over much of the length of the LDDC's existence, evidenced in the relatively fragmented quality of river walkways in its area. This was on the basis that there had never been a precedent for the unbroken walkway promenades (Chesterton 2016). Where walkways do exist, many have been made difficult to enter by circuitous access gates, and are closed at night. In one particularly notorious case adjacent to the pumping station on the Isle of Dogs, houses, to be newly constructed with back gardens adjacent to river walls, were granted planning permission by Hollamby himself, requiring the riverside walkway to bypass around the driveways of the houses. Strangely oppositional to the influential

[6]It is important to note, however, that a policy of riverside access was at a later point asserted: by 1998, the LDDC's Water Use Strategy (1998b: 10) stated that 'the Corporation is committed to securing public access to the majority of the 55 miles of quaysides and to the riverside in Docklands'.

LDSP plan of 1976, which prioritised riverside access but sought to remove the docks, Hollamby's plan evidences not only a shift in planning priorities, but furthermore an unprecedented bridging of the ideological distinction of nature and infrastructure in waterside development.

Urban designer Brian Edwards (1992: 53) argues that a contradiction of form and function is present in the LDDC's dockside walkways—that they are pleasant and attractive, but circuitous; bound to the contingent geometries of the docks. This resonates with a report written by the Docklands Consultative Committee (1988: 25), affiliated to the DJC, which argued that the circuitous planning of the DLR, with its tight bends, was evidence of a desire of transport planners to prioritise the creation of valuable plots of land over transport efficiency. What both these criticisms overlook, however, is that plots and the transport infrastructures were bound by the *now historic*—but by no means inevitable—decision to preserve and design around the docks and other mothballed infrastructure; the decision not to negate the existence of watery peripheries, but rather to capitalise on them had led to the configuration of complex and sometimes arbitrary spatial and transport planning. In its later years it was a function of the conserved material legacies of retaining walls and railway embankments that rail transport and traffic-free cycle routes were easily introduced into the LDDC's remit area—the DLR was a cost-effective reuse of existing railway infrastructure, and the promenades and walkways were only later promoted as a sustainable transport solution. Unlike in the DJC, which took a thoroughly transport-led approach to planning, the LDDC started with conservation for the purpose of the creation of heritage, which led to a prioritising of spectacle over efficiency within much transport infrastructure. These infrastructural shifts evidence a low-density re-centralism; a self-contradictory valorisation of watery peripheries within the post-industrial urban centre, creating an unconscious blurring of the lines between infrastructure and nature. Walkways and impounded water as a new form of infrastructural media were in facilitated the realisation of this new urban perspective.

5.5 Conclusion

To the GLC and municipal councils of the 1970s, the economic changes associated with de-industrialisation presented themselves as a set of *problems to be solved* (economic decline, unemployment, inaccessibility). This can be seen dramatically in the problem-oriented methodology which structured the entirety of both the LDST and DJC reports of the 1970s.[7] The economic solution proposed was for lower density land development, suitable for industry, which was to be achieved through

[7]See for example LDST (1973) p. 29 (Sect. "Short Account of the Problems") and p. 55 (Sect. "First Order Problems and Solutions").

the reduction of urban densities, itself an unquestioned premise.[8] In different ways, the suggested outcomes of both the 1970s reports were both grounded in logics of urban governance that were economically conservative; situated within the methods of now poorly financed local authority bureaucracy. In contrast to this municipal-utilitarianism, to the incoming Conservative national government in 1979, the situation of Docklands raised itself not as a problem, but rather as a question, or an opportunity: how to best capitalise on a valuable geographical asset. While the Labour Party-led DJC plan ignored the historical, material landscape and conceived of the area in terms of the existing population or local community with specific skills and with a diminishing relationship to the wider economic context, the LDDC saw the area in terms of its physical space: a defunct human landscape, serene and exciting in its recent material historicity. With a curious historical irony, the LDDC created a new idea of the city out of the preservation of the now-outmoded functional spaces and their layout which had become second nature, but paid little attention to the specific needs of the residue population—the very community which had co-developed with the now-outmoded terrain's profit-making utility.

In Hollamby's (1990: 11) retrospective, 4 years after quitting his post, he recalls the fundamental questions which troubled the early LDDC (author's emphases, author's parentheses):

> But there was a fundamental question which had to be addressed: *what sort of place* was Docklands to be, for these works [environment, infrastructure, housing etc.] *to serve and embellish?* An industrial area? A pleasure ground for London? Residential suburbs for workers housing as in Paris? But where would the workers work? What work would they do? Some of us in the Corporation apprehended fundamental changes, equivalent to a new industrial revolution, painfully taking shape throughout Britain's entire economy.

As well as conveying a self-conception of an organisation at the brink of a much wider historical transformation, within this narrative is a conception of the city as a place and as something which infrastructure and urban development are there to serve and embellish. This idea of place was not an appeal to a pre-existing, re-discovered authenticity; rather, it was raised as a question, as it was something which was very much being decided by political conflict. It was this wider question of place that was answered in the reimagination and naturalisation of outmoded infrastructure. Just as Ward perceived an asset in the geographical spectacle of Docklands from the NatWest Tower, Hollamby (1990: 12) recalls a surprisingly similar impression:

> Looking at the face of Docklands in 1981, I found it in many ways extremely beautiful. The great silent spaces of the retained docks, the coiled and restless river, and the enormous sky over the flat landscape, created dramatic views and skyscapes of incredible beauty. But it was the beauty of death.

[8]LDST (1973: 30): previous Comprehensive Development Areas of 1947 Town and Country Planning ministry specified 336 person/hectare (p/ha) in contrast to densities frequently between 500 and 750 p/ha in adjoining parts of the Boroughs. LDST adopts a maximum net density for public housing of between 200 and 240 p/ha.

The achieved aim of the early LDDC was to reify, through formalist urban design, this lamented, post-industrial landscape as second nature—to opportunistically but also aesthetically conserve and capitalise on the previous material history of industrial capital—including its distinctive, peripheral spatial layout of water and land; in other words, a decentralist urban typology was utilised to the end of creating a new urban imaginary of the post-industrial pastoral, where function gave way to the idea of the city.

This second nature becomes even more apparent when looking at the legacy of the engineering of retaining walls and their surroundings: when the docks were functioning, retaining walls were constructed in order to suspend water above sea level when the tide lowers. Under the LDDC, however, their economic function was in one way reversed entirely: the infrastructure and urbanism of the 1980s—walkways and buildings—was built to be held in place by the adjacent water itself. Much of the LDDC's waterside development adjacent to such walkways, therefore, exists in a fragile infrastructural equilibrium with the bodies of water on which they capitalise. A document produced by the LDDC's engineering department (1998a) details how around one-third of all the retaining walls of the Royal Docks were in a poor structural condition, and that if by accident the water was to be drained (through leaving open the locks to the Thames at Gallions Reach, or otherwise), around one-third of these walls, the promenades, and possibly the buildings above them, would collapse. Although it has gained a semblance of nature, this impounded water is still itself very much infrastructural, historical, and became the concern of structural engineers—this apparently natural material and medium, water, is bound up with the engineering of the very city which it provides perspectives over.

In creating a new city in what had been the functional backwater of the city, the idea of the city changed. The planning of the early new towns embodied the contemporaneous tendency towards the decentralisation of industry. In Milton Keynes, a newly individualised society was planned which responded to discontent with the social conservatism and the persistence of hierarchised, functionalist conceptions of society through valorising the urban, and designing a city whose people could take full advantage of mobility and communications. It was only in Docklands that the aim of Milton Keynes was in fact fulfilled, through a treatment of infrastructural heritage as natural history; a kind of synthesis of the design priorities of the new towns movement. The TCPA argued in their 1977 policy statement for the inner-city development corporations whose only difference would be that they were more democratically accountable than the New Town Development Corporations. However, it was in fact the LDDC which was to succeed in 'decongesting the inner-city'; the delighted playing with the hollowed-out ruins of the industrial landscape to create a new urban imaginary as shown here had in fact been for so long prophesied by the TCPA.[9]

[9]See, for example, an article in Town & Country Planning (journal of the TCPA) by architect Tom Hancock from 1982, entitled In place of dereliction: innovation! Hancock states that he welcomed the designation of the LDDC.

It is now useful to return to the combination of planetary urbanisation, as an epistemological premise and provisional approach, with aspects of assemblage urbanism as methodology. This combination has allowed this paper to move between modes of analysis: historical, theoretical, empirical and speculative. The necessity of brevity and theoretical exposition has limited the extent of the cogency of these modes, and has limited the empirical investigation to one that is more impressionistic than desirable. Empirically, the primary finding here articulated is the contradictory geographical specificity of the post-industrial pastoralism of the urban development of the LDDC amidst the start of a reversal of the apparently inevitable tendency of urban decentralisation in the UK—I here locate this historical reversal's origins in the new generation of the urban in Milton Keynes.

Regardless of empirical inconclusiveness, this chapter has functioned successfully as a starting point; as a pilot study for an innovative historical urban research methodology. As previously argued, when left on their own, the surface or materiality-based ontology of assemblage approaches grounded in post-structuralist theory fails to conceptualise the processual function of infrastructure, as constitutive of urbanisation. However, this chapter hopes to have shown that when combined with the epistemological provocation of planetary urbanisation and its schema of intensive and extended urbanisation—in this case, imposed through the lens of decentralism—an extremely productive response to the so-called 'infrastructural turn' in the social sciences is arrived at. This constitutes a robust response to the tautological way in which infrastructure, as itself an abstract materialisation of capitalist social relations, is doubly reified as second nature under assemblage urbanism—a particular phenomenon requiring more investigation which has occurred both in theory—as manifested by the infrastructural and material turn—and historically in the practice of urban redevelopment—as shown here in the case of the LDDC.

Through grounding research in the premise and approach of planetary urbanisation and simultaneously utilising select assemblage-based tools in historical research into the urban—namely a focus on the detail of select material transformation over time—in this case the retaining wall—a better understanding of the changing historical specificity of urbanisation and the urban in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may soon be developed. This, in turn, will allow for the clarification of still-unresolved questions at the core of urban theory, and for a better understanding of the contemporary agency and future possibility of urban research.

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