

# CITY

**THE PARTICIPATORY**

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# JUST SPACE ECONOMY AND PLANNING: OPENING UP DEBATES ON LONDON'S ECONOMY THROUGH PARTICIPATING IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

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**A Recent, Brief History of Planning, Economy, and Participation in London** 

Popular participation in London planning has had a long and, in some ways, a distinguished history since at least the 1960s. There have been achievements both in community development and in actual changes to policy and the fabric of the city, though the overwhelming character of the changes has been retrograde neo-liberal shifts: commodification, gentrification, and environmental degradation.

Many London districts were saved from the depredations of developers: Covent Garden, Piccadilly Circus, Tolmers Square, and Coin Street are some of the best known. The entire 1974 plan for London, aimed at adapting the city for private cars, the Greater London Development Plan, was defeated by mobilisations at local and London levels. Some of this history is captured in Andy Thornley's book *The Crisis of London*.<sup>1</sup> None of this had much to do with the economy except by implication: opposition to a city dominated by speculative property and financial interests.

Ken Livingstone's heroic period at the Greater London Council (GLC) gave us the triumphs of strong alternative economic thinking, a pioneering analysis of interdependencies in London's complex economies, and related plans of action.<sup>2</sup> Incredibly, to contemporary eyes, the GLC included domestic work as a sector of the economy within their analysis. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government abolished the GLC before much could be achieved on the ground, however. Resistance dissolved through the rest of the century and into the twenty-first, consigning this moment of innovative thinking about London's economy to history, at least so far.

As the twentieth century ended, the establishment of the Greater London Authority (GLA) provoked academic and policy debates,<sup>3</sup> which raised questions about the increasing dominance of financial, corporate, and—especially—real estate sectors in London's economy and, increasingly, in its governance. As Livingstone took office as London's first mayor, however, London's economy was consolidated as the cradle of a rentier economy, a hotbed of tax avoidance and the pursuit of debt-fuelled asset value appreciation.<sup>4</sup> Livingstone made his historic Faustian pact with the City of London, granting the City a strong influence on strategy in return for enormous and valuable transformations in the transport field (the congestion charge, major upgrades of the bus and rail service, and a unique shift away from car-dependence) and a measure of new social housing through planning gain agreements forced on private developers.<sup>5</sup>

But there was no sign of the kind of detailed economic analysis or supportive policy that had been suggested by the 1980s GLC, such as sectoral diversification, productivity improvements in low-wage sectors, or recognition and support for unpaid labour. Instead, London's economic development would be secured through the growth of its high-value 'global' city sectors, which were picked out for support. The introduction of a (voluntary) London living wage was the only radical measure in the early 2000s, the result of a new broad-based coalition of trades unions and religious and community organisations, supported by analysis from Jane Wills at Queen Mary University of London.<sup>6</sup>

### **Early Challenges to the Economic Growth Model Underpinning the London Plan**

The Just Space Network was forged in the later Livingstone years, building mutual support among grassroots organisations, some voluntary sector groups, and campaigners to challenge and influence aspects of the London Plan. Its particular innovation has been to enable local groups to engage in strategic planning at the metropolitan scale, thereby building loose alliances and coalitions across key themes as well as raising local issues at strategic level.<sup>7</sup> The planning literature documents relatively few examples of such scaling-up internationally, though interestingly there seem to be rather more instances in the global South than the global North.<sup>8</sup> Just Space has also supported community groups in representing themselves and raising their concerns about local plans and—since the

Localism Act 2011—in taking up the various new tools and instruments of neighbourhood planning.

Just Space has developed partnerships with academics and students at University College London and King's College London, including student volunteering placements with community groups, courses integrating community and academic teaching, and learning and research collaborations on issues of gentrification, refurbishment of council housing, and London's economy. As such, Just Space has built expertise in how to develop successful academic-community collaborations, documented in the Just Space protocol.<sup>9</sup> The protocol's emphasis on respect, reciprocity, and resourcing chimes with recent debates on participatory action and activist research<sup>10</sup>.

Just Space has focused on democratising the planning process, seeking higher targets for social housing and implementing those that exist, strengthening environmental imperatives, securing benefits for existing residents in embattled 'regeneration' areas, and launching critiques and demands from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. By comparison, the network has been relatively poorly represented on economic issues. Just Space launched a substantial critique of the economic growth model underpinning the new London Plan, which was prepared when Boris Johnson became London's second mayor. Just Space challenged the 2011 Plan's emphasis on securing growth in Gross Value Added (GVA) by focusing on the global city activities taking place, particularly in central areas of London, and by correspondingly neglecting outer London, low-pay sectors, part-time work, social enterprise, voluntary and community sectors, social well-being, and environmental crisis.<sup>11</sup> While these arguments generated significant debate about whether the GLA ought to take a scenario-based approach to the economic evidence base underpinning the London Plan in order to account for the impact of austerity policies and climate change, they were ultimately firmly rejected by GLA and the independent inspector. Just Space did, however, make some minor gains by securing policy recognition for the particular value of markets and small shops.<sup>12</sup>



Participatory workshop: David Roberts, 2013.

Having experienced such a strong rejection and dismissal of their broader critique of the economic models underpinning the London Plan, Just Space realised they would need to take a more proactive approach to the economy in future. A one-day workshop on alternative economic development strategies for London generated enough interest and enthusiasm to prompt the formation of a dedicated Economy and Planning group (JSEP) in May 2013.<sup>13</sup> The group agreed on a programme of seminars, public events, and community conferences that reflected its multiple intentions (See figure 1): to open up participation in planning on economic issues to a greater diversity of groups and interests, to challenge the economic assumptions that underpin the London Plan, and to build other ways of thinking about London's economy and planning in order to meet the challenges of social, environmental, and economic sustainability.<sup>14</sup>

### Contesting Further Alterations to the London Plan

In January 2014, the mayor of London published his proposed changes to the London Plan (the draft Further Alterations to the London Plan, or FALP) for consultation. The main aim of the changes was to increase housing delivery, after the 2011 Census revealed that London's population was growing much faster than previously thought.<sup>15</sup> The Mayor therefore proposed changes to free up well-located 'surplus' retail space in town centres and industrial land for housing development (see Figure 2). JSEP became concerned that the FALP would do damage to the diverse and interconnected economic activities taking place in high streets and industrial areas, increasing the dominance of the Central Activities Zone and reducing prospects for more sustainable and inclusive economic development in London, closer to homes.

proactively manage declining centres  
**proactively** the changing roles of  
 centres, especially those with  
 surplus retail and office  
 floorspace, considering the scope for  
 consolidating and strengthening them  
 centres identified as being in decline  
 by encouraging seeking to focus a  
 wider range of services; promoting  
 diversification, **particularly through**  
**high density, residential led, mixed**  
**use re-development; and improving**

Redevelopment of surplus industrial land  
 should address strategic and local  
 objectives particularly for housing, and  
 for social infrastructure such as  
 education, emergency services and  
 community activities. **Release of**  
**surplus industrial land should, as far**  
**as possible, be focused around public**  
**transport nodes to enable higher**  
**density redevelopment, especially for**  
**housing.** In locations within or on the  
 edges of town centres, surplus industrial  
 land could be released to support wider  
 town centre objectives (see Policy 2.15)  
**subject to other policies in the Plan.**

Extracts from the consultation version of the mayor of London's draft Further Alterations to the London Plan relating to retail and town centres (left) and industrial land (right). Alterations in bold and blue. Source: GLA 2014.

Just Space and JSEP organised events and activities to help groups and individuals to make sense of the FALP, develop consultation responses, respond to the Inspector's programme of 'matters' to be discussed through the Examination in Public (EiP), secure a seat at the

relevant hearings, and give evidence. Just Space has developed a particular methodology for supporting community participation in strategic planning,<sup>16</sup> which JSEP learnt from and adapted.

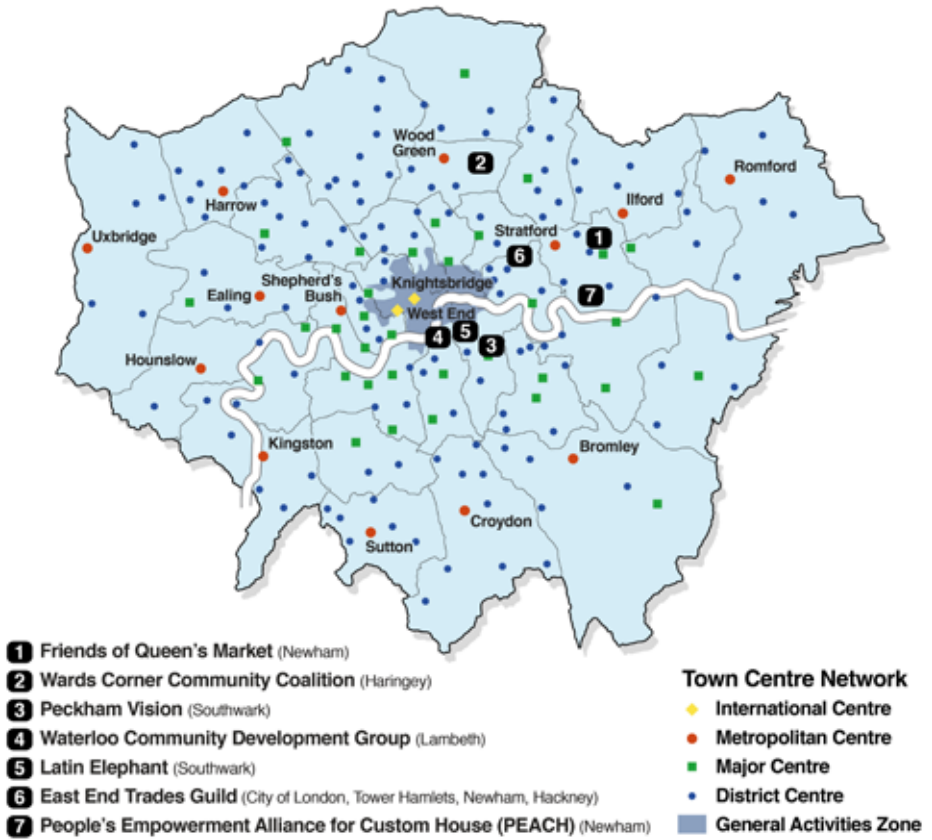
By April 2014, JSEP had produced a forty-page response, which brought together the community and academic evidence collected through these activities to challenge the economic evidence base underpinning the FALP.<sup>17</sup> This required creative reworking and repositioning of JSEP's broader concerns about the assumptions and policies relating to London's economy in the London Plan, which sometimes felt excessively demanding and convoluted. These feelings increased over time, as it became clear that the appointed Planning Inspector was taking a very restrictive approach to his testing of the FALP. However, JSEP was also able to use the FALP to strategically engage new groups, to develop and publish its analysis for use by others, to inform its other activities and initiatives, and to build a sense of common purpose and experience amongst members.

### **Securing Space for Economic Diversity in London's High Streets and Town Centres**

Challenging large retail-led development models had been an important aspect of Just Space's engagement with the economic aspects of the London Plan prior to the formation of JSEP. This focus stemmed from two community groups campaigning to save ethnically diverse markets in Newham and Haringey from demolition and redevelopment: Friends of Queen's Market (FoQM) and Wards Corner Community Coalition (WCC). Through JSEP, Just Space was able to identify and connect with other community and business groups campaigning against the displacement of 'low-value' activities from town centres and high streets. As JSEP began to explore the FALP, this topic went rapidly up the group's agenda.

In the FALP, the group encountered assessments of London's high streets and town centres as being in decline. An updated review of London's need for retail workspace had identified a 'surplus' of retail workspace in medium-sized town centres,<sup>18</sup> prompting the mayor of London to propose a 'win-win' solution in which building high-density housing in town centres would deliver much-needed new housing without the need for investment in new infrastructure and would revitalise town centres that would otherwise be in decline. This assessment of mid-sized town centres as in decline ran counter to the experience of the community and small business groups that JSEP had brought together (see Figure 3). The group were concerned that the proposed policy changes would in fact *cause* mid-sized town centres to decline, making ethnic and minority retailers who were already vulnerable to displacement even more so and undermining the London Plan's approach to sustainable development.

In preparing responses to the consultation, JSEP was able to knit together a wide range of evidence covering experiences of displacement and the complexity and adaptability of high streets and town centres. The response benefited from the input of researchers who



A map of the community and business groups campaigning in defence of 'low-value' activities in high streets and town centres in London that participated in JSEP's activities to engage with the FALP during 2014. Source: adapted from GLA 2014.

summarised existing research on high streets and town centres and on the contribution of ethnic and migrant retailers and entrepreneurs.<sup>19</sup> The JSEP response also drew on the examples and experiences of WCC, Latin Elephant (a group originating in Elephant and Castle, south-east London, promoting the inclusion and representation of Latin Americans in urban regeneration), FoQM, and the People's Empowerment Alliance for Custom House (PEACH, whose activities include negotiating to secure the return of existing shopkeepers to a major regeneration scheme in east London), which had been presented and discussed in JSEP seminars and previous Just Space events.

The narrow approach of the Planning Inspector to the EiP meant that JSEP was limited to challenging the findings of the retail review and the understanding of 'viable and vital' town centres. Latin Elephant argued that the contribution of ethnic and migrant retailers and entrepreneurs to the viability and vitality of town centres had been ignored and should be recognised in the London Plan. Drawing parallels with new policy wording to

support Tech City, they proposed the London Plan be amended to support ethnic and migrant retailers and entrepreneurs as an important and growing sector of the London economy. Other community and small business groups raised related concerns that the FALP did not recognise the vitality of the finely grained economic activities taking place in low-cost workspace in high streets and town centres all over London but rather encouraged their displacement.

WCC's comment that 'we need to have more dialogue with existing businesses before jumping to conclusions' suggests how these debates about what makes a town centre viable and vital were cut through with calls for existing local businesses to be more involved in town centre development. PEACH argued for a policy to require boroughs to work with existing businesses to ensure they are able to return to new developments, saying that even the most successful businesses could not survive redevelopment unless they 'had a part to play'. These calls for more business involvement in town centre development were echoed by WCC, who reminded the planning inspector that small businesses made up 80% of London's economy, claiming that 'small businesses don't have a voice. ... [I]t's becoming clear that it's the corporate interests that this institution is listening to. ... [I]t's very hard for small businesses to participate in these hearings.'

After Latin Elephant's proposal that the plan recognise the contribution of ethnic and migrant retailers and entrepreneurs was supported not only by other JSEP participants but also by two London Assembly members and one local council, the GLA's planning officer confirmed he would 'take it away' to consider. He also proactively proposed to consider an amendment to a policy on town centre partnerships in response to the concerns raised by JSEP members about involvement of local businesses. JSEP's efforts therefore eventually resulted in small changes to the London Plan's retail and town centre policies, even though the group's larger critiques and concerns were rejected. In their campaigns in defence of Latin markets in Seven Sisters and Elephant and Castle, WCC and Latin Elephant are already making use of the new policy wording requiring local planning authorities in London to consider 'the potential benefits of London's diversity' in managing town centres.<sup>20</sup> More generally, taking on these often technical and complex debates on retail and town centres also significantly extended Just Space's previous work, developing its analysis, relationships, and proposals for an alternative London Plan and providing a firm basis for future initiatives. The changes achieved and the strength of the evidence gathered to contest the FALP on this topic indicate the potential productivity and power of JSEP's method of collaborative knowledge production and mobilisation to build an alternative economic evidence base for a new London Plan.

### **Making the Case for London's Industry**

JSEP also challenged the projections of continuing industrial decline that were used to justify a proposal to release well-located industrial land. Through its work on the economy, JSEP was able to support and marshal experience and knowledge about industry in



London from voices not commonly heard in strategic planning debates. Only four businesses had responded to the mayor's consultation on his draft Supplementary Planning Guidance on industrial land, all of whom were major landowners and developers.<sup>21</sup> While Just Space hadn't given much consideration to the industrial land policies of the 2011 London Plan, industrial land loss had long been a major concern of its member group the London Thames Gateway Forum: 116.3 and 72.5 hectares of industrial land had been lost in London in 2011–12 and 2012–13, which is respectively three times and twice the benchmark of forty-one hectares set by the London Plan.<sup>22</sup> The formation of a dedicated and proactive group on the economy enabled Just Space to explore the issue of loss of industrial capacity in London in much detail, drawing together community and business groups and allied researchers through an ongoing programme of events and meetings on industrial land and affordable workspace.<sup>23</sup>

In written response and statements at the EiP, evidence was presented from diverse community and business groups and allied researchers.<sup>24</sup> JSEP members were therefore able to point to healthy clusters of activities in industrial areas that supported other activities elsewhere in the city and provided decent jobs for local people and space for the activities needed for a green or circular economy, such as recycling, repair, processing, and distribution.

At the EiP, community and small business groups raised their concerns that the mayor's proposal to amend the London Plan to focus industrial land release around public transport nodes in order to facilitate high-density housing development would result in well-used industrial areas being lost. The GLA planning officer present acknowledged that too much industrial land was being lost in London and that this would be an issue for a future full review of the London Plan to consider. Two Labour London Assembly members also raised concerns about this issue and pointed out that the GLA's own report had revealed approximately 2,000 businesses employing over 30,000 people in the Park Royal industrial estate in west London.<sup>25</sup> The Planning Inspector saw JSEP's concerns as irrelevant, however. Focused on the release of 'surplus' industrial land, he saw the alteration as consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework requirement on planning authorities to 'avoid the long term protection of sites allocated for employment use where there is no reasonable prospect of a site being used for the allocated use'.<sup>26</sup> JSEP members' concerns that industrial land is being made surplus through the actions of land owners and planning authorities—not renewing leases, raising rents, nor advertising available units, for example—were not heard by the Inspector.<sup>27</sup>

While JSEP was not successful in rejecting these alterations, the FALP did spur the group to generate new resources and alliances and pursue new activities around the issue of the loss of London's industrial capacity. For example, two JSEP members worked to support small businesses and artists to make the case for industrial workspace to be retained and valued at the EiP on the draft London Legacy Development Corporation local plan in March 2015, building and extending the relationships and arguments established through

the FALP. UCL researchers continue to develop their research on industrial capacity in collaboration with JSEP.<sup>28</sup> These resources and relationships are also being put to work by JSEP members in collaboration with small business and community groups in Tottenham in order to contest proposals for industrial land release there.<sup>29</sup> JSEP members have also been invited to attend a ‘roundtable’ organised by the GLA to provide feedback to the consultants engaged to review London’s industrial capacity, providing the group with a further, albeit indirect, route to influence the economic evidence base for the next London Plan. Loss of industry is also moving up the political agenda through the efforts of Green Party London Assembly Member Jenny Jones, who is taking up the issue with the mayor of London<sup>30</sup> and making use of JSEP’s resources and contacts where needed; it has also become an important item in the popular press.<sup>31</sup> Early indications are that this issue will be taken up in the GLA’s work on the next London Plan.<sup>32</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

In a city pre-eminent in its own terms as a centre of globalised capital, it is a tall order for grassroots interests to challenge the triumphalist hegemonic economic discourse that drives policy and action. Perhaps, however, the ‘common sense’ ideas masking neo-liberalism are a bit more threadbare in this highly finance- and real estate-dominated metropolis. Just Space, a network grounded in struggles over housing, “regeneration” and local environment, is a tiny David facing the Goliath of corporate—especially rentier—interests. One of the difficulties faced is that the UK lacks any mainstream political party at national level challenging neo-liberal orthodoxies: city-level struggles are thus more isolated than those we now observe in, for example, Greece and Spain. Even trades unions have been ineffective in challenging mainstream thought and in linking workplace and wider urban struggles—though in this regard there now seem to be embryonic actions among younger workers engaging with urban actions. The activities of JSEP in its first two years of life do, however, demonstrate that there are diverse constituencies that could coalesce in opposition to the accelerating transformation of the city’s economy to one in which low paid workers confront high rents, the ethnic and gender dimensions of exploitation are ignored, and ‘low-value’ sectors are extinguished or shifted to the periphery.

In the process of challenging the FALP, JSEP gathered significant community and academic evidence that emphasised the value of the diverse economic activities taking place in London’s high streets, town centres, and industrial estates. By drawing a more diverse group of economic actors into the debate, supported by academics, JSEP has demonstrated the extent of the gap between the developers’ and the occupiers’ and users’ perspectives on the health of London’s employment land. JSEP’s experience through the FALP has drawn attention to the need to radically open up the process of producing the economic evidence base that informs spatial plans. In this way, JSEP has begun to create a space through which to ask important yet neglected questions about who speaks for London’s economy and what or whom it is for.



The small policy changes that JSEP did secure to the FALP were, of course, wholly insufficient, despite enormous expenditure of effort. While some readers may therefore interpret JSEP's story as one of hopeless co-optation through post-political participation, we suggest this analysis misses the generative and productive aspects of the experience. Firstly, while the changes secured are limited and insufficient, some are already being used by community and business groups in their campaigns, where they may yet prove useful. Further, participating in the FALP prompted JSEP to build and extend its knowledge, networks, and confidence, thereby generating resources that are themselves leading to other initiatives. Some of the more extreme contradictions in current practice are coming under attack and in some cases gaining broader attention, most notably in relation to industrial land. Importantly, the effort of focusing on the FALP prompted JSEP to attempt to identify economic policies for an alternative London Plan.

With a new mayor and assembly to be elected in 2016 and the GLA already preparing the ground for a new London Plan, JSEP will continue to develop and pursue these proposals with Just Space. It is possible that the potentialities for change may improve, either on substantive issues or on the representation in economic policy-making of hitherto-marginalised and subordinated groups and interests. JSEP will be working to marshal a broad-based coalition, including community and civil society groups, small business groups, trades unions, and equalities groups, to continue to press for an economic policy for London that works for the many, rather than the few.

Finally, what we can conclude more definitively at this juncture is that academic support *can be* productively mobilised to support community participation in planning on economic issues. It remains the case that the economy is a particularly difficult aspect of planning for civil society groups to contend with, due in part to the dominance of particular interests in these debates, the intimidating nature of the economy to many groups, and the related problem of framing of economics as a technical science outside of public debate. Yet, if the economy is outside of the realm of participatory planning, the possibilities for more inclusive and sustainable approaches to urban planning remain deeply constrained. JSEP's experimental collaboration between community and business groups and allied and supportive researchers, built on the experience and relationships of Just Space, points to a role for academics in addressing this problem. We suggest that collaborating with community groups and networks in this way has the potential to open up productive and generative fields of critical praxis in pursuit of more emancipatory urban planning.

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