Streetsweeper

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The Isle of Mediocrities

Development of London's Isle of Dogs since 1982 has been a success from some points of view. It looks great from the air, and from other parts of London. The dock basins have been mostly saved from the threatened infill and the area shows every sign of having achieved the 'permanent regeneration' sought by the government of the day.

But what should we say of the quality of the open space and landscape? 'Mediocre'. And this is a tragedy more in need of study than such comparative trivialities as the failure of the Tay Bridge, the Maginot line or the Challenger space shuttle. Most of our futures are bound up with the success of cities and few urban development sites have ever had so much going for them as the Isle of Dogs.

In 1982:

- (1) the site was just downstream from a city about to recover its historic role as a leading world financial centre;
- (2) a vast area of land was in public ownership;
- (3) an exceptionally long planning period had resulted in an imaginative range of alternative development strategies, prepared by Travers Morgan;
- (4) the full resources of what was then the world's largest and most successful property company (Olympia and York) were thrown into the project;
- (5) there was iron backing from the Iron Lady and her then side-kick, Michael Heseltine;
- (6) a landscape design was commissioned from one of the world's best landscape firms, experienced in this type of work (Hanna Olin had previously worked for Olympia and York on Battery Park City, New York);
- (7) the site was better than Lower Manhattan, with large impounded bodies of water retained within a great loop of the River Thames;
- (8) the Isle of Dogs Enterprise Zone had exemption from the dreary town planners who

constrain the quality of most urban development in the UK;

- (9) the project had design leadership from a man (Ted Hollamby) with a deep commitment to the integration of architecture with landscape – he was living in William Morris' Red House, Bexleyheath;
- (10) the development manager (Reg Ward) had a commendably broad vision of the area's potential, as a port for the information age.

To follow the above 10 opportunities, here is a list of 10 mediocracies:

- (1) the architectural styles are as jumbled as a warehouse shelf at Toys R Us;
- (2) the central space (Cabot Square) is normally in deep shade, aggravated by a microclimate reminiscent of the Roaring Forties;
- (3) the Isle is strewn with vast, empty expanses of unused paving;
- (4) some north-facing sunless waterfronts are devoted to cafes and some south-facing waterfronts to emptiness, because the adjacent buildings are not street life generators;
- (5) the new Thames-side walkway is as broad as it is vacant and does not allow access to the historic Thames shore;
- (6) there was no coherent planting strategy, resulting in too few trees and some very odd choices (eg the plantation of a Swamp Cypress forest in Jubilee Park, by the Belgian designers Jacques and Peter Wirtz);
- (7) there are no sensibly planned pedestrian routes from anywhere to anywhere;
- (8) the designated cycle routes show every sign of having been planned by cruel engineers with a maniacal contempt for cyclists (as is usual in London);
- (9) the Isle has no sign of the smallest token of sustainable or ecological design;
- (10) the Isle appears to have more uniformed security guards than it has flowers – and they do not have dogs.

So what went wrong? Readers are invited to email a short explanation to the editors. If the response is sufficient we will publish selected extracts.