

Mediating Instruments

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Abstract

London's expansion is invading the Thames Gateway with 120'000 new homes in the next decade. 91% of these riverside developments are situated on flood plains, posing an immediate conflict between nature and society. AA Diploma Unit 14 continues to be a testing ground for generating *mediating instruments*, applied installations that simultaneously instrumentalise and politicise consultation, communication and design strategies for developments in the Thames Gateway. A case study of a design proposal for the expansion of the *East London Green Grid*, a 'network' of public green spaces, reveals how mediating processes inform alternative suburban topographies that renegotiate territory and inhabitation through both facts and value. Synthetic landscapes born from public engagement and ecological feedback become dynamic and transformative, resulting in an adaptive environment that proliferates rather than suppresses.

1 Introduction

Whilst some regard sustainability as a measure of quantitative values associated with ecology and performance, others place the emphasis on a qualitative level involving socio-political aspects. The great struggle operating within this context is the deliberation of ecology and economy with creativity, and in turn creativity with degrees of instrumentality. How do we address the incompatibility of market-driven urban expansion, natural processes and social heritage? And what is the role of the designer within the developments of urban design? More importantly, how can ideas be communicated and represented in a manner that results in platforms for discussion that includes rather than excludes all the various parties involved?

In a recent exhibition called *The Thames Gateway Assembly* at The Architectural Association in London, AA Diploma Unit 14 tried to address this dilemma within the context of its ongoing research into London's expansion of the Thames Gateway [Fig 1]. The exhibition showcased a series of mediating instruments that combined various aspects of sustainable planning. The most instrumental and most successful were comprehensive design representations that provided a platform for effective discussion between socio-political and environmental bodies. Some of the questions raised during these discussions are summarised by Lawrence Barth:

How might architects apply themselves to the future of the Thames Gateway? Its vastness seems poorly matched with the usual scale of an architect's attention. In the popular mind, an architect is trained to design houses, or maybe the odd museum, office tower, or library. Assigned to the 80,000 hectares of the Thames Gateway, one might imagine, the architect simply begins to project these once-discreet objects in massive numbers across a landscape. The visualization may suggest the potential of transformation, but it typically remains static, vaguely utopian, and quickly forgotten. What if,

*instead, architects used their training to create interactive media to show how urban and environmental systems might work over time? What if they developed instruments which encouraged people to form assemblies around the consideration of the large-scale functional systems driving urban development around them?*³⁵



Figure 1: 'The Thames Gateway Assembly'; Exhibition at the Architectural Association Gallery, 28.4.2006 to 26.5.2006, curated and designed by Peter Staub, Theo Lorenz and Neil Davidson. Photograph by Valerie Bennett

2 The Eco-Economical Dilemma

The discussion centred around what was outlined in the London Plan by the Mayor of London in 2004³⁶ for the construction of 120'000 new suburban homes and the necessary infrastructures in the Thames Estuary within the next 10 years. Most of these new-build communities and cities will be riverside developments, built on current floodplains and brown fields. Given the capacity of London's existing flood defences, these developments pose an immediate conflict between nature and society. Although there is awareness of amphibious living and dykes in the Netherlands, which are proven examples of successful flood mitigation systems based on designing with natural strategies, the current

³⁵ Lawrence Barth, *The Thames Gateway Assembly* in *AA Files 54* (London: AA Publications 2006), pp 67

³⁶ Mayor of London, *The London Plan* (London: GLA February 2004)

property market and its demands deem such solutions as non-viable for London's expansion. Developers are looking for the "New York Central Park Effect", where the vicinity to "nature" boosts both demand and prices.³⁷

3 The East London Green Grid

One component of the flood risk management has been the introduction of the *East London Green Grid*. Described by the Thames Gateway London Partnership as "a living network of parks, green spaces, river and other corridors connecting urban areas to the river Thames, the green belt and beyond"³⁸, its effect is to create a better environmental context for development, enhance biodiversity and ecological values, and provide strategic public areas for local communities. Theoretically, in case of flooding, these strategically situated areas would serve as drainage basins and protect the surrounding developments. On paper it appears as the perfect solution to the eco-economic problems outlined above. Unfortunately, the speed of ongoing developments coupled with the lack of funds and the multiplicity of agents involved in the planning process make it very difficult for the Green Grid to be implemented in parallel to ongoing developments³⁹. In order to understand how the cultural, social, political and economic environments can become mutualistic with the natural world, it is vital to synthesise dynamic relationships. As put by James Corner, "the promise of landscape urbanism is the development of a space-time ecology that treats all forces and agents working in the urban field and considers them as continuous networks of inter-relationships."⁴⁰

4 Desocialised Planning: Consultation and Representation of Urban Developments

Such networks of planners, environmentalists and local communities are often unable to communicate effectively as their tools of representation do not translate well across to other groups. Despite the fact that most planning documents claim to have consulted local communities and that the design was derived from a bottom up process, investigation by AA Diploma 14 into the planning of several projects in the Thames Gateway have proven quite the opposite. A large percentage of the local population were fully unaware of planned developments on their doorstep. New infrastructures and housing proposals in the Thames Gateway are mostly presented and discussed through the form of large-scale masterplans or maps.⁴¹ These representations, a tool of architects and urban planners, are not only unfamiliar to those outside of these professions, but also allow for distortion of information.

*Architecture's relationship with its representations is peculiar, powerful and absolutely critical. Architecture is driven by belief in the nature of the real and the physical: the specific qualities of one thing – its material, form, arrangement, substance, detail – over another. It is absolutely tooted in the idea of 'the thing itself'. Yet it is discussed, illustrated, explained – even defined – almost entirely through its representations.*⁴²

³⁷ 'A most canonical instance of this, of course, is Olmsted's Central Park, intended as relief from the relentless urban fabric of Manhattan – even though the catalytic effect that Central Park exerted on surrounding real estate development links it more closely with a landscape urbanist model. In this instance, landscape *drives* the process of city formation.' James Corner, *Terra Fluxus* in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Charles Waldheim ed (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2006), pp 21

³⁸ <http://www.thames-gateway.org.uk/projects-content.asp?id=160>

³⁹ For detailed information please see: *London under threat? Flooding risks in the Thames Gateway*, Environment Committee, London Assembly (London: GLA October 2005)

⁴⁰ Corner, pp 30

⁴¹ 'Maps will be regarded as part of the broader family of value-laden images. Maps cease to be understood primarily as inert records of morphological landscapes or passive reflections of the world of objects, but are regarded as refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world. We thus move the reading of maps away from the canons of traditional cartographical criticism with its string of binary oppositions between maps that are "true symbolic", or that are based on "scientific integrity" as opposed to "ideological distortion". Maps are never value-free images.' J.B. Harley, *Maps, knowledge, and power* in *The Iconography of Landscape*, Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), pp 278

⁴² Kester Rattenbury, "This is not Architecture", *Media Constructions* (London: Routledge 2002), pp xxi

5 Possible Conclusions: A Case Study

A case study in the form of a project by recent AA Diploma Unit 14 graduate and AA Diploma Honours winner, Richa Mukhia, will help address these questions and suggest some conclusions.

“Propagating a Green Corridor” is a project that deals directly with the Green Grid and its relationship with the urban fabric, local communities and developer’s economic and political interests. On a variety of levels, from intelligent interactive prototypes (as exhibited at the Architectural Association) to local initiatives and actions, from design manuals for the implementation of her ideas and an inclusion in a governmental primer, Richa creates a platform for discussion making the issue public.

Rather than reading the Green Grid as a series of dispersed public green spaces, it uses a green linking strategy as the negotiation tool between involved parties. The urban fabric between the ‘network’ of parks is not seen as interruptions to the flow but rather as the playground for a bio-regional grass roots initiative. These linkages, which she describes as ‘Green Corridors’ can begin to redefine the streetscape, so that it is not merely seen as a territory for pedestrian and traffic flow, but a valuable public space in its own right. In addition, they could accommodate biodiverse habitats, pollution buffers and high quality urban spaces.

To do so, it is important to recognise the public as experts of their own territory (that they inhabit) and to integrate them into the planning process right from the outset. Through a series of guerrilla interventions, including patches of turf on the pavement or street markings on grass pitches, the issue of the Green Grid was directly made public, and created a platform of discussion not in a distant community hall, but right on the sites on which the scheme would be implemented [Fig 2]. Unlike common maps and drawings of urban proposals, this strategy of representation avoids the desocialisation of the territory affected.⁴³ The information, opinions and concerns were publicly documented in brochures, presentations and on a website.



Figure 2: ‘Propagating Green Corridors’. Interruptions: Making the Green Grid Public (Richa Mukhia, AADip 14, 2005/2006)

Considering the fact that some developments are only going to be built in 10 Years time, it seems essential to get the youth involved at an early stage to increase their awareness of the conversation. During workshops at local schools, the results of the real public consultations were discussed and the students were encouraged to voice their opinions with techniques that they are familiar with.

⁴³ ‘Maps as an impersonal type of knowledge tend to “desocialise” the territory they represent. They foster the notion of a socially empty space.’ J.B. Harley, pp 303



Figure 3: Mediating Instruments exhibited in *The Thames Gateway Assembly* at the Architectural Association in 2006 (Richa Mukhia and Max Babbé, AADip 14 2005/2006)

This led to a second phase, where proposals for a green corridor were displayed at the Architectural Association through an interactive device. The visitors, mainly people interested in the topic or involved in some of the ongoing processes in the Thames Gateway, were able to retrieve information and give informed opinions which, in return were logged by the device. Through shifting a variety of components related to the Green Corridors into position, every visitor could create his/her own preferred streetscape [Fig. 3]. A camera would detect any movement of the sliding components and log this information. As an immediate output, an evolving image on screen would demonstrate the participatory design as well as quantitative figures. Over four weeks, significant data could be received which directly influenced the design. In addition, as a more manual output, a series of flower seeds given away for free for people to plant in their front garden were the start of a branding campaign for the project. This combination of guerrilla gardening initiatives and applied academic research was the basis for a common representational language that proved to be appreciated by all parties involved.

In a final step, the project identified three sites as testing grounds for Green Corridors. Through a series of drawings and animations as well as physical models with plants, possible changes and growth over time were demonstrated [Fig. 4]. Together with a design manual explaining in detail how to 'construct' public green corridors, this formed the basis of a design proposal ready to be implemented anytime.

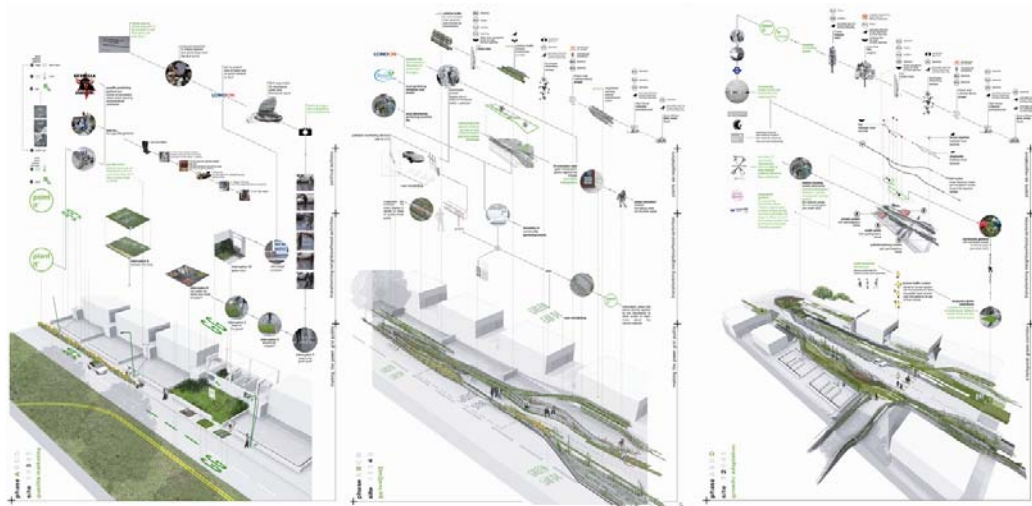


Figure 4: 'Propagating Green Corridors': Drawings of progress stages over time (Richa Mukhia, AADip 14 2005/2006)

This project was very successful in communicating strong design intentions to a variety of parties such as local communities, governmental and environmental bodies as well as architects. Most significantly,

as a result, the project has recently been included in a primer⁴⁴ issued by the Mayor of London and therefore makes strong claims to be implemented in the form of a planning policy. The Greater London Authority (GLA) has expressed keen interest in pursuing this method of engagement and is currently in conversation with Richa to realise some of the findings, methods and ideas associated with 'Propagating a Green Corridor'. This collaboration has fostered a highly valuable relationship between AA Diploma Unit 14 and the GLA, which will continue to effect change in London's landscape urbanism.

6 Conclusion

From the investigations carried out through the agenda of AA Diploma Unit 14, it appears that the role of the architect has changed. Considering the many factors involved, designing within the context of the Thames Gateway means to mediate. This involves creating a democratic design process considering both socio-political and environmental issues. It also means informing independently before receiving informed opinions. In turn, this asks for a variety of communicative tools and platforms of discussion, such as the ones outlined in the case study above. This has, so far, proven to be a successful way to achieve a higher level of information transparency and engagement of all parties involved in the planning process, without just ticking the boxes in promoting participatory design methods.

AA Diploma Unit 14 is becoming a creative link between academia and practice. Perhaps this niche within which it operates can form a new (net-)working model which can be of great mutual benefit, to both students who are about to enter professional practice and to professional bodies. The research continues.

Literature review

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⁴⁴ Richa Mukhia's essay "Green Grid as Social Network", co-written with AA Diploma Unit staff member Neil Davidson, was one of eight essays included in a publication on the London Green Grid published by the Greater London Authority. See GLA, *East London Green Grid Primer/ Eight Essays*, (London: GLA 2006), pp 8-9