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Urban catalysts in theory and practice

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The concept of 'Urban Catalyst' is examined through consideration of Patel Taylor's Thames Barrier Park in London, completed in 2000.

Urban catalysts in theory and practice

Juliet Davis

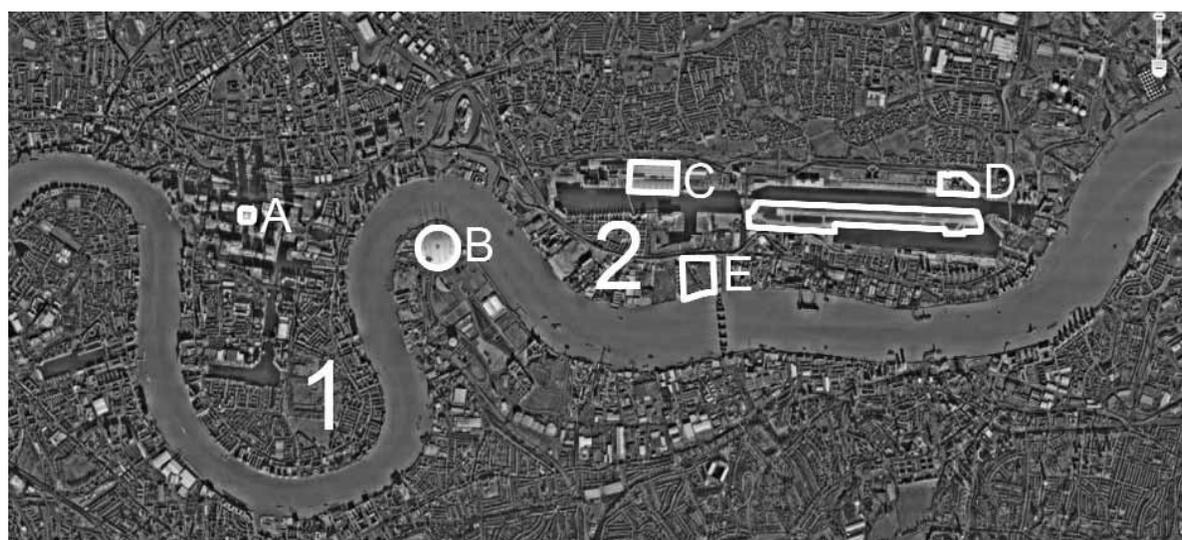
Introduction

This paper involves an analysis of the role of architectural projects which can be defined as 'catalysts' to urban renewal. The aims of this paper are twofold and the paper is divided accordingly into two main parts. The first aim is to discuss, with reference to the work of a number of urban and architectural thinkers, a range of ways in which the term 'urban catalyst' has been both conceptualised and applied. Discussion is structured in relation to the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of a 'catalyst' in the field of chemistry as,

[a] substance that when present in small amounts increases the rate of a chemical reaction or process but which is chemically unchanged by the reaction; a catalytic agent. (A substance which similarly slows down a reaction is occas. called a negative catalyst.)

The second aim is to consider the nature of a specific project – the Thames Barrier Park – that has been referred to as a 'catalyst' to the urban renewal of London's Royal Docks and, in so doing, to further develop the notion of an 'urban catalyst' [1]. The Royal Docks form part of an eight square mile Docklands area which was left as a decaying hinterland to London in the wake of mid to late twentieth-century shift to containerisation in

shipping and concomitant abandonment or scaling down of industry in the area. In considering how the park conforms to or differs from other definitions of 'urban catalysts', particular factors are taken into account. First are ways in which the park addresses conditions of its existing urban context and the processes which have produced it – how it interacts with, expresses and/or alludes to this context through architectural forms, details and materials. Second are impacts that the park appears to have had to the present date in helping to structure new residential projects that have grown up around it, activating new uses on its site and promoting the Royal Docks as an attractive area for investment. Analysis is informed by structured interviews with the park's lead UK design firm, Patel Taylor Architects, their drawings and photographs of the park, the online archives of the London Docklands Development Corporation and by material gathered on walks around the Docks over the last five years. The paper concludes with reflections on the potential future role of the park as a catalyst, its potential durability as such and by suggesting what this says about processes of city-making that are significantly subject to a global financial climate.



1 Aerial view of the Docks showing the Thames Barrier Park in relation to other key landmarks

Key:

- 1. The Isle of Dogs
- 2. The Royal Docks
- A Canary Wharf
- B The Millennium Dome
- C ExCeL Exhibition Centre
- D The Docklands Campus of the University of East London
- E The Thames Barrier Park

What is an 'urban catalyst'?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition above suggests that a chemical 'catalyst' has three specific properties: it is a substance, it activates or accelerates a process and, in that process, it is not itself changed. How do these properties accord with and/or translate to notions of 'urban catalysts'? While the notions put forward by urban thinkers that are outlined below are structured sequentially in relation to these three properties, it is important to stress that these are extracted from variable bodies of work, developed at different time periods and informed by differing theoretical and political contexts.

In his 1970s book *The Architecture of the City*, architect Aldo Rossi ascribes the term 'catalyst' – which he uses as such only briefly – to what he views as the 'primary elements' of a city.¹ Many of these – if not all – are physical substances or 'artefacts', thus broadly complying with the first component of the definition of a catalyst above. 'Primary elements' encompass for Rossi the broad spectrum of activities and associated spatial characters connected with the collective life of cities – including their monuments, commercial buildings, schools and hospitals. Rossi discusses how, although constructed primary elements often constitute relative permanencies in a city, they can simultaneously be 'capable of accelerating the processes of urbanization' including the deployment of its residential districts and thus of acting as 'catalysts'. He cites the growth of the medieval 'bourg' around the abbacy of St. Germain-des-Prés in Paris as an example of such a process. In their capacity to act as catalysts, he argues, 'primary elements' hold long-term value for cities not only in terms of accommodating functions ascribed to them, but in actively participating in and influencing the dynamics by which they are structured over time.²

In relation to the second component of the above definition, Rossi suggests that primary element 'catalysts' are not always 'physical, constructed, measurable artefacts. For example, sometimes the importance of an event itself "gives place" to spatial transformations of a site'.³ His argument follows that as the sites or topographical 'loci' of lastingly significant events in Western culture – the death of St. Peter for example – became their emblems, they began to develop, often in ways that were significantly influenced by ceremonial acts or rituals that have continued to commemorate and/or re-enact them.⁴ With regard to the modern city, Rossi argues that it is important to understand that 'primary elements' act not only in processes of incremental development but in those of redevelopment. Through this, Rossi indicates that catalysts, whether as 'artefacts' or events, affect rates of change in processes of initial urban assemblage or of re-assemblage, and in terms either of growth or of negative decline.

The writer and urban activist Jane Jacobs elaborates an argument about urban catalysts in her classic early 1960s book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* which also relates to the second

component of the dictionary definition above. Jacobs' critique of late Modernist planning in the U.S. emphasises the value of studying and conceptualising urban process over product. She stresses the need for urban practitioners to work with detailed understandings of how the city is produced, through complex interweavings of social, spatial and economic processes. She argues that 'a great blight of dullness' was produced across significant regions of the modern city as a result of urban planners' and designers' over-emphasis on concept-driven, fast track development combined with their failure to see or study how urban processes – 'forces of decline or regeneration' such as 'slumming' or 'unslumming'⁵ – actually get set in motion. In mid-twentieth century New York, this root failure often led to failed attempts to solve perceived urban social and economic problems through comprehensive, physical redevelopment. She states that, 'once one thinks about city processes, it follows that one must think of catalysts to those processes, [as] this too is of the essence'.⁶ Identifying by close analysis what the catalysts to renewal are, she argues, should form a basis for the development of long-term views and process-driven objectives in both urban policy and design.

Though Kevin Lynch does not refer specifically to catalysts in his 1970s book *What Time is this Place*, his argument that if 'utopian ideas' are to have any chance of success 'they must be fuller of the substance of life that people know' resonates with Jacobs' focus on everyday processes. In these terms, Lynch advocates the need for practitioners to design 'temporal model[s]'⁷ for urban development that can reflect this living, concrete 'substance' in the present while remaining capable of 'open' adaptation in the future. Such emphasis on the need for urban development not to foreclose opportunities for growth and transformation resonates with some of the more contemporary work of Richard Sennett. As opposed to the 'brittle city', Sennett's 'open' city incorporates principles 'of porosity of territory, narrative indeterminacy and incomplete form'.⁸ His arguments suggest a need for 'urban catalysts' to be at once well-grounded in existing, perhaps long-standing, living situations and somehow also active in terms of stimulating processes of development and evolution.

As Rossi suggests, questions of how and why 'primary element' catalysts endure and/or change over time are highly complex. As opposed to counterparts in chemistry, urban catalysts are as subject to change as the varied contexts they influence. The contemporary interdisciplinary group known as Urban Catalyst focus on what they term 'temporary use' catalysts for the contemporary post-industrial European city. 'Temporary use' encompasses a range of practices but in general denotes informal spaces produced through the direct engagement of users with existing territories, often of a marginal kind. Oswalt, Misselwitz and Overmeyer argue that temporary use can be catalytic as it can serve to

reveal potential in neglected urban districts and thus can help to frame agendas for future development and/or investment. Citing the success of the incremental redevelopment of the NDSM docks in Amsterdam, they argue that '[t]emporary use could become a[n effective] tool for a strategic planning process'.⁹ In focusing on the 'temporary' and on 'use' rather than on building, they suggest that 'urban catalysts' may be elements or acts of potentially limited duration, initiating processes that may continue long after they have transformed or disappeared.

The work of contemporary activist group, Stalker, provides an example of architect/artist attempts to create small-scale urban catalysts of a temporary nature. Their work involves close observation of areas around the cities' margins, and leads, typically, to interventions that aim to both represent issues they confront and initiate activities within them. One of Stalker's first projects in the Campo Boario in Rome – a former slaughterhouse (re)appropriated by gypsy and illegal immigrant communities – involved creating a setting for the event of a shared feast.¹⁰ Far from being concerned with the structure of the whole city, Stalker's projects deal with moments of time and pockets of space, aiming to create new ways of seeing and communicating within them. At this small scale, they suggest the capacity for design to initiate processes and for architecture to be viewed, in a contemporary sense, as both physical presence and 'event'.¹¹

Spanish architectural theorist Ignasi de Solà-Morales supports the notion that architecture is part of the 'production of an event'. He argues, against Rossi, that complex natures of the post-industrial, cosmopolitan city mean that 'the places of present-day architecture cannot repeat the permanencies produced by the force of the Vitruvian Firmities'.¹² He contends, however, that awareness of complexity need not result in loss of a sense of the value of place, as represented by what he terms 'spectacular' or 'nihilistic architecture' and cautions against the retreat of architectural practice into realms of the 'ephemeral, instantaneous [or] fragile'.¹³ He argues that the major challenge for contemporary planners and architects is to find new ways of building coherently in full recognition of the cultural complexities of contemporary urban life. It is in the light of his theoretical arguments that we can view the range of public space and infrastructure projects constructed in Barcelona during the 1980s and 1990s – ranging from its 'new coastal front' to parks on former industrial sites to street improvement works.¹⁴ They are of a more lasting, physical kind than Stalker's work or that advocated by Urban Catalyst. Viewing them as 'urban catalysts' raises questions relating to how they act – physically, socially, economically – and the timeframes in which they appear to do so. In the next section, I consider such questions specifically in terms of the Thames Barrier Park, beginning with an outline of the main stages of development and redevelopment of the Royal Docks.

Development and evolution of the Royal Docks

The Royal Docks comprise three parallel docks named Victoria, Albert and George V. These were opened between 1855 and 1921 on the northern banks of the river Thames at Beckton. They formed significant additions to the older, smaller London Docks, developing in response to the expansion of Britain's global trade between these years and coming to represent a 'nexus of empire'.¹⁵ Goad's 1895 'Fire Insurance Plan' shows the Victoria and Albert docks rimmed by the vast warehouses – powerfully described in Celine's *Guignol's Band* as 'phantasmagoric storehouses, citadels of merchandise'¹⁶ – and labelled according to the materials they stored: 'grain', 'coffee' and 'jute' for example. In 1900, London's docks employed in the order of thirty thousand men, mostly casually, drawn from the residential districts of Beckton, Canning Town and Tower Hamlets that swelled around them. By the time of the Second World War, the strips between the Royal Docks were heavily industrialised, accommodating among other industries confectioners Crosse & Blackwell, sugar refiners Tate & Lyle and a number of petrochemical factories. The site for the Thames Barrier Park was a tar-works.

Industrial decline began in earnest with the Second World War bombing of the East End of London. After 1945, losses in productivity resulting from infrastructural damage were compounded by wide-ranging political, economic and technological changes – including the disintegration of the British Empire – that began to forge an urban dynamic of deindustrialisation. New container ships carrying more pre-manufactured goods required deeper water and this led to the need to shift London's docks eastward to Tilbury. Between 1967 and 1980, the employment of labourers across the docks fell to just two thousand. By 1980, many of the docks were derelict, forming huge, largely sealed-off wastelands. While a number of small, local, opportunistic businesses such as car breakers and waste businesses continued in operation up until the recent past, the only major industry to survive decline is Tate & Lyle.

Redevelopment plans for the Royal Docks now have a history going back to the formation of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1981. The LDDC was formed to initiate and manage a redevelopment strategy for the docks. The Isle of Dogs was designated an 'enterprise zone', this aimed at stimulating growth and centralisation of financial services in London. Mechanisms for this took the form of financial incentives for private investors and property developers with a promise of publicly funded infrastructure. The prime 'catalysts' to change may thus be seen as strongly economic, involving the attraction and vast generation of private capital. Criticism of the LDDC's early approach to redevelopment process has focused on the exclusion of existing local communities – disenfranchised through the closure of the docks – and even of local planning authorities.¹⁷ As Hall suggests, decision-making lay with 'a relatively small group of public agency officials, using mainly market criteria' and

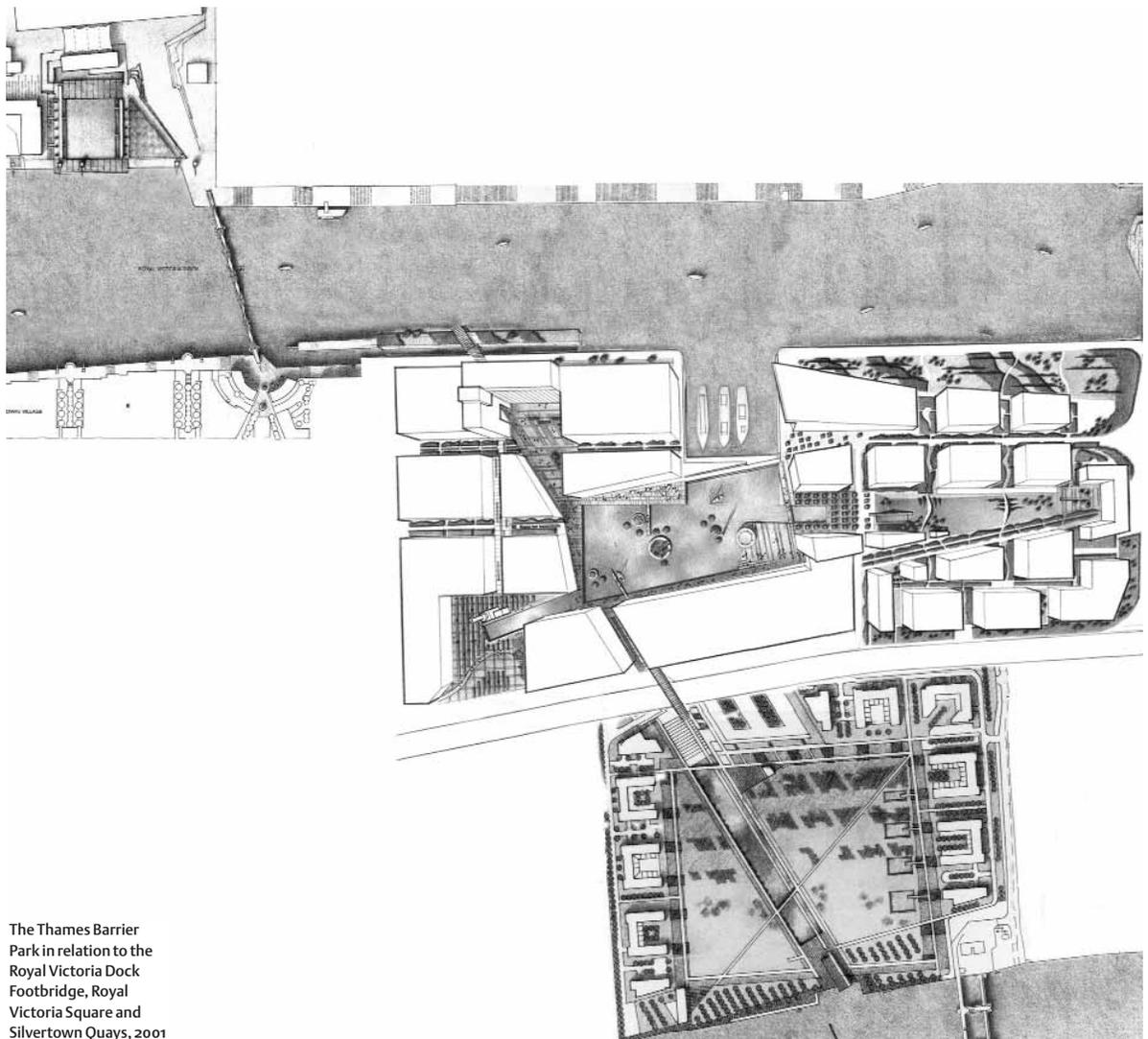
'leverage planning' tools.¹⁸ Criticism has also focused on the lack of urban planning controls introduced by the LDDC and thus on their sacrifice of potential opportunities to harness funds from private development to create a more coherent system of open spaces and better quality public infrastructure.¹⁹

A strategic development plan for the Royal Docks was first published in 1985. The LDDC allege that by then private developers could see for themselves that regeneration in Docklands was both 'serious and succeeding',²⁰ suggesting that the Isle of Dogs could act as 'catalyst' to similar, eastward development. The strategy laid the ground for the development of a series of key urban elements, intended to shift 'London's centre of gravity [...] eastwards' and initiate 'self-sustaining' regeneration.²¹ The 'Royals' were carved up into a jigsaw of uses and plots for private development following industrial property lines. The key elements were the Docklands Campus of the University of East London, ExCeL Exhibition Centre and London City Airport. Strategic infrastructure, which comprised new roads and extensions to the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), was seen as key to their economic success if not from a perspective of urban design. In the early 1990s, a series of small, interlinked public realm projects were also positioned: a footbridge across the Victoria dock –

facilitating north-south pedestrian movement; the Royal Victoria Square – a space foregrounding ExCeL and the DLR station; and the Thames Barrier Park. The LDDC's initiation of these indicated adjustment in their approach to urbanisation, following the recession of the early 1990s, toward greater valuing of the public realm and urban design or, as architectural journalist Peter Davey puts it, some 'attempt to civilise the relentless philistine flow of London's money down towards the derelict docks'.²² As Thornley et al suggest,²³ the LDDC's interest in these projects was informed by the economic success of urban design-led regeneration approaches developed in other European cities, resulting in projects such as Paris's Parc André Citroën and Barcelona's new public spaces. In 1996, the LDDC launched an international competition for a phased masterplan for these projects. This was won by a consortium headed by Patel Taylor and the French designers of the Parc André Citroën, Groupes Signes [2].

The place of spatial connection and temporal allusion in activating redevelopment around the Thames Barrier Park

The park, as built, establishes relationships with its surrounding context of derelict docks at various



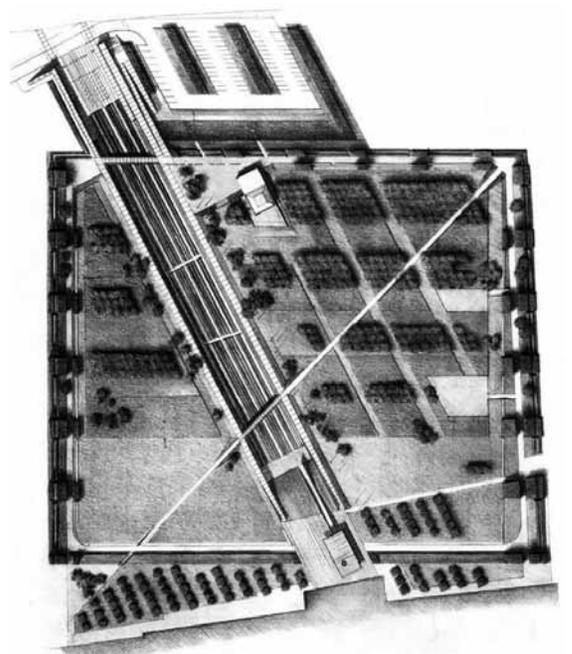
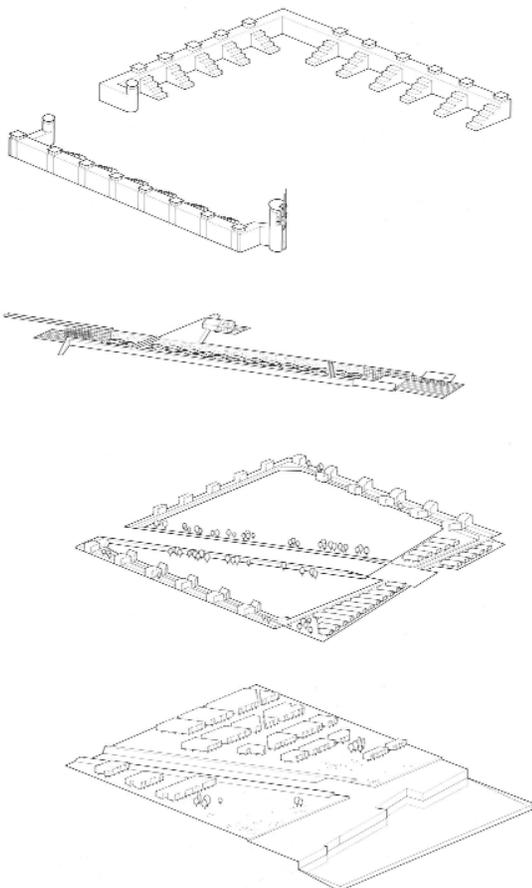
2 The Thames Barrier Park in relation to the Royal Victoria Dock Footbridge, Royal Victoria Square and Silvertown Quays, 2001

levels and scales. A challenge which Patel Taylor acknowledged in interview was to find ways of responding to docks – huge forms that powerfully evoke their past uses – while establishing a set of new spatial relationships that begin to open them up to a different kind of future [3].²⁴

Patel Taylor's primary design move involved raising the ground plane to the level of the former river wall, creating a grassy plateau [4, 5] which, according to Davey 'emulate[s] the muscular, man-made topography of the Royal Docks'.²⁵ Andrew Taylor regards the river as a crucial element of the site topography for the project, drawing on Ackroyd's ascription of 'sacred' position for it in relation to the history of the City of London.²⁶ The elevation of the plateau helps reorient the site towards the river edge – dramatically tidal and previously invisible from within it. Stands of birch trees serve to frame views of the extensive dock landscape, as from within an interior. The other three edges of the 'plateau' are marked by features which form clear boundaries between the park and neighbouring sites, though paths running around the entire perimeter of the plateau encourage people to occupy them whilst promenading along the river or sitting in view of the Thames Barrier, Millennium Dome and Docklands [6].

In a secondary design move, the 'plateau' was effectively incised, opening up a rift referred to by Patel Taylor as a 'green dock' [7]. Whereas the 'plateau' is open and simple, intensity is produced in the 'dock' through a variety of architectural and botanical features and forms. These are arranged within a sequence of space distributed between the road's edge and the river. The first, at the entrance from the car park, is referred to as a 'piazza' and characterised by a grid of fountains set into granite [8]. The second, main space, is cultivated in parallel strips which include yew hedges cut in wave patterns [9]. The third and final space, where the ground ramps up between fair-faced concrete walls to plateau level, has a pavilion overlooking the river [10, 11]. In addition to creating a particular 'microclimate', the 'green dock' has a more 'human scale'²⁷ than the surrounding landscape, allowing an option of retreat from its vastness. This spatial scale is reinforced by park furniture, intricacies of colour and planting, by delicate guarding and bridges. For Andrew Taylor, introducing architectural forms suited to small-scale community uses into monumental post-industrial sites presented a considerable design challenge. All too often, he argued, such uses are starkly juxtaposed against large existing elements of infrastructure, waterway and/or road, appearing dislocated and/or

- 3 Isometric drawing showing the main elements of the park
- 4 Aerial view of the plateau
- 5 Rendered plan of the park, 2004





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6 Riverfront promenade

7 Detailed aerial view focusing on the 'green dock'

8 The entrance 'piazza'

9 The 'green dock'

10 View towards the riverside pavilion

autonomous. He suggested that the 'green dock' allows for bridging between both scales and times – the era that produced the docks and the present phase of urbanisation. As such, it forms a 'structuring element' intended to inform the layout of Silvertown Quays, projected to the north.

Relationships are also established with the existing dock landscape at the level of details and materials. Pedestrian surfaces and edgings are formed in silver grey granite or timber boarding while walls are

generally formed in *in situ* cast concrete [12]. Granite and concrete echo the materials of dock construction; the timber recalls ships' decks. The pavilion's canopy is supported on a forest of steel columns, like masts [13]. The guard rail between the plateau and the green dock, formed with chunky steel balustrades finished with grey iron oxide paint and topped with hardwood handrails, recalls the balustrades of ships. Under the canopy of the river pavilion, a series of wave-profiled black granite



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10

benches are inscribed 'To the Victims of the War' [14]. Taylor generally downplays the significance of historical references. He explained, in somewhat dismissive terms, that:

*the war memorial came about because there was some money for some art [...] So fortunately, somebody knew this historian in Newham and he told us about these stories, that a school was hit by a bomb and an armaments factory went up in the First War, killing a load of people nearby [...] and that's really as far as it goes.*²⁸

Regardless of the extent to which this monument is central to the project, it clearly suggests an attempt to establish continuity with the site's past. As such, it raises questions of how and even whether architectural allusions to the past can heal gaps in time created by sudden, drastic change. Even though virtually nothing remains of the original uses or communities of the docks, Davey suggests that the monument has a role in re-establishing 'community identity'.²⁹ How this is performed is important for

understanding the park's broader role as an 'urban catalyst'.

When Solà-Morales argues that the post-industrial landscapes he describes as 'terrain vague' should not be regarded merely as blank canvases, he suggests that redevelopment actors should work to capture the complex and particular 'kind[s] of definition'



that they already possess.³⁰ This resonates with an argument that urban thinkers Armstrong, Girot, Klingmann & Angéilil each make: that there is a need to re-evaluate what post-industrial landscapes, often rendered as 'landscapes of contempt'³¹ offer – in terms of 'temporary use', wilderness or simply space which imagination can seize. The Thames Barrier Park does not, after projects such as Latz's Landschaftspark in Duisburg, involve re-imagining the industrial 'ruins' it overlaid, all evidence of the former tar-works having been buried or removed. Nor does it, in the manner of Geuze's Eastern Scheldt Project, express the extensity or fluidity of the docks and estuarine landscape. Its effect rather, is to introduce a new urban order, certainly in relation to conditions of the existing landscape – river, dock, road, sky, industrial edges – that begins to domesticate its character for the future.

In *The Architecture of the City*, Rossi directly associates continuities in concrete urban and architectural form in the city with strands of cultural continuity and 'collective memory', building on the theories of Maurice Halbwachs.³² Social scientist David Harvey, writing in the late 1980s, questions Rossi's

- 11 Close-up view of details and materials at the ramped threshold between the green dock and the riverside pavilion
- 12 Fair-faced concrete walls
- 13 The pavilion and memorial benches
- 14 Close-up view of one of the wave-shaped memorial benches



assumption that allusions to the past can actually correspond to 'collective memory' in the context of the 'rapidly changing landscapes' of the post-modern city. He suggests that contemporary architectural design founded on such assumptions may be in danger of 'lapsing into the aesthetic production of myth'.³³ He is sceptical about certain



13

motivations for employing historical references in architecture, linking their proliferation in architectural post-modernism to the 'heritage industry' which grew to prominence in Britain in the 1980s in the face of the collapse of manufacturing.³⁴ He cites the 'heritage' waterfronts of the Isle of Dogs as a prime example, arguing that these are not signs of continuity but 'fictions'. Though Christine Boyer acknowledges her debt to Rossi's urban theory, she also challenges it with a view that 'collective memory' forms through the continuously unfolding relationships between people and places.³⁵ She sees collective memory as the 'lived and moving expressions' of diverse individuals and groups and thus focuses less than Rossi on how it might attain certain fixity in 'artefacts' or monuments of an age.

Allusions to the past made through details, materials and the bench-wave-memorial in the Thames Barrier Park are made much more subtly than many of the sanitised allusions to the Docklands' working past. They are not stylised or literal, thus allowing scope for interpretation and for genuinely utilitarian qualities to rise to the surface. Photographs of people in the park on a sunny afternoon – cooling off in fountains, playing hide-and-seek between the hedges – indicate the success of this endeavour. In the light of the above discussion, they help suggest that for historical allusions to resonate with past and present, they need to be able to act as more than memorials in the formation of new narratives of contemporary life.

Is it active?

The purpose of this final section of the paper is to discuss aspects of the way in which the park, as a 'catalyst', acts.³⁶ Patel Taylor's competition masterplan [15] indicates orthogonally structured blocks and open spaces to each side of the park, suggesting how the scale of ex-industrial plots might be broken down. Taylor argued that when approaching an area like the Royal Docks

*[...] you just need strategy. The sites are big enough to create streets and roads and things: run some connections from North Woolwich Road north south and some streets running the other way and you have urban blocks. It's not difficult, you know.*³⁷

He emphasised the value of employing familiar urban typologies and scales in creating new 'pieces of city'. These are tried and tested, can be easily adapted or extended. Their consistent implementation, however, would require the commitment and 'buy-in' of different landowners, developers and public bodies involved in the area.³⁸

After the demise of the LDDC, sites adjacent to the park were bought by developers whose focus on maximising returns in the short term has produced much larger building blocks than suggested by Patel Taylor [16]. Their proposed extension of the park's public river promenade across these sites was not developed. Although the new residential blocks face the park, they are fenced off from it, thereby consolidating rather than beginning to knit together the pieces of the fragmented existing landscape. For Taylor, these buildings testify to the need for 'a bigger



14

picture' to exist among regeneration industry players and stronger leadership in local planning authorities. In apparent echo of Lynch, he emphasised the need for 'frameworks' which establish spatial principles for coherent transformation over time. Over the last four years, the park has begun to inform new development more effectively. To the north of the park, Silvertown Quays – which is currently on hold as a result of the global economic downturn – has been planned to accommodate five thousand new residential units 'in the context of interlinked public spaces'.³⁹ Patel Taylor Architects are involved in developing the masterplan for this. Taylor explained that 'basically the axis of the park is going to carry through and be the sort of structuring element for this development'. However, it may be seen as indicative of the ongoing lack of a 'bigger picture' that continuing the urban coherence established by the park has to rely on Patel Taylor to extend their vision.

In our interview, Taylor emphasised the popularity of the park for diverse uses including dog-walking, picnics, ball games and jogging and thus the catalytic effect of the park in terms of engendering social activity [17]. There is no entrance fee so in theory the park is open to all during the day. Apart from the café, features of the park facilitate but don't prescribe or serve to segregate uses. Users appear, in this sense, to have the freedom to negotiate their usage of patches of grass or path with others. Notwithstanding, the park is managed, made secure (there is a night guard) and maintained by the London Development Agency (LDA). When the park first opened, the LDA 'stage-managed' it too, hosting a series of publicity events. The LDA's website for the park states that 'here you can indulge yourself with excellent gourmet coffees [...] while enjoying panoramic views in a relaxing atmosphere'.⁴⁰ While there is no reason why anyone shouldn't enjoy a

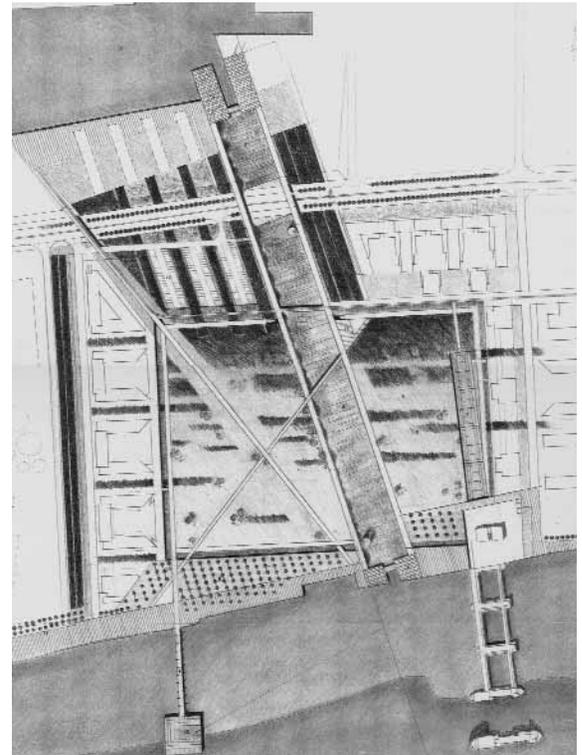
gourmet coffee, this language suggests that an 'upwardly mobile' community is predominantly being welcomed.

The LDA provide horticultural maintenance in the form of a park-keeper. Taylor argued that this is critical, not only in terms of the condition of plants, but in terms of engendering a collective 'sense of

15 Patel Taylor's competition stage plan of the park with suggested forms of surrounding development, redrawn 2004

16 Across the plateau towards new, neighbouring development

17 Active 'green dock'



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ownership'.⁴³ Local people, he stated, 'aren't going to pick up the litter or clean the graffiti off the walls, so you've got to have somebody to do that'.⁴² For Taylor, further encouraging collective 'ownership' of the park might involve a scheme through which local people could make financial contributions towards its maintenance. It would not specifically relate to actual land ownership or to processes of community decision-making about the park's evolution. Although the park clearly engenders use, it is not analogous to the grassroots social 'catalysts' envisioned by Oswalt, Misselwitz and Overmeyer and described above.

The development of the park created an immediate surge in land-values which developers sought to profit from. Taylor affirmed that, '[w]hen we did the competition, the site was worthless because it was all contaminated [...] So, it's a whopping site and a 12.5 million pound project. The first plot was sold for 7 million and then the value of the rest of the site was worth twenty five million or so, against 12.5 million. This development here, Silvertown Quays, is a billion pounds. The catalyst effect is unbelievable!'⁴³ The park is no longer the only project viewed as a 'catalyst' for this development boom, but the first in a rolling sequence of attractions. A major economic 'catalyst' for Silvertown Quays, intended to draw international attention and investment to the Royal Docks, was Terry Farrell's London Aquarium. However, the slow-down in terms of the projected delivery of Silvertown Quays in the context of the current global recession serves to indicate the extent to which such projects depend on a broad climate of economic prosperity. This is not so starkly the case with the 'gradual money' models of urban investment and development that theorist Jane Jacobs advocated in the 1960s or 'temporary use' catalysts more recently advocated by Oswalt, Misselwitz and Overmeyer. The

prohibitive hoardings around the decaying, silent Millennium Mills to the north of the park testify to risks in viewing short-term private investment and property as the primary forces in the evolution of urban places over time.

Can it last?

I began this paper by bringing together a variety of contributions towards a working definition of 'urban catalysts'. These variously indicated that catalysts are involved in the production of 'artefacts' and/ or constitute 'events', that their role is to initiate and/ or accelerate change, that their 'reactants' constitute existing situations and their pasts, and that they may be more or less transient.

Analysis of the Thames Barrier Park focused initially on relationships between the project and its context. I suggested that while references to the past made through architecture may sometimes be mere allusions, here they also contribute to the activation of new uses within the site and thus to the sense in which the project acts as a social and spatial 'catalyst'. Although the park has served to stimulate large-scale private capital investment in the Royal Docks, it has not had the impact its designers intended in terms of influencing the form and fabric of new development around it. What appears to have been significantly lacking to date in order for this to happen is a cohesive urban framework for the whole area more firmly endorsed by the local planning system. One of the most promising indications that the park may yet have a physical structuring role in relation to development to come is Patel Taylor's appointment as public realm designers for Silvertown Quays.

While significant economic values accruing to the Royal Docks over the last decade suggest that the park was a well chosen catalyst for their renewal, I would argue that these economic effects can serve to mask



17

more insidious social and spatial processes, represented for example by failures to engage local communities – their representatives and organisations – to also initiate change for themselves. All of the authors cited in the first section of the paper suggest, in different ways, how this might occur – through temporary use, micro-interventions and/or careful analysis of the intertwining of forces that produce a vibrant city. The old Millennium Mills, remaining sealed off from use, serve to highlight one of the problems of the mode of development that the changing Royal Docks represent – which tends to be intolerant of interim uses, of small-scale

appropriation or of other ways in which ordinary people contribute to re-forming place. Addressing this seems particularly important in times of recession, when projects that have missed the opportunity to ride a particular wave of confidence or development trend are put on hold, raising questions about their future and meanwhile limiting other, potential ‘catalysts’. Further proof of the success of the Thames Barrier Park as an ‘urban catalyst’ will lie in the extent to which the Silvertown Quays form in time as a sustainable piece of London at its eastern edge – socially, spatially and economically.

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