

Urban Regeneration of London Docklands – A sustainable success?

During the late 18th century and early 19th century the London Docklands were a very important industrial centre and the busiest port in the world. Right into the early part of the 20th century, the docks provided employment for thousands of dockers. Trade was focused around maritime activities, for example shipbuilding and the import of goods, such as tobacco and sugar, stored in large warehouses encircling the docks. Traffic through the Royal Docks reached its peak in the 1950s and early 1960s.

However after a turn of technological improvements, the docks became abandoned and derelict. The first change, in the 1950's, was an increase in the size of ships. The ships were so big that trade had to be moved down river to Tilbury docks, which was next to the sea and not crowded by poor roads and a large city.

Unemployment, few amenities and poor living conditions followed this in 1970.

Other changes included a rise in air travel, competition from other ports and the need for more space. All these factors resulted in the closure of the London Docklands in 1981 creating an area of derelict and unused space.


The conditions for the locals in 1981 were very poor, there were a lot of high density housing – cheap, but small and old fashioned. Over half of the Docklands was derelict, vacant or under-used with empty factories and other buildings. There was virtually no open space and only a few small shops and leisure facilities. Transport was poorly developed and the narrow roads were congested with lorries. The unemployment rate was 17.8% and the population of the Docklands had fallen by 20%. Something needed to change, so in July 1981 the London Docklands Development Corporation was set up to improve the social, economic and environmental conditions of the area.

The LDDC was an urban development corporation set up by an Act of Parliament it wanted to tackle the main problems of the area, and attract new people to live and work there. The LDDC wanted to undertake the issues of:

- Transport
- Utilities
- The environment
- Housing
- Community infrastructure
- Unemployment
- Reclamation

Example of Environmental Development	Details
Visual appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Refurbishment of docks allowing them public access.• Urban design, street furniture, public art.• Restoration of listed properties.• Reclamation of 7square km of derelict land.
Environmental projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wildlife and nature parks created.• 160,000 trees planted.• 17 conservation areas.

Example of Social Development	Details
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19,000 new homes built. • 2,000 new social housing units. • 770 council houses refurbished.
Community infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 new primary schools. • 5 new health centres and 6 refurbished health centres.
Utilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in drainage. • Improvement in electricity supplies.

Example of Economic Development	Details
Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in Tourism, with Docklands receiving 2.1 million visitors last year.
Unemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment rates: 17.8% in 1981 and 7.2% in December 1997. • Population increased from 39,000 in 1981, to 68,000 in 1995 . • 2,800 new jobs created.
Transport £950million spent	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New roads. • Docklands Light Railway. • London City Airport. • Pedestrian and cycle networks.
Commercial Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many companies chose to move out and make the most of the cheap office rents and open space. • 16million m² of commercial development completed. • 11.2 million sq. ft of completed new office space. • £1.7 billion of public centre investment and £6.1 billion of private investment towards new businesses and office developments. • Large superstores and shopping complexes.



West India docks, looking west, 1982



Canary Wharf and the Isle of Dogs, 1997



Western Dock, Wapping 1981



Western Dock, Wapping 1998

However not every aspect of the regeneration was successful, some of the impacts that affected the local people and the area were not good ones:

- The new jobs created did not solve unemployment as they were designed to attract rich, skilled workers, there were few jobs created for the unskilled inner city population.
- Money was spent on expensive office blocks rather than local amenities and services.
- Wealthy new people brought extra money and trade to the area, but this caused local shop prices to rise.
- The new housing built is too expensive for the locals. This has led to gentrification.
- Poverty in social housing estates was outlined and inequality increased, when rich, skilled workers moved to the area.
- The traditional 'Eastenders' community was destroyed by the changes.
- Transport schemes were seen as inadequate, although there has been some improvement with the Jubilee line extension in the 1990's, critics believe it should have been in place before.
- The recession in the early 1990's saw work stopping on Canary Wharf and a sharp increase in unemployed and homeless people.

Physically and environmentally, the London Docklands regeneration has been a success, however socially it has been a failure, especially for lower social classes. A survey taken in 1996 showed that 22% of people thought that life had got worse as a result of the regeneration. However other factors and mainly the visual appearance of the Docklands is much better than it would have been had the regeneration not taken place.



Bibliography

www.lcacc.org/regeneration
www.lddc-history.org.uk