

BACKYARD

In the first of a regular series, *Perspectives* turns the spotlight on the 'planning vigilantes' - ordinary people who are demonstrating that they can improve or protect their own environment. Here, Nick Wates looks at

an alliance aiming to give birth to a new urban village. Overleaf, *Backyard* reporters talk to a householder who masterminded her own housing project and the Glasgow tenants who took control of their destiny



And baby came too: Donna Fallows (centre) at the planning weekend

Docklands' hands-on heroes

People get a say as the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture promotes a new urban village

THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY OF LONDON Docklands has felt oppressed and ignored over the past 15 years as development has transformed an area of low-cost housing and industry into an enclave of offices and luxury private homes. But things are set to change.

In a small office building surrounded by 350 acres of derelict land in the redundant Royal Docks, 50 public officials and development experts rolled up their sleeves and began work with an equal number of enthusiastic residents and businessmen on a new approach to planning in the east end. The aim: to involve local people in testing the idea of turning the area into one of Britain's first "urban villages" - the kind of mixed-use, convenient, human-scale and safe place with a sense of community that everyone wants to live and work in but no-one seems capable of building anymore.

The event, the "West Silvertown Planning Weekend", was the largest and most ambi-

tious planning weekend held in the UK to date. Organised by architects Hunt Thompson Associates for the Urban Villages Forum, it was supported by the London Docklands Development Corporation, the London Borough of Newham, the Peabody Trust and Tate & Lyle. The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, which is supporting research into planning weekends, provided a student technical support team as part of its policy of integrating education with practical action.

The outcome was a series of imaginative recommendations, including the setting up of a development trust to give the local community a stake in the new

village alongside the land owners and developers, and a framework for allowing it to grow organically, like a traditional village.

So often, major development proposals are characterised by bitterness and hostility between developers and community. The weekend provided a glimmer of hope that the bureaucratic obstacles which normally stand in the way of sensible community

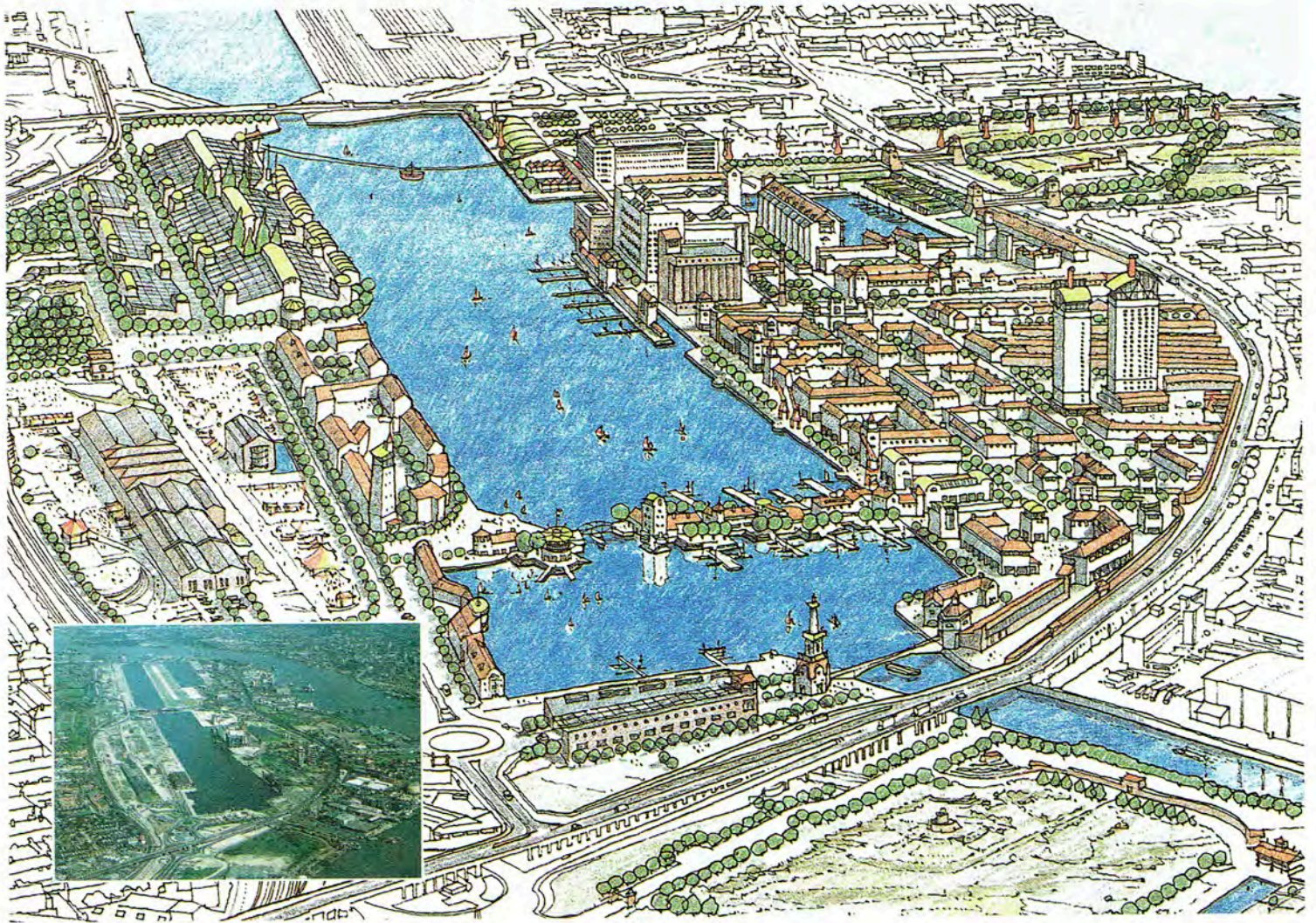
Donna Fallows: the mother who became a planner

Mother of three Donna Fallows attended the Silvertown planning weekend and helped to design proposals for improving the tower block where she has lived on the eighteenth floor for ten years.

"I only went to be nosy and before I knew what had happened I was in the thick of it. It was very hard work but really exciting. It took me a week to sleep properly afterwards," she said.

"I really do agree with the urban village idea and we came up with a lot

of suggestions. What made the weekend so successful was having professionals working with the local people. That was the ideal combination. It was also a good idea to concentrate the event into a weekend instead of having committee meetings once a fortnight: having everybody in one room together slogging it out produced a lot of good ideas. All the residents thought the weekend was brilliant. I just hope that something happens as a result of it."



planning can be overcome. Pledges of £345,000 have already been made to finance the trust initially. If successful, the official report of the weekend argues, the village could become a "pioneering sustainable settlement" – a model for city planning at the end of the century, as important as the garden cities of Welwyn Garden City and Hampstead Garden Suburb were at the beginning.

Planning weekends are emerging as one of the most effective of a range of new techniques being introduced to improve the way we create and manage our cities by involving local communities. They are based on a programme pioneered by the American Institute of Architects (known as Urban Design Assistance Teams), which since 1967 has organised more than 120 such events in the US affecting 21 million people in 40 states. A review by architect David Lewis concludes that the technique's positive impact on town planning "is unequalled by any other urban activity over the past decade". Proposals to set up a similar programme in Europe have been floated by the Urban Design Group. Meanwhile, planning weekends are being run independently with increasing success.

The aim of a planning weekend is to help people to develop a vision for the future

of their community and a strategy for achieving that vision. The basic concept is that everyone with a current or future interest in an area works together over a carefully structured, highly publicised long weekend of site visits, topic-based workshops, group design sessions and public meetings. They are guided by a multidisciplinary team of experts from outside the area who present recommendations for action to a public meeting on the last day.

As Charmaine Young, of Wimpey Homes, one of the 24 team members at Silvertown, explains: "The weekends change the way you plan because you focus single-mindedly on a specific area and involve the people with a particular interest in seeing that area come to life. Normally you would be in an office framework, divorced from the site and the community." Despite initial cynicism, residents almost invariably respond positively. "The weekend was an absolute success," says John Barnard, acting chairman of the Barnwood Court Tenants and Residents Association.

Vision of a future for Silvertown

A drawing prepared during the planning weekend shows what an urban village at West Silvertown in London's Royal Docks could look like. (Inset shows the same view today.)

The main urban design innovation is the proposal to build a "causeway" across the west (near) end of the Royal Victoria Dock, which would contain

pubs, restaurants and a sailing club. Other features of the scheme include refurbishing the existing tower blocks (right) as part of a mixed tenure residential area for 5,000 people, and saving many of the existing large dock buildings (centre) for conversion to shops, workshops, galleries, studios and flats.

tion. "It was one of the very few occasions when you had the opportunity to see all the people involved in the same place at the same time. And they were actually discussing things without doing so behind closed doors in small groups. It was a far more open process than you would achieve in any normal circumstance."

"Planning weekends can achieve more in five days than is often achieved in five years," says community architect John Thompson, chairman of the West Silvertown event and the country's most experienced planning weekend organiser. "A chemistry of activity and energy is created which can lead to highly imaginative solutions and a greater sense of collective ownership than could otherwise be achieved. They should become a standard feature of the planning process." – *Nick Wates*