

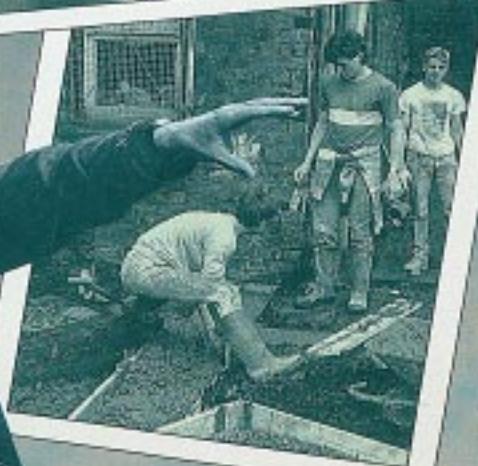


COMMUNITY ARCHITECTURE

HOW PEOPLE ARE CREATING THEIR OWN ENVIRONMENT

Nick Wates and
Charles Knevitt

FOREWORD BY THE RT HON.
THE LORD SCARMAN OBE



Penguin Books
Community Architecture

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Kelvin McDonald, *Planning*, 27 November 1987.

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Anthony Holden, *Charles: A Biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988.

Nominated as the best book of 1987 by Frank McDonald, *Irish Sunday Tribune*.

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Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt – who have both received the International Building Press Architectural journalist of the Year Award – first teamed up in 1984 to research and write this book. In 1986 they founded Community Architecture Information Services (CAIS) Ltd with Jim Sneddon and Caroline Theobald and organized 'Building Communities: the First International Conference on Community Architecture, Planning and Design', which was held at the Astoria Theatre, London, in November 1986.

Community Architecture

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Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt

Foreword by the Rt Hon The Lord Scarman, OBE



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To the pioneers

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Chapter 3

Cities That Destroy Themselves

The Bankruptcy of Conventional Architecture

“Our inner-city areas have been devastated by the actions of previous generations of architects, planners, housing officers and politicians working in isolation from the people they serve, effectively condemning thousands of people to a life of urban squalor and hopelessness. Participation is the key to the way forward, but there can be no half measures if it is to be successful.”

John Thompson, *Community Architecture: The Story of Lea View House, Hackney*, 1984

“Present systems of production are organized in such a way that most decisions are made very much ‘at arms’ length’. Decisions are made by people remote from the consequences of the decisions. Architects make decisions about people whose faces they have never seen. Developers make decisions about land where they have never smelled the grass. Engineers make decisions about columns which they will never touch, nor paint, nor lean against. Government authorities make decisions about roads and sewers without having any human connection at all to the place about which they are making those decisions. The construction workers who nail the boards and lay the bricks have no power of decision at all over the details which they build. Children who are going to play between the houses have no power of decision at all, over even the sandpits where they are going to play. Families move into houses which have been laid out ‘for’ them and have no control whatever over the most fundamental and most intimate aspects of the plan in which they are going to live their lives. In short, the production systems which we have at present define a pattern of control which makes it almost impossible for things to be done carefully, or appropriately, because *almost without exception* decisions are in the wrong hands.”

Christopher Alexander, *The Production of Houses*, 1982

“Apathy is frozen violence.”

Patrick Doherty, Project Director, Derry Inner City Project, 13 June 1986

There is growing realization worldwide that the physical environment in which people live their lives is crucial, both to their social and mental

well-being. People’s ability to work, bring up children, think, learn, socialize and remain healthy is immeasurably improved by a conducive and responsive environment - and seriously impeded without one.

Yet, in contrast to man’s extraordinary advances in science and technology - whether in outer space or conquering disease - the ability to create and maintain humane and efficient settlements has advanced little if at all. Indeed the clock has been put back in many respects rather than forward.

The spectacle of immensely costly public housing estates being dynamited or abandoned within a few years of construction - despite chronic and persistent homelessness - hardly makes news any longer. Neither does the fact that the design and management of much of what remains in service make it equally detested by its occupants and are increasingly blamed for family break-ups, illness, crime and other social disorders. Yet paternalistically provided public housing is only the most visible symptom of the disastrous way in which so much of our built environment is created and managed. Few people are fortunate enough to be able to say that they live in a home which is beautiful and suits their needs, in a street in which they feel they belong and in a neighbourhood which they feel proud of. Instead they are likely to talk about crude new developments which are alien and inappropriate; about public property vandalized and badly maintained; about the lack of amenities and facilities; about insensitive road planning, traffic congestion and deteriorating public transport; about how beautiful, well-made buildings have been unnecessarily destroyed and replaced with ugly, badly made ones. They will speak about the destruction of communities; a stream of award-winning buildings which leak and are socially and operationally unusable; the impossibility of finding competent builders and craftsmen; and about local businesses driven to the wall because of senseless restrictions and zoning policies. They will talk in the pub about absence of street life; lack of community spirit; and how there does not appear to be anything that can be done about it all.

This general malaise has been recognized for some time but solutions have remained elusive. For the sake of expediency, governments, professional institutions and academics have prescribed a series of universal top-down remedies which have almost invariably created as many problems as they have solved. Lack of government investment is often blamed, but even when money has been thrown at the problem the solutions have often failed. The community architecture movement on the other hand has approached the problem from the bottom up, by dealing

with *specific* problems in *specific* communities and devising *specific* solutions. A better insight into the nature of the problem can therefore be gained by looking at a specific community and the problems it has faced over a period of years.

The Problems: Limehouse

The example we have chosen is Limehouse, in London's East End. Limehouse is typical of the run-down inner-city areas of Britain that are increasingly the main focus of concern. It is a predominantly poor, multi-racial neighbourhood with some 3,000 residents and 100 businesses. The difficulties facing such areas are, however, particularly sharply focused in Limehouse because its location next to Canary Wharf, where a massive new office complex is under construction, is causing land values to rise. An examination of the way the area has developed - or rather not developed - over the last decade illustrates clearly the ways in which the built environment is being mismanaged. This in turn helps to explain why community architecture has emerged as a popular alternative approach and is so desperately needed.

Symptoms 1. The Homeless

'London 1984: LIVING HELL' screamed the banner headline in the *Daily Mirror* on 13 March 1984. The rest of the front page was taken up with a photograph of six children, aged from three to eleven, who shared a bedroom which was so small that they had to sleep in shifts. Their parents slept in the family's only other room, which measured 6 x 12 ft. On the inside pages of the paper was a horrendous description of how tens of thousands of young homeless people were tramping the streets of Britain and how tens of thousands more had no option but to live in cramped and sordid hostels. 'This is Britain, the civilized society, in 1984,' campaigned the *Mirror*. The main target of the article was Princes Lodge, a hostel for 169 homeless families in Limehouse where the six children sharing a bedroom had been photographed. A report by Environmental Health Inspectors claimed, rightly, that it was 'unfit for human habitation'. Sparked into action by the *Mirror*'s story, national housing pressure groups quickly joined local community organizations and the local authority in noisy demands for its closure.

But as so often in environmental politics over recent years, the anger was directed at the wrong target: at the symptom instead of the cause. Had those who campaigned so vigorously for the closure of Princes Lodge directed their attention to what was happening to the environment in the immediate vicinity, they would have discovered far more disturbing evidence of the malaise which is afflicting our cities, a malaise which affects everyone and of which the homeless are only the most visible casualties.

Symptoms 2. Demolition-mad Paternalism

Within a few minutes walk of Princes Lodge with its 169 homeless families there were, in 1981, 368 flats owned by public authorities standing empty. Most were in five-storey blocks built between the First and Second World Wars, similar to those in which over half of the population of Limehouse live. One such block was Brunton Wharf; a handsome, well-planned and well-made building with eighty-six flats and eight shops, owned by Tower Hamlets Council. Until six years previously, it had been very popular with residents, some of whom had lived there since 1924, when it was built. The communal courtyard was beautifully maintained and the ground-floor-flat gardens were well kept.

But the council wanted to modernize the block and decided to move people out; 'decanting' is the official phrase. Many people did not want to go, but were given no option. Delays then occurred in the programme. Some vacancies were filled temporarily with people from the council's waiting list. Others were occupied by squatters. The new community, however, had no roots and no sense of permanence. The complex informal patterns of self-policing and maintenance which the previous community had evolved over the years could not instantly be replaced. The estate began to deteriorate physically and started to look untidy. The local paper described it as a 'cesspit'. Neighbouring residents blamed the newcomers - many of whom were black - for the deteriorating state of affairs. Vandalism, violence and racial tension increased steadily.

Unable to understand or cope with these problems, the council decided to demolish the estate, even though it had no other use for the site.

Then Circle 33, an experienced housing association, entered on the scene, offering to buy the block, and refurbish and manage it for people in need at no cost to the council. Circle 33's area manager, Simon Kaplinsky, described the decline of Brunton Wharf as 'a classic example of an anonymous bungling bureaucracy destroying a living community'.

But worse was to come. Not only did the council reject the association's offer, but it also rejected an offer from a property consortium formed by local designer and developer, Thomas Brent, to buy the block for £70,000 or whatever the district valuer said it was worth. Because the block was in such good condition structurally, with many attractive design features, Brent claimed he would be able to sell converted flats in the block for between £11,000 and £14,000 each - making them some of the cheapest in London and well within the means of many people on the council's waiting list, who would be given first option to buy.

Brent's offer was turned down by a special committee of the council's Development Committee on 3 August 1981. Admitting that the Committee had not seen details of how Brent intended to convert the property, vice-chairman Dennis Twomey told the *Observer*: 'We wouldn't want to push people into a position where they were forced to buy flats which we thought were unacceptable to live in.'¹⁰

In 1982 the council paid demolition contractors over £200,000 to demolish Brunton Wharf. Five years later the site was still a waste land surrounded by corrugated iron.

A similar fate befell Brightlingsea Buildings, owned by the Greater London Council. Despite an offer from the same housing association to buy these fifty flats, they were left empty for three years until the £200,000 could be found to demolish them. Former resident Joe Royle told the local paper that the destruction was 'diabolical': 'The flats are ideal. If they had let me rent one, I'd have done it up myself.' This site too was still vacant in 1987. Other blocks of flats senselessly demolished in the early 1980s include Kotoko House (75 flats), Shipwright House (64 flats), and Providence House (78 flats). All but one of these sites were still vacant in 1987.

Other publicly owned housing in Limehouse has simply been left to rot. Six picturesque canalside cottages, owned by the British Waterways Board, have lain empty for almost twenty years, despite frequent offers by individuals and housing associations to buy them. Homeless families squatting in them at no cost to anyone have been forcibly evicted and the corrugated iron replaced at considerable expense to the public purse.

In 1986, 1,230 people were accepted into homeless accommodation by Tower Hamlets Council, and the cost to the ratepayers of housing homeless families in bed-and-breakfast hotels exceeded £1 3m. Nine thousand people were on the council's waiting lists and the situation at Princes Lodge hostel for the homeless remained unchanged, despite the *Mirror's* campaigning journalism.

Symptoms 3. Rehabilitation for Nobody

The local authority's reluctance to refurbish blocks of flats is more understandable when you see what a mess they can make of it when they do. Padstow House escaped demolition, but suffered an only slightly less depressing fate. In October 1982 the three hundred tenants in this five-storey block built around a tarmac courtyard received a letter from the Director of Community Services headed 'Tenants Consultation: Padstow House - Improvement Scheme'. The letter informed tenants that the council proposed to carry out 'major improvements' to the block, which was built in 1938. After briefly setting out details - 'Central heating and hot water, full internal and external repairs and decoration, lifts and improved balcony access, controlled entry system, direct mains water supply, a new look to the courtyard' - the letter concluded: 'I feel sure you will agree that these works will improve the quality of life in the area.'

But this improved 'quality of life' was not intended for the current tenants of Padstow House. Although many of them had lived there for over twenty years and grown attached to the neighbourhood, they were simply 'decanted' and dispersed throughout the borough. They were given no option.

And yet this was only the beginning of the catastrophe. Padstow House itself was then 'improved' to designs by the council's architects department without any consultation with either past or future inhabitants and, after partial completion in 1986, tenancies were offered to people with high priority on the council's waiting list.

On being shown round the refurbished block, Dr Alice Coleman, Director of Land Use Research Unit at Kings College, London (who had directed a study of 100,000 flats throughout the UK) commented that it was a 'complete waste of money'. An architect who had recently completed the renovation of a similar block, working *with* the tenants, described it as an 'appalling disaster' and was visibly upset. 'It will be a slum again within six months,' he predicted. Although providing the flats with new basic amenities, the council's refurbishment had completely failed to deal with the basic arrangement and organization of the block, which was the main cause of tenant dissatisfaction in the first place.

For instance, one of the keys to refurbishing such blocks successfully has proved to be redefining common and private space so that as much of the common space as possible becomes the responsibility of individual tenants. This can be done by amalgamating ground- and first-floor flats

and providing them with private gardens and direct access on to the street. Entry to flats at upper levels should be directly from the street and balcony deck access should be avoided, since it means people are constantly walking past other people's windows - a frequent cause of tension. The council's renovation of Padstow House made no attempt to tackle the problem of common space and instead created new balcony access where none had previously existed. Almost in recognition of failure, a complex central entrance locking system was provided with permanently mounted security video cameras. This system prevents people from having personal post-boxes and - because it is possible to stand on a rail on the ground floor and swing, with ease, on to the first-floor balcony - does not work for security purposes anyway.

The refurbished flats have not proved popular. Prospective occupants invariably comment on the prison-like atmosphere. The first ten turned down the offer. Tenants in residence complain of social tension caused by poor sound insulation both within and between flats, lack of maintenance of common areas, the impossibility of getting furniture in because of poky front halls and the difficulty faced by visitors in getting in. 'I can't think of anything I like about the flat. It's ridiculous, I just want to get out,' one says. The construction costs alone of the 'improvements' to Padstow House were £2m, or almost £30,000 per flat: as the tenant quoted above observed, 'money down the drain'.

When council tenants on the neighbouring St Vincent Estate realized they were in danger of suffering a similar fate, the tenants' association commissioned its own consultant architects to show how the estate could be improved without people being 'decanted'. The consultants' first recommendation was that the tenants be allowed to appoint an architect of their own choice to work with them on the estate. The proposal was turned down by the council on the grounds that it would take work away from its own in-house team of architects.

Symptoms 4. Utopian Housing Nightmares

As in most cities, the most popular homes in the Limehouse area are three- and four-storey brick terraced houses built over a hundred years ago. With front doors opening directly on to the street, secluded back gardens and a simple construction system which allows for flexibility and personal choice, they provide people with a combination of privacy, sociability,

independence and freedom which has rarely been matched by the construction industry since. Unfortunately, there are not many left in Limehouse. Most of those that survived the Blitz in the Second World War were systematically demolished by the council to make way for the brave new Utopia of the post-war planners and architects.

The least popular housing in Limehouse is the product of that Utopian vision: that most recently built by the local authorities. Residents of Kiln Court, built in 1977, find it hard to understand why the council should have demolished the terraced houses they were brought up in which used to stand on the site, and, at vast expense, moved them into a seven-storey block of sixty-two flats made of purple-brown bricks, which looks like a misshapen factory and is surrounded by unusable pockets of land, thorny shrubs and tarmac play areas enclosed by sixteen-foot brick walls and chain-link fencing. Certainly they were not involved in any of the decision-making or in choosing the design.

Ironically, the Kiln Court housing scheme was built well after architects and planners were thought to have learnt from the mistakes of the tower-block era, three fourteen-storey products of which stand close by and are classified as 'hard to let'. Yet only the shape is different. Neither have much to do with creating homes and neighbourhoods. To get to one's flat in Kiln Court in 1987 involves negotiating a maze-like network of alleyways, flights of steps, dark graffiti-covered stairways with broken windows and urine-soaked lifts, and dreary rubbish-strewn internal corridors with broken light fittings. The basement car-parks are frequented mainly by vandals, glue sniffers and alcoholics. Cars left there are rapidly wrecked and burnt out, so cars are mostly left on pavements instead, where only the radios get stolen.

One tenant, who used to live in a terraced house on the same site, comments: 'I wish I was back in my house. I put up with it now because I have lived in the area all my life. But my children can't wait to marry and move right out. They don't want *their* children to put up with this.'

Symptoms 5. Planned Wasteland

The skill of successfully planning and managing open space has also eluded the local authorities. One of the main reasons advocated for building high-rise housing in the sixties and seventies was to provide large public open spaces for people to enjoy for recreation. But it is hard for

residents of the two estates just mentioned to enjoy the acres of tarmac and grass surrounding them. Even were they not normally covered with litter, broken glass and dog excrement, what is one supposed to do there?

The laying out of the first phase of Limehouse's new park - known as Ropemakers Fields - in 1982 by Tower Hamlets Council initially seemed more hopeful. At the suggestion of local tenants, two tennis-courts and some children's play equipment were incorporated and surrounded by shrubbery. A plain new brick building was erected containing an office of a park-keeper and, somewhat surprisingly, two public toilets. (Limehouse's two existing public toilets, built at the end of the last century, had just been closed due to lack of staff.)

Sadly the park deteriorated rapidly. The tennis-courts remained largely unused, initially because the park-keeper who held the only key to the gates did not work in the evenings and at weekends when most people wanted to play tennis; later, because the keeper's post was axed altogether. No attempt was made to establish a tennis club which might have enabled local tennis enthusiasts to take over the running of the courts. The type of play equipment - metal structures on tarmac - was chosen without consulting parents or children and was located close to flats. After several accidents and the predictable complaints about noise, the play equipment was removed. Virtually all the shrubs died; because there was a dispute over who should maintain them - between the contractor who planted them and the Parks Department - no one did any maintenance at all during the crucial early period of their growth. At no time have any of the residents of the flats which directly overlook the park been invited to play a part in its management.

The final phase of the park development was shelved because the council claimed it had run out of money. In the previous two years alone, nearly £0.5m had been spent demolishing flats in the area that people wanted to live in and were prepared to pay for.

Symptoms 6. Killing Community Culture

Apart from a one-room old people's club and a youth club, social facilities in the area are virtually non-existent. To get to any shops involves crossing a busy main road, as the area's shopping street was demolished to make way for the Utopian housing projects. There is no focus to the neighbourhood and few opportunities for social interaction apart from the

pubs. The development of voluntary organizations and cultural activity is hampered by lack of premises. There is no community centre, cinema, theatre or adequate venue for live music, exhibitions or dancing. A survey carried out in 1980 identified widespread demand for social, shopping and recreational facilities of all kinds.

In the mid-seventies an ideal opportunity for creating a community resource centre arose when the Cyril Jackson Primary School moved into new premises. The old school building was a fine example of Victorian craftsmanship with many rooms and halls of varying sizes. Structurally it was very sound. A local tenants' association asked the council to let them have it for a community centre. The council refused and, after leaving it empty for several years, during which time it was wrecked and vandalized, demolished it instead. Four years later the site was overgrown and still vacant. The tenants' association subsequently collapsed, its leadership exhausted and dispirited. The spark of community spirit that had been lit by the hopes of a community centre had been extinguished. Two subsequent attempts by other community organizations to secure other buildings were also thwarted by bureaucratic intransigence, despite being backed by comprehensive feasibility studies. Both buildings remain empty and derelict at the time of writing.

Symptoms 7. Private-sector Development by Remote Control

If Limehouse were in a different part of Britain, that would probably be the end of the story. But Limehouse is privileged. Since 1981 it has fallen within what is widely billed in the British property world as the largest and most successful urban regeneration project in Europe, if not the world - London Docklands. As the Port of London moved down river it left behind an eight-mile stretch of derelict docks surrounded by hundreds of acres of derelict land and a dozen or so communities very similar to Limehouse. Understandably dubious as to whether the existing local authorities could cope with the redevelopment of such vast areas when they were capable of such gross mismanagement of the land they already controlled, the government established a special new corporation to take charge - London Docklands Development Corporation. This corporation was (and is still) given vast sums of public money to invest and sweeping new powers to cut

through red tape and buy land. Its main brief was to get private developers interested in investing in the area.

At that task it has been spectacularly successful, and by 1986 over £2,000m of private money had been invested in the Docklands area for an outlay of only £300m of public money. But despite having massive reserves and expertise at its disposal, the private sector has failed dismally in addressing itself to the challenges and opportunities in Limehouse.

The first development to come to public attention was on a five-acre riverside site called Free Trade Wharf, where there was a unique and historic enclave of docklands warehouses. A developer and designer, Rae Hoffenberg, who lived adjacent to the site, had drawn up a detailed and imaginative scheme for converting the warehouses for a wide range of uses which would have brought new life to the whole area. But the Greater London Council, which owned the site, sold it by means of a sealed-bid competitive tender without any conditions. The winning developer employed architects based over fifty miles away, who produced plans to demolish most of the warehouses and build an office block and two structures shaped somewhat like ziggurats, or terraced pyramids, eleven storeys high, and containing 418 luxury flats for sale. The proposals led to an outcry from the local community, the local authority and, somewhat ironically, the Greater London Council, on the grounds that it was totally irrelevant to the area's needs. But the London Docklands Development Corporation decided to support it. A five-week public inquiry into the proposals was held in 1983 and, in one of the most damning reports since 1947, the inspector strongly urged that planning permission be refused. He concluded that it was the wrong place for offices, that a broader mix of uses would be more desirable; that the design was 'totally out of sympathy with the character of the development along the river frontage'; that the housing blocks were of 'excessive height' and 'unsympathetic shape'; that they showed 'blatant disregard' for nearby buildings; and that they would 'overpower and dominate' an adjacent park, 'seriously detracting from its present quality and character and from its enjoyment by the public'.

Incredibly, the inspector's report was overruled by the Secretary of State for the Environment and, at the time of writing, the scheme is under construction. Legal opinion secured by Tower Hamlets Council on the decision argued that 'The Secretary of State has acted in an arbitrary manner to such an extent as to make the inquiry process redundant.'

But even worse was to come. At the heart of Limehouse lies one of the most interesting dock basins in London – Limehouse Basin; a twenty-two-acre site owned by a public corporation – the British Waterways Board. In

1979, when the site had been lying vacant and abandoned for ten years, a group of local citizens – some with architectural and development experience – came to the conclusion that the Basin was the key to the regeneration of the area. If it was properly developed, they argued, it could provide all the facilities lacking in the area, as well as being an exciting addition to the city in its own right. They arranged a public meeting, advertised it in the local papers, and invited all the organizations known to be interested in the area including the local authorities and landowners. At the meeting it was agreed to form a voluntary, non-party-political, democratic community organization called the Limehouse Development Group with the aim of securing 'the best possible development of the Basin'. The group's motto was 'Let's Build Limehouse Together' in recognition of the fact that the aim could only be achieved if all of those with an interest in the area worked in partnership. Consultants (prepared to work voluntarily) were appointed from a wide range of professional disciplines. An extensive survey was conducted of local needs and aspirations. Discussions were held with the authorities and landowners. A brief was then drawn up of what was required and from this a strategy was developed for achieving it, as well as a sketch scheme showing what was possible if the strategy were adopted. All stages were approved by a series of widely advertised public meetings. The outcome was a proposal for an evolutionary, mixed-use development, providing housing in mixed tenure and architectural style, and a new 'heart' or town centre for the area with a wide range of commercial and recreational facilities in and surrounding a new urban harbour.

To demonstrate the scheme's viability the group secured the backing of Bovis Homes, who guaranteed to underwrite the project to the tune of £70m. The strategy was widely acclaimed in the local, technical and national press and, later, won a commendation from *The Times*/RIBA Community Enterprise Award scheme in 1986.

The key element of the strategy was that the first step had to be for all the authorities, landowners and other interested parties to sit round a table together and discuss how to coordinate their activities. But this simple and obvious step never happened. Instead, the British Waterways Board held a limited competition without any effective brief or criteria for judgement, in which only large commercial development companies were invited to compete. All the efforts of the Limehouse Development Group were completely ignored. So too was the planning brief drawn up by Tower Hamlets Council. The winner was a Hertfordshire-based company, Hunting Gate Homes, with R. Seifert and Partners – one of the largest

commercial practices in the country – as architects. The scheme, which involved filling in almost half of the water area, was for luxury housing, offices and a small marina. Predictably, there was a public outcry.

The public inquiry on the Hunting Gate scheme lasted forty-five days. After examining evidence from some of the country's leading experts on inner-city regeneration and architectural research, the government's architectural assessor concluded that it was 'a design approach which completely ignores the existing setting, and which would in fact destroy it'. The government inspector stated that the scheme reflected 'a serious degree of over-development', and that the result of building would be 'seriously to damage, even to destroy, the Basin's general amenity value... The scheme would not integrate into the surrounding area but would reduce the overall integration of that area.' He concluded: 'I am convinced that the scheme would not properly advance the regeneration of this particular part of Docklands.'¹¹ Yet his recommendation that the scheme be refused planning permission was overruled by the Secretary of State for the Environment on the extraordinary grounds that because the area was run down, *any* development would improve it and would therefore be acceptable. Effectively his decision marked the abandonment of planning.

A 17,000-word petition against the British Waterways Board's proposals was subsequently signed by the leaders of all the local community organizations, the local church leaders (one of whom organized and ran in a sponsored marathon to raise money for its publication), local councillors and local G Ps, as well as the country's leading architectural critics and a host of other national figures including Dr David Owen, then Leader of the SDP, who also happens to be a local resident. (A standing joke locally is that the formation of the Social Democratic Party in Britain was a product of David Owen's observing from his windows the mess being made of his local environment by the two traditional parties.) But even this was to little apparent avail. As so often with environmental campaigns, superficial design changes were made to give the scheme a more acceptable face, but those in authority did not feel able to rectify the fundamental organizational deficiencies, even though they were now widely recognized on all sides. As the urban development consultant Nicholas Falk told *Time Out* magazine: 'The terrible problem is that people get stuck in positions which they feel they have to defend or risk loss of face. It's like the Americans in Vietnam.'¹²

The main impact on Limehouse so far of the intervention of the London Docklands Development Corporation and the private-sector development industry has therefore been to impose two grotesque

developments, totally irrelevant to the area's needs and opposed by all sections of the local community.

The future of two of the most important development sites remaining in Limehouse - both initially owned by *public* authorities - has been determined simply on the whims of a handful of men who have no real connections with the area and who are unlikely to have any connections with it once it is built - whims that, in one case, the architectural critic for the *New Statesman*, Jules Lubbock, described as 'a back-of-an-envelope hamfisted botch'.¹³ Thousands of hours of time by both professional experts and local people who know the area intimately and whose lives will be affected by its development have been wasted. No one who will live, work or play in the schemes, or who will have to manage them, has been the slightest bit involved in their preparation. And while the grandiose plans gestate, eight years after proposals were put forward for using the derelict land and water at Limehouse Basin within six months - as successfully put into practice in other places (such as Camden Lock in north London) - they still lie vacant. Every year another building is vandalized or burnt to the ground, while much of the local population remains jobless and scores are homeless.

Symptoms 8. Local-government Impotence

Local government in Limehouse has, effectively, broken down. On the main road next to the parish church stands an imposing building with the words 'Limehouse Town Hall' inscribed in the stonework. The building has long since lost that function. Ironically, for many years it contained the National Museum of Labour History. Local government powers are now held by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The main town-hall is half an hour's walk away and is not on a direct bus route; the Planning Department likewise, but in a different direction. Social Services, Housing and Recreation are slightly nearer but not much. So too is the Arts Office. Not a single council officer is based in Limehouse except in the library, where local people may not even display posters without sending them to the Director of Libraries at the main town-hall for approval. None of the councillors representing the ward in which most of the area falls actually lives in Limehouse.

It is no one's job within the council to think about the problems in Limehouse in their totality and get to grips with them. Each officer and

department deals with the area in a completely fragmented way. Furthermore, the professionals employed by the council are prevented from working creatively with the people they are employed to provide services for by a gigantic hierarchical bureaucracy. Council architects, for instance, rarely come into contact with the people they are designing buildings for and, sometimes, are specifically prevented from communicating with them. The horrendous mistakes described earlier are just part of the result. The waste of physical and financial resources is absurd: the waste of human lives grotesque. At the time of writing a recent change of political control (from Labour to Liberal) has resulted in the decentralization of many council services to seven newly created neighbourhood areas. This is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. But not a big enough step to make any significant inroads into any of the fundamental planning, architectural and property-management problems mentioned above. The boundaries of the new neighbourhood units bear no relationship to the way people perceive the area or to the tasks that need to be tackled. Limehouse has been arbitrarily lumped together with other communities up to two miles away. The community still has no direct access to the architects, planners and other professionals it needs. Instead of grasping the opportunity to evolve new systems of local government based on learning from yesterday's mistakes and today's community needs, the new system appears to be simply a truncated version of the old one.

The introduction of the London Docklands Development Corporation has not significantly improved the picture. The corporation's offices too are hard to get to, with different departments in different directions away from Limehouse. It has no officers based in the area nor any place locally where members of the public can go to find out what is going on. To inspect a planning application for a development across the street one still has to travel two miles during office hours, when many people are at work. Taking photocopies is not permitted. No one in the corporation has a mandate to look at the problems comprehensively and there are no mechanisms for harnessing local knowledge and experience positively. Participation is restricted to commercial developers and landowners, and even they often complain about the way they are treated. While the corporation may justifiably be proud of having attracted private development into docklands, it has not yet begun to grasp how to build civilized communities.

Paralysis

Decayed infrastructure and bad physical conditions generally were two of the five factors identified as signifying the nature of inner-city problems in the government White Paper *Policy for the Inner Cities* in 1977. The other three were high levels of unemployment, limited job opportunities and a concentration of people with social difficulties. All are present in Limehouse today. Deprived urban areas also tend to include a high proportion of ethnic minorities; almost 49 per cent of this population of England are believed to live in government-designated Partnership and Programme authority areas, which matches almost exactly the 48 per cent ethnic population of parts of Limehouse.

The past ten years have seen a whole panoply of government initiatives aimed at addressing the problem: Task Forces, Enterprise Zones, Derelict Land Reclamation Schemes, National Garden Festivals, Urban Development Grants, Urban Regeneration Grants and the designation of Partnership and Programme authorities, of which there are now fifty-four in England. Development Corporations are the latest flagship of the Thatcher government's approach. Limehouse, not surprisingly, is high on the list of priorities for government action and has fallen within the scope of many of these programmes. But there has been little noticeable effect on the ground.

Buildings that were empty ten years ago are still empty, yet one third of the adult population remains unemployed and one fifth of residents live at a density of more than one person to a room. Land that was derelict ten years ago is still derelict, while less than 5 per cent of residents have gardens. Canals that were dirty, dangerous and unused ten years ago are still dirty, dangerous and unused, and yet there are still no recreational facilities. Housing estates that were run down and badly managed are still run down and badly managed. Apart from a handful of successful building conversions by owner-occupiers and housing associations, the only significant construction in Limehouse for the past ten years has been for new luxury homes selling at £300,000 each - a life-time's earnings for the average *employed* inhabitant. No wonder that there appears to be no end in sight to the vandalism, burglaries and assaults which afflict residents and businesses alike with monotonous regularity, causing many to leave if they can. Wealth differentials within the community are becoming increasingly apparent and the most catchy new slogan to appear on the railway bridges in the East End is 'Mug a Yuppie'.

Despite having a proud and distinguished history, a strong community spirit, a distinctive character, some fine buildings and natural features, and some exceptionally resourceful community groups, Limehouse in 1987 remains lifeless, resembling a morgue rather than a city. Meanwhile another generation of children have grown up deprived of the urban environment they should, and could, have.

People living in and working in Limehouse – as elsewhere – know by and large what they want and what needs to be done. Instinctively. They know because every day they experience the problems and understand what is wrong. They know, for instance, where it would be useful to have shops or play facilities; they know that a new footpath in a certain location would mean they no longer had to walk along a fume-choked pavement within inches of juggernaut lorries. Furthermore, many of them have skills which would enable them to help with the community's problems and bring it back to life.

Yet those with the power and resources to influence events in Limehouse are not drawing on this wealth of talent and understanding when they make their plans. Apart from a handful of owner-occupiers (less than 5 per cent of the population), none of the people who make decisions about land and property in the area live or work there. There is no way for local people to influence events. And when they try to take the initiative, they run up against insuperable obstacles. They cannot improve their own homes because the landlords' rules forbid it, and in many cases the buildings are so badly designed that they require major reconstruction. They cannot build new housing for themselves because they cannot get any land or raise finance. They cannot start up new businesses because there are no suitable small and well-serviced premises available. All initiatives, both individual and collective, run up against bureaucracy and inertia. Confrontation takes the place of sensible discussion. Frustration breeds a sense of hopelessness, apathy and despair.

Technical solutions to all the problems in Limehouse exist and have been employed successfully elsewhere. The housing estates *could* be re-designed to make them pleasant places to live. The derelict basement car-parks *could* be put to other purposes, such as workshops or music studios. Unused pockets of land *could* be turned into parks, gardens or playgrounds: the filthy canal *could* become a pleasant recreational amenity. The area has great potential. But the inhabitants have no way of putting these ideas into practice for two fundamental reasons: *they have no access to the technical assistance necessary to turn ideas into reality and they have no effective form of neighbourhood government through which to coordinate the community's*

affairs. In short they are up against a brick wall.

None of this state of affairs can be blamed on any particular individual officers or members of the various authorities involved, or on professionals *per se*. Many of them are equally frustrated by the state of paralysis. *But they have not been trained to deal with it and are unable to find a framework of employment which would enable them to apply their skills creatively with, and in the interests of the people of Limehouse.* Many talented planners, architects and designers actually live in Limehouse but can only find employment building office blocks and luxury housing outside the neighbourhood. *All parties are simply locked into a system which has ceased to function.*

The re-development - or rather mal-development - of Limehouse is not addressed to any community, past, present or future. It is not guided by knowledge, history, vision, theoretical analysis or practical experience. Neither is it based on open and rational discussion, weighing the evidence or reasonableness. At every level - from the management of individual homes to the planning of the neighbourhood as a whole - it is simply an architecture of neglect, short-sighted expediency and stupidity.

That, in a nutshell, is the problem.

The Crisis of the Built Environment

The institutions in Britain and many other countries do not have the ability to create, or even maintain, civilized human settlements any more.

The environmental professions and construction industry responsible - architects, planners, landscape architects, builders, developers and planning authorities - are in a state of chaos. They are making a mess. They are squandering massive resources. And they are undoubtedly creating a great deal of unhappiness, illness and social stress in the process.

What has been happening - and continues to happen - in Limehouse, might not replicate precisely what is happening elsewhere. But the pattern is the same. Similar horror stories could be recounted in every city in the country and, in less stark form, in rural areas too.

Here are some of the frightening statistics, culled from government and other official sources,^{13a} which help paint a picture of the state of the built environment as it existed in 1987:

- Britain's public-sector housing stock requires immediate expenditure on repairs and maintenance of at least £18,000m.

- Britain’s private-sector housing stock requires immediate expenditure on rehabilitation, improvement and repairs of £26,000m.
- More than 3.8m dwellings (84 per cent of public-sector stock) require expenditure of an average of £4,900 per dwelling.
- The backlog of repairs and maintenance to public-sector housing is growing at a rate of £900m a year.
- The number of homes in serious disrepair rose from 860,000 to 1.2 million between 1976 and 1986.
- There has been a cumulative shortfall of about 750,000 new dwellings over the last ten years.
- Birmingham City Council will need six hundred years (at the present rate of progress) to carry out the full modernization of its housing stock. Manchester can afford to repair only three hundred houses a year because of government cash limits.
- More than £2,000m needs to be spent on schools, and another £2,000m on hospitals to bring them up to a reasonable standard.
- There are 100,000 acres of derelict land in the inner cities.
- The number of people living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation increased from 49,000 to 160,000 between 1979 and 1984; there are 1.25 million people on council waiting lists for homes.
- The number of people officially classified as homeless in England doubled between 1978 and 1987 to about 100,000. This figure excludes most single homeless people and childless couples. Unofficial estimates for 1987 are 400,000.
- There are 112,000 empty council houses and flats in England, about 28,000 of them in London.
- There are 545,000 homes empty in the private sector.
- In 1986 more than 200,000 households applied to local authorities in England for housing under the Homeless Persons Act.
- Some 400,000 construction workers are unemployed (about 30 per cent of the total).

But, as we have seen in Limehouse, the real cost of physical deterioration cannot be told simply in figures. The tragedy of mental stress, physical illness, crime, economic inefficiency, wasted resources and, above all, lost opportunity, are unquantifiable. Lord Scarman, U K President of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, asked at its launch in January 1987:

“Do people understand the misery, the squalor, the threat to health and even to

life itself which homelessness inflicts upon millions of our fellow men? Does the public realize that homelessness is a critical element of the social conditions which provide the breeding ground for crime, marital breakdown, child abuse and neglect, and that homelessness destroys man’s chance of developing and maintaining stable human relationships?

Scarman could - with equal relevance - have asked the same questions replacing the word ‘homelessness’ with ‘communitylessness’, ‘neighbourhoodlessness’ or ‘citylessness’. Most would agree with the sentiments thus expressed. But few would have any idea how to translate them into a practical critique of the present system or a programme of action for change. Despite the construction industry’s being worth some £30,000m per annum in Britain (about 10 per cent of gross domestic product), virtually nothing is spent on analysing the success of its output.

As a result, the industry has been largely rudderless, failing to learn from its own mistakes, let alone those of others in other places or in past times, where solutions have been evident. The industry has proceeded in a haphazard manner based on the profit motive, simplistic political ideologies (land nationalization or privatization), voguish styles (such as Modernism or Post-Modernism) and a firm belief in centralization, technology and the economies of operating on a large scale. It has been left to the community movement to start asking the right questions and indeed to start providing the right answers. As the geographer Dr Alice Coleman wrote in her book *Utopia on Trial* in 1985:

“It is the natural condition of human beings to make progress by trial and error, and it is the misfortune of our age that the trial and error have been both large-scale and prolonged, with only minimal attention to the question of progress. Planners, architects, developers and housing managers have all been drawn into the same huge plausible vortex – so plausible, indeed, that none of them can be blamed for lacking the foresight to see where it would lead.”

The Vicious Circle

As construction techniques, cities and society itself have become more complex since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the proliferation of experts and specialists has been inevitable. But sadly these experts and specialists have become increasingly divorced from the environmental

needs of the population they purport to serve, developing their own professions with their self-perpetuating, self-interested objectives.

To protect the public from unscrupulous or misguided experts, governments have evolved a whole new tier of bureaucrats, controls and regulations to act as mediator. This tier has become ever larger, more sophisticated and hierarchical and ever less equipped to deal with the intricate, human-scale problems of a particular building or neighbourhood.

In parallel with increasing specialization and bureaucratization has gone a de-skilling and de-education of consumers in environmental matters. Lack of involvement has led to lack of knowledge and understanding, and this has not been rectified by the formal education system, which has almost completely ignored environmental issues. So people have lost touch with their environment. They have lost the ability to solve their own most basic environmental problems, let alone those of their neighbourhood or city, through the democratic process.

The Pioneers

The Community Architecture Approach Explained

‘Everywhere we see evidence of alienation, the fraying of the social fabric, the breakdown of community. Commercial architecture contributes to these trends. Academic architecture – Post Modernism – is in retreat from these painful realities. Social architecture,* limited so far as its adherents and its armamentarium, remains to probe, to test, to propose new solutions that at once satisfy immediate needs and open up new visions of life and work... Rekindling the desire for architecture and for the city is the task that social architecture sets for itself.’

Richard Hatch, *The Scope of Social Architecture*, 1984

‘By accepting the involvement and initiative of the user as a starting-point for contemporary housing, we may begin to see a way out of the constraints in which we operate. Unsuspected possibilities emerge. Both the technological and the human sides of the housing problem can acquire new perspectives. There is scarcely any limit to the possibilities which will be opened up, and new and long-lacking enrichment of life will again be within our grasp.’

John Habraken, *Supports: an Alternative to Mass Housing*, 1961

‘The more people feel themselves involved in architecture, the more likely we are to get the buildings we think we deserve. An enlarged architectural conscience brought about by the greatly increased participation of more people as partial clients is more likely to lead to good architecture than the most scrupulously applied aesthetic controls. If architecture is to flourish and progress in an age when change is constant and development rapid and relentless, it must, with renewed vigour, use society as a partner in the creative process. Only then can the primary unchanging function of architecture be achieved: to provide decent surroundings for people and to help them to a wider vision of life.’

(Sir) Denys Lasdun, ‘Process of continual cooperation’, *The Times*, June 1961

* ‘Social architecture’ is a term commonly used in the United States with a meaning similar to ‘community architecture’.