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My story is essentially about economic power and the displacement of people, and the displacement of activity on the land by other activities, all driven by economic forces. I begin with some history of the origins of the story, and then relate two separate phases of intense political struggle, during which time the nature of activism changed and we encountered some serious problems. I will conclude with a description of where we are now, still in the midst of this 20-year struggle.

Context

England, Great Britain, never experienced a bourgeois revolution. In the slow transition from feudal to modern society, land ownership has maintained much of its medieval power. Today land is a commodity vigorously developed for investment, savings and speculation. The British system of urban, town and county planning has been admired and imitated world-wide, but it's a system which is quite compatible with private land ownership and strong speculation by private ownership. The private market has very successfully adapted to having to deal with State regulations through a planning system. The planning system

itself has in any event always served to preserve assets and to enable the landed to live off rent, which is, increasingly, the modern way. Even after the Great Fire of London, which was a perfect time to introduce city planning, landed interests preserved London by simply rebuilding what was destroyed rather than adopting Christopher Wren's city plans.

Since 1944, the city of London has, as part of a plan for decentralisation, enforced a green belt around the city to prevent its continuous growth. Therefore the areas of rapid growth are 40, 50, 60 or 100 kilometres from London. Our structure is one of a very strong economy in the centre, bringing its population every day enormous distances by train in long-haul commuting.

This is the general context of one example of the problem of the expansion of the central business district into the intermediate area around the edge of the centre. In this case the problem area is King's Cross, on the edge of the centre of London.

History of the Story

A circular railway goes around the centre of London forming an important interchange with the metro-network, with seven different interconnecting lines. King's Cross is a point of very good accessibility, and a point where two of the most important National Railway Stations exist, serving Scotland

and the North and Midlands of England. It's also an area in which the British State Railway failed to invest from 1945-1990. The Railway also did not invest in the stations themselves, so the area suffers a lack of physical maintenance and care.

It's also an area in which the planning system didn't know what to do. So all the city plans for London declared this area difficult, and planning has been indefinitely delayed. This condition, called blight, had created an atmosphere of uncertainty in which investors do not invest because of the uncertainties about the future, and nobody buys land.

In the 19th century, this area accommodated a large variety of activities relating to the railway: post office, newspaper distribution, freight, horses and so on. We have inherited in this area many historic buildings which represent the history of Britain's industrialisation. For many years a large number of these buildings have been abandoned or given over to temporary use.

As is always found in areas around railway stations in Europe, the area around the station includes high-density working-class housing. This is where the railway workers lived, along with the workers in the Post Office, the workers in printing industries, workers making beer. This is a very normal situation in many European cities; here it includes social housing from the 20th century which continues to be

inhabited. There are a lot of historical buildings here interspersed with abandoned space, which is now being used for construction sites.

King's Cross is now an area where the population is rather mixed in terms of income and ethnicity. About half the population is white, including people of English, Irish and Scottish origin who are of very mixed income; poor, middle, and rich. The black population is quite small, maybe 10 or 15% of the total, with predominantly middle and low incomes. Additionally there is a population of people originating from Bangladesh, who on the whole are very poor. They in general have quite low literacy and quite large families. Many are first-generation migrants though now some are second-generation, but most are much poorer than the other groups. It's a complex mixed society, which is very typical of London.

First Battle

The first battle in the King's Cross struggle took place from 1987-1992. During this period the neo-liberal ideas of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were being rolled out across the world, liberalising stock exchanges and financial markets. In Britain the financial sector was reorganising itself and becoming very strong, and making extensive use of office buildings. There was an extraordinary upswing of demand for office buildings, mainly from banks and financial bodies, and

the available supply was decreasing; they were all utilised.

Of course in these conditions investors and developers think of building, and because the system of Urban Planning was being dismantled or weakened as part of this neo-liberal project they received permission and they built. So there was a tremendous surge of construction, some of it in the core areas, which are the very expensive parts of the center, but increasingly also pushing out into other areas where there is more space.

Railway land was considered the best space because the railways had enormous pieces of land already consolidated in big ownerships, at points of very good accessibility. The State Railway, although not yet privatised, was beginning to operate in a private kind of way and making a lot of money from its land.

In the area of a railway station called Liverpool Street, where one arrives in London from Stansted airport, the Railway wanted a new station. It made a deal with the real estate development company Rosehaugh & Stanhope and together they built a colossal project of about 400,000 square metres of office buildings, which financed a new station and infused cash into the Railway.

The intention was to recreate this financial success at King's Cross, supported by the fact that the British Government then

decided to bring a high-speed line from France which would terminate at King's Cross.

The State Railway reunited with the same private development group which built Liverpool Street Station to develop a master plan for King's Cross, using architect Norman Foster. The project called for the building of office blocks for corporate occupiers around a Central Park, which contains protected historic buildings. The buildings, which by law cannot be demolished, would be used as a feature around which to place the office buildings.

This scheme was negotiated over some years with the local municipality of Camden, which has the power to give or refuse planning permission. As soon as the local citizens of this area discovered this project they began to get organised and I also got involved at that point, because I work in the University which is located next to this area, about 500 metres away.

A group formed which linked the local residents, tenants, the English businesses, the Bangladeshi businesses, the tenants of housing groups, environmental movements and squatters; many different social elements in a kind of consortium. This consortium, the King's Cross Railway Lands Group, organised in 1987 and continues to work together today.

The consortium was involved in active debates, arguments, and confrontations with the local politicians; formal and

informal arguments surrounding the project; and a series of "planning for real" exercises and alternative workshops and engagements with the municipality.

That process lasted for about two and half years. At the end of it the citizen groups proposed their own alternative plans, two or three different schemes, which were different from the commercial one. They had more housing, more social housing, especially more services for the locality and a limited amount of office space.

The outcome of this phase of the struggle was partly simply to make the decision process very long and slow. We were trying to get a better plan accepted, and we kept on fighting for it along with some allies inside the municipality, which was run by the Labour Party. Some of its members favored the commercial project, with a minority favoring our more community-oriented project. We were working with some politicians against other politicians, with some professional planners against other professional planners inside the office and we managed to keep the debate going for two or three years.

We were hoping that during the period of delaying the decision-making process the office-building market would collapse, and it did. The boom in demand stopped in 1989-90 and the supply of new buildings at the Docklands and in the centre of London was completed. By 1990-91 there was an

enormous stock of empty office building and no demand at all; some development companies went bankrupt, investors lost a lot of money and that boom was finished. That took the pressure off; the consortium did not succeed in achieving a positive development of the land, but at least we prevented a terrible development.

The Respite

The period of ten years following the collapse was a rather quiet time in the speculative activity of the London property markets. During that time the government was busy privatising the Railway (which was a disaster) and setting up a regime for the new international Railway, which would arrive from France in a new line through Kent, crossing the river and entering London in the north-east through Stratford and arriving again at the same point but by a different route.

This project took four years to devise and an additional two years to pass a law in the Parliament authorising the railway. Some of us from the consortium were involved in the discussions about it, but it was not a mass movement and not a popular campaign. I would say that the popular movements in this area got quite weak in that period. People got demoralised and depressed. A few of the older people died, some people moved away, some new people arrived. It's very difficult to keep a big struggle going for 10, 15 or 20 years.

The Government at this point spent a lot of money on an urban regeneration scheme for the area, planting trees, painting the buildings, improving some derelict buildings and generally trying to make the area more attractive to investors. They installed a lot of CC TV cameras to watch everybody and particularly to try to get rid of drug addicts and prostitutes, who were very active in this area for 100 years. This is common in the area around railway stations, but was particularly prevalent around King's Cross. Much of this activity was eventually moved, though no further than to adjacent areas.

Second Battle

The next round of the campaign, of the struggle, started around about the year 2000. By then the Government had concluded a contract for the Railway, which was a private-sector contract for a completely private consortium to build and operate this railway.

The Government agreed to subsidise the Railway because the Railway was actually not going to be profitable without a subsidy. In addition, the Government decided to give some land to this private consortium to help finance the Railway. The land at King's Cross is part of the dowry, part of the gift. Therefore the private Railway consortium was under pressure to make the maximum money from this land in order to finance the project.

We began again with the new development company, a new project and a new set of architects over a long period of negotiation. But this present speculative upswing in real estate, since 2000, has been very different from the period of 1987-92. The gross distortion of the UK economy in favour of financial and rentier capital as against manufacturing capital has continued. The financial and business-services sector of London has grown fat on globalisation with its special role as a central base for consultancy and deal-brokering for the neo-liberal world. The economy is booming again, and investors have flooded the central London office market.

There is an extraordinary consensus between Tony Blair and the National Government and the London Government led by Ken Livingston. The new Mayor is very progressive on many issues, such as transport, but has adopted a very business-friendly approach to spatial planning. He strongly supports more office development in and around the centre of London.

The local municipality, the Borough of Camden, though still divided between left-Labour and right-Labour, is led by a strongly Blair-ite faction. It's a child of this consensus, of a business-oriented Labor Party. We struggled against a much more established hegemony this time around.

As usual in the UK, the local authorities and the developers had to go through all the motions of "public consultation" on a succession of drafts of the development plan. We fought

every inch of the way trying to secure concessions. On any substantial disagreements with the great consensus we were dismissed as a group of very unrealistic people who are trying to challenge common sense, trying to challenge sensible business practices. The local politicians who objected to a business-oriented development plan for King's Cross have been marginalised. The leading objector among the local politicians has actually been excluded from the committees and excluded from the decision-making. At most stages we achieved little or nothing, have been out-maneuvered or ignored. In effect, we have been defeated, we lost this battle.

Last November the Borough of Camden gave permission for the development project, which intends to build about 700,000 square metres of buildings, again predominantly offices. The land involved in the proposal that we are attacking occupies space between the two big stations of St Pancras and King's Cross, both built in the 19th century. St Pancras has been extended to make space for the arrival of international trains from France, Germany and Belgium. The space between the stations includes some historic buildings which can't be touched or removed, and the new project has to fit itself around them. The proposed buildings will reach 10-18 floors high, but no higher. One of the curiosities of London planning is the importance of protecting the view of St. Paul's Cathedral, in the centre of London, from Hampstead Heath and other viewpoints. This view has become a sacred thing and no development is allowed to rise above this

imaginary ceiling. Therefore the height of the project is set by the view from Hampstead Heath to St. Paul's Cathedral, but it's still a very solid lump of development.

The historic buildings include a little building about 10 metres high, Turnhalle, a gymnasium built by the German community in London in 1870. The first sports building in London, Turnhalle is where the first meeting was held to organize the modern Olympic Games and therefore it's a very important building in the history of sports but in the end it will be dwarfed by great slabs of office blocks behind it.

We hoped that the Mayor of London might intervene to try and influence this plan to make it a bit more community-friendly and include more housing. But he didn't; he decided to let it go through. Similarly the National Ministries involved agreed to let the development plan go through. It seemed our defeat was complete.

New Directions

The only thing course left open to us was to resort to the law. We have never done this before, but it is increasingly common today in Britain to go to the Administrative Court and challenge the way decision-making is done. With support from the Environmental Law Foundation and from individual lawyers we lodged a challenge, in the High Court (Administrative Court), to the validity of the planning

permission. The Court has accepted that we have a strong case and a hearing will decide our case three weeks from now, on the 24th and 25th of May 2007. We are optimistic about the outcome, and our lawyers are excited about the case. The lawyers are working for nothing; they will get paid only if we win. We are encouraged by their willingness to struggle with us.

Essentially our case is based on the focal criticism that one decision, one permit, covers a large and complex project which will take 15 or 20 years to build. We think this gives too much power to a private agent, taken away from the public realm. We are also very critical of the composition of the whole scheme. For example, within the housing component of the project, only 40% of the housing can be called social housing, affordable for middle-income people. About 60% would be housing for the open market, which means the homes will sell for millions; they are very, very expensive.

The development plan has other critical faults as well. Quite a lot of historic buildings are slated for destruction. We also believe that any plan should be a model of zero-energy or low-energy development, but this proposal includes high-energy performance. In our view the procedures for decision-making have been very undemocratic, both relative to English Law and to the Law of the European Union, which now operates in Britain as well. European Environmental Law is a

valuable asset for campaign groups active on environmental issues.

Our struggle is very difficult; we may well be completely defeated. We are a large number of citizens fighting a strong dominant set of ideas about markets and business and economic growth and gross domestic product. We find ourselves investing a lot of thought in the conduct of our campaign, and taking care in the use of language.

Incidentally, I am very impressed when I read the text of "Bimkom", because you seem to be doing the same. You are being very careful to look at the words and think about their meaning.

The Government, for example, keeps using the phrase "Sustainable Community" to justify what they are doing. Establishment use of this phrase terrifies us. It somehow suggests environmental qualities. It suggests that society will continue into the future. It suggests that everything is harmonious and stable and of course it isn't because what is actually being engineered is a market-driven displacement of one community by other communities in the pursuit of capital gains.

We have chosen to keep using their language back at them and say, "What do you mean by sustainable communities? The families who live in this area can't afford to stay here. Their children can't afford to live here. If they want to form a

household and have children they have to move 100 kilometres away to a cheaper place to be able to afford to live."

That's not sustainability. That's not a community, which can continue to occupy its terrain for 50 years or 100 years. Whether we speak of a settled community or of mixed communities or just of individual citizens who have lived in one place for a long while, they have to be able to assert their right to continue to occupy the space, irrespective of the legal documents or of the ownership of the space; whether they are tenants of the Municipality or of a private landlord.

The battle we need to fight is this battle about basic rights. This battle reaches far beyond casual use of the word "rights", which was much used in British politics and discussion till recently. Now the discussion is beginning to change because of to the environmental movements, who are trying to establish the concept of environmental rights: that we have rights to open space, that we have rights to good quality air to breathe, and that these rights should be defensible in the courts if necessary.

We are trying to maintain our optimism and to believe that the courts will uphold more of these rights and will force the reversal of the Camden decision in favour of the development plan. Then the planning process will begin again. Perhaps the best outcome will be simply ten more years of public debate

on the development of the area.

The one last thing I would like to emphasize is that driving all these processes (and this is much clearer in England than in Israel, where processes are influenced by other factors as well) is money, is the extension of commodity relationships and market relationships into ever-wider ranges of urban life. Education, the universities where you have to pay; the schools where you don't actually pay yet for public schooling but you have to pay more for a house to live near a good school; the swimming pools; the public facilities in general; are all increasingly becoming part of the market. The land of course is always on the market; public ownership of land is steadily decreasing.

Our activism is about dealing with capital, dealing with markets and the owners of assets. The power of the State, nationally, or of the municipality, to mediate the relationship between people and capital is rather weak. I think we have to start thinking again about strategy, about how we can sometimes deal directly with the investors rather than relying on elections and politicians to do this mediation for us.

In this area we have one example of success in the King's Cross Railway project. During the construction of this railway, which has gone on now for 6 years, the citizens living near the construction site (which stretches for 5 kilometers) have

been badly affected by the construction process itself.

The residents demanded that construction be limited to daytime only, Mondays to Fridays, perhaps including Saturday morning. They demanded that building not go on at night. This is an effort to limit and control the dust, the noise, and the vibration. They were so effective that the private promoter of the Railway agreed to set up a direct negotiating group, which meets every two weeks, between the citizens who live there and the Railway Company. The working group meets continually to deal with questions of noise, dust, pollution, vibration and working hours on the construction site. The process is working well though it's the first time that there has been direct engagement between citizens and investors. The process ignores the municipality, which is ineffective at creating direct engagement. We perhaps should consider using this model more in the future.

[Later: the High Court decided against our challenge. More details at <http://www.kxrlg.org.uk>]