



THE NEXT LONDON

Visions for the future of a city — Thirteenth in a series

Can we get there from here?

The ability to turn London into a community that is trendy and contemporary may be possible, but it has to be from our own experience. It can't be artificial — a cookie-cutter copy of some other successful city.

As the saying goes, timing is everything. So it would appear that celebrating 150 years of history in London is as good a time as any to take stock of where we have been and where we are going.

CAROLYN GIBSON



This series is part of that taking-stock process — an opportunity for the community to discuss, debate and possibly even rant about the present and future vision of the city. City administration and politicians are also taking this opportunity to plan a strategy for the future. This round of strategic planning has established five priority areas:

- ▶ Community development
- ▶ Core infrastructure
- ▶ Culture
- ▶ Commerce and
- ▶ City governance

Previous rounds of strategic planning were based on attempting to implement quality initiatives that would achieve a more responsive and accountable government. What is being considered today appears to be no different. Each strategic planning initiative the city has undertaken appears to have been less than successful in reaching expectations.

And the community has repeatedly asked the question: Why does it seem that policy-makers don't get it? Why is it so hard for the people making decisions about how to run the city, to grasp what it is that makes the city work? To be fair, I doubt there has been a time when municipal officials across the country have not encountered similar sentiments. London is no different.

A valued feature of any strategic plan is the ability to connect the pieces, like a puzzle, of what an organization needs to do to ensure staff and city council will not run off in different directions with an idea or plan to get a quick fix on one problem area while ignoring another.

Herein lies the problem. Usually, by copying what other cities have done — without thought to building on what is unique about a community, such as history and social character — cities are quite capable, albeit without realizing it, of developing strategies that can be less than successful in achieving local goals.

It is this cautionary note that I believe speaks to the future vision of London. I believe London has yet to establish that commitment to connecting the pieces of the puzzle. For me, the time has come where mediocrity and the acceptance of the status quo are over. Breaking down the barriers of meaningful and effective

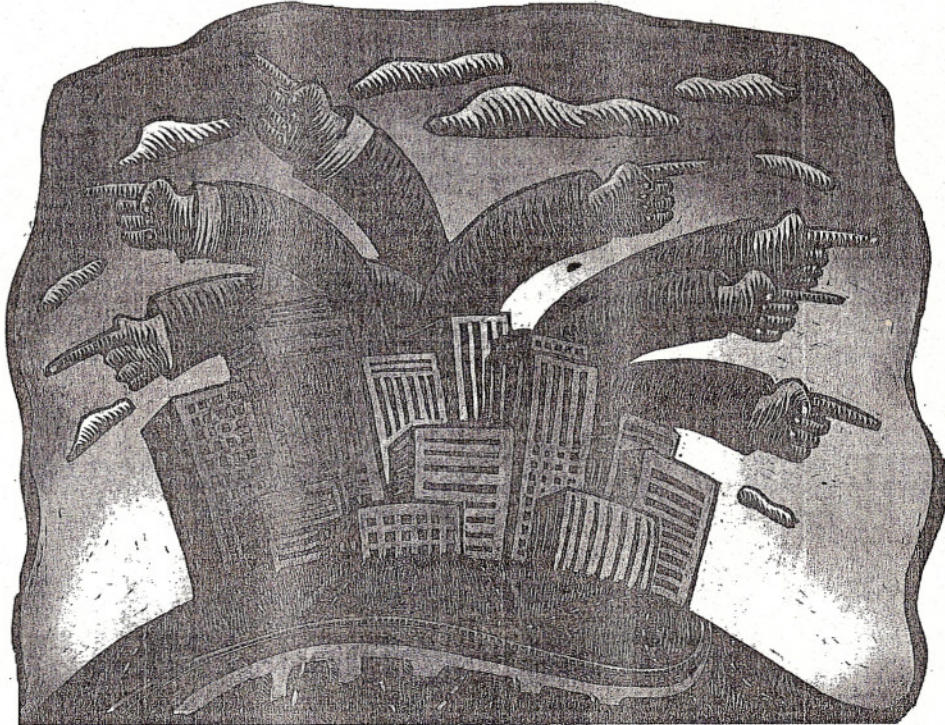


Illustration by Paul Lachine

collaboration is a priority in setting the stage for the city's future.

Every city is a distinct and particular kind of place and, over the last 150 years, London has experienced its distinctive morphology, with all appropriate descriptions attached — conservative, boring, elite, homogeneous. Such adjectives are reminiscent of a time when London appeared sheltered from the ails of society-at-large, economically prosperous and culturally contained. This is part of London's genuine identity, based on the real history of the city. By its very nature, this is still a part of London's reality, but only one part.

There is another element to London's distinct social character, a grassroots cultural scene that has been quietly thriving when no one was really looking. There are poets and artists, musicians and writers, who represent a well-established "creative class" in this city. They represent London's evolving culture, and provide a deeply rooted base for the next round of visioning.

As with people, a community cannot know where it is going until it has figured out where it came from and what it evolved into along the way. We don't need to look any further than our own community to establish a way of promoting the creative class in London. But what we do need is an acknowledgment of this creative force. Why is it so hard for

us to reclaim what we already have?

In fairness, policy-makers have often struggled when experimenting with trends for urban revitalization. The pedestrian mall, convention centres and the stadium and sports arena have all been a part of the experimentation.

In the early '90s, urban revitalization came in the form of industrial parks, shopping centres and housing, all situated at the edges of a community. Each represented the symbols of a future vision of the community, whereby urban sprawl was an example of growth and indicator of economic success.

Yet on the surface, it would appear that the decisions for implementing such strategies were based on the notion of transferable opportunity — the assumption that if it works in one community with great success, then it should work in another community with similar outcomes.

The assumption that communities are homogeneous and interchangeable is what people see as a short-sightedness among policy-makers. London is no different.

This revitalization emerged out of Joel Gerreau's 1991 book, *Edge City*, which provided a vision, a way for communities to grow, revitalize and gain economic success by sprawling the boundaries of the community to the outer edges. Many communities implemented such artificial eco-

nomic development tools. London was no different.

Individuals and groups in the community have lamented the application of such artificial economic development tools to try to revitalize the city. They are seen as preventing progress, old-fashioned and, dare I say, selfish. Possibly. But those on the other side of the argument are no less narrow in their thinking.

Is this possibly just a quick-fix solution? This, I believe, is where the caution must come into play.

And now the next wave of urban revitalization is upon us, with Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class*. According to Florida, the way for a city to harness creativity (and, therefore, economic success) is to be tolerant, diverse and inclusive.

It is not that Florida's research is not worth exploring. On the contrary, it is promising to see any research where the foundation is based on tolerance, diversity and inclusiveness, particularly when society's problems are played out more readily in urban centres. In this sense, London is no different from any other city. But caution is required in this next phase of revitalization.

For example, London already has a vibrant grassroots creative community. So when Florida suggests that communities recognize and promote grassroots innovation and small-scale creativity, what he is suggest-

ing is we not quickly jump to imitations of what other cities have created, but rather enhance the genuine identity that already exists.

This includes embracing our old metaphors of the city, recognizing where we were, and recognizing the often-subtle realities of what we have evolved into. The ability to turn London into a community that is trendy and contemporary may be possible, but it cannot be artificial. I don't think it fits in with our social history, our character. By nature, it is not part of our culture. But that does not mean we cannot define our own sense of contemporary culture.

My vision for London embraces diversity, tolerance, inclusiveness and collaboration. I don't think there is anything selfish about that. In fact, what is selfish about ensuring that issues reflecting our social consciousness, issues that have been slowly isolated to the periphery, are brought back to the local political agenda? And what better way to ensure this than engaging the optimism of our young people.

As an example, I have often wondered why we, as a community that expresses such concern for our young people, have never actually bothered to ask them what they wanted, what they needed or what they thought. We want young people to stay in London, to establish careers and families in London, yet we have never reached out to them. My future of London would put a high priority on our youth.

I would want to establish a London Youth Forum where a diversity of young people, representing a range of age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status were brought in to actively participate in the strategic planning and decision-making process of the city. What better way to express validation and respect?

I believe this celebratory series began with the following questions: How do we express to each other the sometimes-competing visions we have for the decades to come? How do we discuss our ideas for how London can stake its claim on the road to prosperity in the years ahead?

Asking the questions is the easy part. The hard part is ensuring that we find a way to not forget missteps we have taken along the way.

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← DIALOGUE.....

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