

Double erasure: Building the dome, rebuilding britain

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Abstract

This paper discusses two projects associated with the Millennium celebrations in London: the regeneration of Greenwich Peninsula, and the building of the Millennium Dome. The paper examines the Labour Government's appropriation of these interrelated projects, which started as a Conservative Party's proposal. It is argued that Labour attempted to redefine them into a narrative of national renewal by employing a discourse of inclusiveness, consensus, and togetherness that entailed ignoring, even erasing, the complex history of the site.

Keywords: urban regeneration; recent British political history; millennium

Resumo

Este artigo discute dois projetos associados às celebrações do milênio em Londres: a regeneração da Península de Greenwich, e a construção do *Millennium Dome*. Os dois projetos foram concebidos originalmente pelo governo do *Conservative Party* na Grã-Bretanha, mas realizados pelo *Labour Party*, que o sucedeu após a vitória eleitoral de 1997. O artigo examina a apropriação dos projetos pelo *Labour Party*. É proposto que *Labour* tentou redefinir esses projetos através de uma narrativa de renovação nacional, usando um discurso de inclusão, consenso, e unidade, que envolvia ignorar, e até mesmo apagar, a história de conflito da península.

Palavras-Chave: regeneração urbana; história política Britânica recente; milênio

1. Introduction

Conceived as a beacon of Britain's cultural confidence in the 1990s, the Millennium Dome was built on the tip of the Greenwich Peninsula, a 300-acre piece of land northeast of historic Greenwich, lying to the southeast of London, across the water from, and facing, that icon of Britain's economic confidence in the 1980s, the Canary Wharf development.

Originally proposed under a Conservative Government but carried out by the Labour Government that succeeded it, one of the (expressed) goals driving the Millennium Dome

project was to portray the contemporary condition of Britain, whilst pointing to a future that exceeded that condition. A shift in discourse took place throughout the process of realising the Dome, which paralleled Britain's change of political climate and administration. That discourse put forward a particular narrative about the transition from the outgoing Conservative government, and the hopes of national renewal brought about by the electoral victory of "New Labour" (as the victorious party rebranded itself) in 1997. It was a utopian narrative, inscribed in a long line of idealism aimed at reconstructing and improving on society through architectural and urban planning (see MARIN, 1990; and HARVEY, 2000). The Millennium celebrations, and especially the Dome, were often compared to the 1851 Great Exhibition and the 1951 Festival of Britain, two events which had in common a stress on a linear idea of history based on the notion of progress, in which the "contributions" of Great Britain to the world could be shown off and extolled (MURRAY, 1999; NICOLSON, 1999). A constant deployment of notions of cultural and social regeneration through architectural/urban development seemed, however, to claim for the Millennium Dome a status which the disciplines of architecture and urban planning had arguably long lost.

In the early years of the Dome's conception, Michael Heseltine, Deputy Prime Minister under the Conservative Government, and chairman of the government committee overseeing the Millennium Festival, stated his aspirations for it:

I want millions of visitors to visit this country, share in the festival and go away deeply impressed, much excited by British achievements. *The excellence of UK companies, the pre-eminence of the City of London as a financial centre, the technological prowess, the innovative genius* will leave an indelible impression.

We can do that only *in partnership with our leading companies*. It is not a bureaucratic concept of central government, or a whim of the Millennium Commission. *It is about selling ourselves and our country*. (Michael Heseltine, July 1996, quoted in NICOLSON, 1999: 2; my emphases)

Reflecting a stress on Thatcherite ideals of releasing market forces, and pointing to the Dome as a celebration of private enterprise, these words make a startling contrast with a written reply issued by the (also Conservative) Secretary of State for National Heritage, Virginia Bottomley MP, only some six months later. Answering to a request for a statement on the progress of the millennium exhibition project at Greenwich, Mrs Bottomley quoted a statement issued by her department on 18 January 1997, which concluded with the following paragraph:

A National Exhibition should be a landmark in the lives of British people; it should be an event of which the whole country can be proud and which other nationals will admire, and be a worthy successor to the 1851 Great

Exhibition and the 1951 Festival of Britain. The decontamination and regeneration of the 300-acre Greenwich Peninsula – the largest single derelict site in Southern England, just six miles from Westminster – will be one of the great legacies of the event. Five thousand people will work to build the Exhibition. The associated national programme will involve the whole country in the celebration of the Millennium. This will be an exhibition for the whole nation. (PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES, Jan 1997: 448-449)

That rhetoric of inclusiveness, consensus, togetherness, and regeneration, would be embraced by the Labour administration that came to power after the landslide victory of May 1997. This article aims to dissect the narrative underwriting that rhetoric. That narrative (and the erasure of the contradictory history of Greenwich Peninsula that it entailed) was embodied in the discourse justifying the work on the millennium celebrations, the culmination of which would be the building of the Millennium Dome and the regeneration of the peninsula.

2. Greenwich Peninsula: industry and conflict

In 1996 Greenwich, the Prime Meridian of the world, the Zero Degrees Longitude from which other time zones are fixed and from which time and place are officially measured, was chosen as the site to host the official Millennium Celebrations, beating competing bids from Stratford, Derby and Birmingham. The Greenwich Peninsula was put forward as the site to house the Millennium Dome, a ‘landmark’ building, with surrounding parkland designed as part of a ‘Millennium Experience’ exhibition. Suffering, like many other parts of East and Southeast London, from a disintegration of its urban fabric, the borough of Greenwich was already considering how the millennium could be seized on as an opportunity for regeneration. The calling cards of historic Greenwich – its architectural heritage and history, its tourist attractions, such as the *Cutty Sark*, the Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich Park and the National Maritime Museum – show one face of the borough. Some residential areas of Greenwich, especially around the park, had become increasingly trendy and expensive during the 1980s and early 1990s. But years of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership had contributed to the demise of traditional riverside industries in Docklands (of which the Borough of Greenwich is part), particularly in East Greenwich and Charlton. The redevelopment of Docklands since the 1980s, as part of an attempt to reconfigure the geography of London from its hubs in the City and the West End towards the East Thames corridor, saw the decline of a once-thriving industrial landscape (OGDEN, 1992). One of the visible effects of that decline is the two faces of Greenwich: on the one side, the tourist destination; on the other, a borough facing similar

problems to those of many other inner city boroughs in Britain, such as the slide into dereliction of its industrial infrastructure, unemployment, and crime in impoverished housing estates.

Standing on the tip of the peninsula, where the Dome is situated, and looking North across the River Thames, one can see Blackwall Pier and the area of the East India Docks. Turning left, and looking West, one can see the Isle of Dogs, and the Canary Wharf development. Designed by Mike Davis of Richard Rogers Partnership, with design and engineering input from Imagination and Buro Happold, in plan the Dome's simple, circular form follows the curve of the peninsula.

The Greenwich Peninsula is a site less than a couple of miles east of Greenwich, and yet, for a place with its long history of industrial activity and its peculiar history of labour relations (on which, see MILLS, 1999: 180-192), it is surprisingly absent from many mainstream accounts of the history of Greenwich. Ackroyd's "biography" of London (2000), for instance, does mention Greenwich and Docklands (2000: 512, 549, 550, 564, 663, 764-5, etc.) but a look at the Index will reveal no mention of Blackwall Point, Bugsby's Marshes, Greenwich Peninsula, or the gas works. Indeed, Iain Sinclair (1999: 4) remarks, "the peninsula thrives on secrecy. For as long as anyone can remember much of this land had been hidden behind tall fences".

The site had been used for the production of chemicals since the mid-19th century, when Francis Hills, a firm producing sulphuric acid, built a chemical works in Bugsby's Hole. Gas manufacture was moved there in the 1880s, when the South Metropolitan Gas Light & Coke Company, which had been formed in 1829, opened what was to become the largest gas works in Europe, in terms of gas production. Built on reclaimed marshland, the East Greenwich gas works initially occupied an area of 120 acres. In 1900, Parliamentary powers were obtained to purchase a further 130 acres for future possible expansions (MILLICHIP, 1998). The gas works itself eventually occupied 150 acres of the site, the remaining land being used for other equally heavy industries. The site had a river frontage of nearly one mile. Yet the presence of this considerable tract of land was largely ignored, consigned to invisibility, to the east of Greenwich town. Millichip notes that

The geographical siting on the peninsula meant that the works was rarely seen by the general public. The only views possible were from passing river craft or on the approach road to the Blackwall Tunnel, which had been

officially opened by the Prince of Wales on the 22nd May 1897.
(MILLICHIP, 1998: 411)

The peninsula was at once a hub of industrial activity (with its production of gas for the metropolis), and hidden from the rest of the city, even from its immediate neighbourhoods. Iain Sinclair, writing about the isolation of the Peninsula, remarks on its ‘erasure’ from the field of vision of the inhabitants of the metropolis, a deliberate elision that ties in with Millichip’s observation about the ‘invisibility’ of the works for the general public:

19th-century colourists, busy with windmills, with miniature orchards on the Isle of Dogs, golden sandbanks at the mouth of the River Lea and deepwater docks of a celestial blue, balked at Bugsby’s Marshes. The swamp defied their imagination. Its karma was too terrible. They knew that any proper human settlement needed its back country, its unmapped deadlands. The peninsula was where the nightstuff was handled: foul-smelling industries, the manufacture of ordnance, brewing, confectionery, black smoke palls and sickly-sweet perfumes. The cloacal mud of low tide mingled deliriously with sulphurous residues trapped in savage greenery: the bindweed, thorns and dark berries of the riverside path. (SINCLAIR, 1999: 14)

The peninsula, cut off from the metropolis, was hidden also because there were no passenger links with the rest of London: East Greenwich gas works was initially isolated from the main railway network system. Its industries were served by coastal ships and by an internal railway system; these, however, were goods lines, not passenger services. It was only a progressive expansion from 1903 that provided a justification for a direct connection of the gas works railway with the main line system. However, although for the first time a connection between the peninsula, Blackheath and Charlton was provided, it remained a goods line.

The site housed two massive gas holders. No. 1 holder was built in 1885-6, at the same time as the gasworks, and had a capacity of 8 million cubic feet. The No. 2 holder, built alongside it in 1891-2, had a capacity for 12 million cubic feet. No. 2 holder suffered extensive damage in 1917 when a munitions works in Silverstown, East London, making ordnance for the British war effort, exploded. Although the munitions works was one and a half miles away from the South Metropolitan plant, the force of the blast caused No. 2 holder to collapse, and the 8 million cubic feet of gas inside went up in flames. No. 2 holder was also hit by a German bomb during the Second World War in 1941, but was repaired. When gas production at the plant ended in the 1970s,

No. 2 was used for some time for storage, and eventually demolished in 1986 (IRVINE, 1999; MILLICHIP, 1998).

By the 1960s, exploration of natural gas supplies were being undertaken in the North Sea, and by the end of that decade that gas was being brought to England, with production at the East Greenwich site, whose gas works had been active for some 90 years, progressively abandoned until it ended officially in 1978.

In January 1979, the site between the two holders on the Greenwich Peninsula was bombed by IRA terrorists, who that same night also planted a bomb 30 miles away, in a fuel-storage tank on Canvey Island, Essex. This prompted the strengthening of security at all gas and oil installations in the country. The Greenwich No. 1 holder still stands to this day, although advances in pipeline technology have rendered it redundant.

3. Regeneration and architectural idealism

In 1994, regeneration plans were resumed by the Conservative Government, after British Gas, the owners of the site, agreed to make a £20 million contribution towards the cost of building an underground station in Greenwich Peninsula. A mass transit link with Central London, with an advertised journey time of 12 minutes between North Greenwich (the newly named underground station in the peninsula) and the West End, was crucial for any regeneration proposal. The idea of linking the peninsula and Central London had been considered long before that. Councillor Bob Harris, Greenwich Council's deputy leader, mentions these ideas: "The debate around the future of the Peninsula had been going on for some time. We had had the failed BUD (British Urban Development) scheme in 1988, which was basically a bunch of Thatcher's mates who wanted to bring Docklands across the water to Greenwich. We had had Michael Heseltine come down and the architect Sir Norman Foster engaged to draw up designs, so there were a lot of things bubbling around" (quoted in IRVINE, 1999: 33).

By 1996, Richard Rogers Partnership produced a "master plan" for the peninsula, commissioned by English Partnerships, the government development agency. With this master plan, Rogers envisaged the regeneration of the site, with a link between the peninsula and the rest of the city. This link was Rogers' "vision" for the future development of London's riverside (ROGERS, 1997: 140-143). For Rogers, the regeneration of Greenwich Peninsula had to be seen in the context of a redefinition of the River Thames. Largely abandoned as industry had stopped using it, the Thames had to be made once again the "heart of London" (POPHAM, 1996: 12). Rogers' plan for the Thames had been conceived well before any decision was taken

to stage the millennium exhibition in Greenwich. In an interview in *The Independent* in December 1996 – six months before the public unveiling of the Millennium Dome’s design – Rogers expounded his concept for the redefinition of the role of the Thames:

The concept we developed was beads on a string – or pearls on a string, depending on what party you come from. What we need to do, we said, was build up a series of urban nodes along the river, most of which already exist: strengthening existing ones, creating new ones, all of them adding up to an overall hierarchical system. (POPHAM, 1996: 12)

These nodes included nearly all monuments along the river: the Houses of Parliament, St Paul’s Cathedral, the South Bank complex, the Tower of London, and Greenwich:

If you build up density points, you create desire points too... Our idea was to link these beads or pearls. This idea was developed before the millennium project came along, and at the time the Greenwich peninsula was just an ordinary bead like the others. But the millennium gave us concentration, and then Greenwich became a major head, the crown or the clasp in a string of beads, because Greenwich is the gateway. (POPHAM, 1996: 12)

The argument went that like the Great Exhibition of 1851, which left in London a number of important legacies from the Victoria & Albert Museum to the Royal Albert Hall, and the Festival of Britain of 1951, which left the Royal Festival Hall, regeneration prompted by the millennium exhibition should be *of lasting benefit*. Listing these benefits, Rogers said in the same interview that the Greenwich Peninsula

...will have all the elements of an ordinary town: a very good tube station, 15 minutes from Trafalgar Square, the riverside, a great walkway along the edge of the water, a park all the way through the centre with a lot of trees, and offices, housing and shops. It will be a sustainable development which is all about people living, sleeping there, people working there, having leisure and culture there – in other words, a community. The exhibition must have the potential for cultural regeneration... To make it of use it has to be regeneration by which the poor are advantaged as well as the rich – it has to be an inclusive celebration. The Greenwich site is a linchpin between all sorts of areas that are very fragmented. The whole focus of what we are doing is seeing how you make new parishes. (POPHAM, 1996: 12)

If we leave aside the question of how many “ordinary” British towns actually have such facilities as a very good tube station, a riverside, a great walkway alongside the river, etc., we observe in this plan for the regeneration of the peninsula a rhetoric of inclusiveness similar to the one expressed by Virginia Bottomley, quoted above. This rhetoric brings together a mixture of urbanism, ecology and defence of the environment (enwrapped in the notion of “sustainability”), and morality (the “poor” being given the

same advantages as the “rich”). In this rhetoric, “regeneration” of an area means more than bringing it into line with the economic productivity of wealthier areas of the country. As noted by Nicolson, the assumption behind the notion of regeneration that would be advanced during the construction of the Millennium Dome was “not that Britain was great, or that its brilliance needed trumpeting, but that, as a group of individuals, as a society and as a global presence, it was in need of repair” (NICOLSON, 1999: 3). “Regeneration”, then, meant in that context the *reparation* of the fabric of society, the *healing* of its wounds – and in the process of doing so, the *reconstitution* of the body politic, dismembered *by previous actions*. “Eighteen years of Conservative government destroyed social cohesion [in Britain]”, said Terence Gibbons, spokesman for the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), the company formed to manage the Dome project. (quoted in MILLER, 1998). The Labour Party’s slogan during the run-up to the 1997 elections – “Things can only get better” – clearly indicated hopes of a reparation Britain’s social fabric. After its landslide victory in 1997, when the Labour Party decided to embrace the Dome project, that rhetoric of regeneration would once again be translated into a slogan. NMEC undertook a market research exercise in 1997 to gather people’s ideas and expectations for the Dome. The result of the exercise was a slogan, concocted by NMEC with M&C Saatchi, the advertising agency: “Time to make a difference” (NICOLSON, 1999: 27).

4. Double erasure

In June 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair visited the Greenwich site after the newly-elected Labour government confirmed its backing for the Exhibition. It was announced that the project would be renamed the “Millennium Experience”. During his visit to the site, Tony Blair said:

Are we in Britain going to give people a derelict site or the finest exhibition the world has seen? In the year 2000, as the country that is the home of time, here, at the millennium, on the meridian line, we ought to be making a statement to the world about Britain.

These plans require a leap of faith. It is not the easy thing to do, it is the bold thing to do. It could be, if we get it right, and we mean to get it right, the

most exciting happening in the world in the year. 2000 (quoted in NEW MILLENNIUM EXPERIENCE, 1998: 2)

The interventions of Rogers and the Prime Minister quoted above crystallised an ethos for the Dome and the Millennium based on the conception of a future that broke away from the past rather than developed from it. If for the borough of Greenwich the Millennium Project was seen as a catalyst for social regeneration based on the creation of local opportunities, the rhetoric of Rogers' intervention and of New Labour's plans pointed towards a form of idealism in which regeneration was based on architectural/urban planning. Just as Rogers affirmed in his interview that the focus of his "vision" was "how you make new parishes" (POPHAM, 1996: 12), the Prime Minister called for a "leap of faith", in a conflation of millenarian themes of renewal with quasi-religious talk that did not escape the attention of some commentators (e.g. NICOLSON, 1999).

The proposal for the Millennium Dome faced much resistance nationally and locally. A report on a forum held at the Borough of Greenwich in 1997 notes that the project may be an "attempt to send 'up-beat' image to world, but may leave profound underlying local and global problems unaddressed" (GREENWICH ENVIRONMENT FORUM, 1997). This sceptical reception of the Dome makes for a startling contrast with the claims being made for the regeneration of the Peninsula, and for the role of the Dome in that project.

The project's guiding light, in the words of the chief executive of the NMEC, Jennie Page, was a saying of the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, who divided nations into "those that are hoping to rise and those that are fearing to fall" (ASLET, 1999: 227). This gives rise to the question: who, or what, was expected to rise from the polluted land in which the Dome was to be built? A nation (or an image of a nation) regenerated, purged from which past, looking forward to which future? What about the land in which that image was to be carved?

On the 10th July 1997, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott launched a national competition, organised by English Partnerships, for a "Millennium Village" to be built on 32.3 acres south of the Millennium Dome site. Announcing the winner, a mixed-use scheme from a consortium comprising developers Countryside Properties plc, Taylor Woodrow plc, Moat Housing Group, and Ujima Housing Association, Prescott said:

“The new community will be a tangible, living example of sustainable development – providing a new environmentally friendly way of 21st century living” (quoted in IRVINE, 1999: 69). This “environmentally friendly” community was to be built on a site on which heavy industry had dumped its waste for nearly a century. The clean-up operation of the Peninsula had included the removal of thousands of tonnes of toxic waste. Vast quantities of topsoil had then been used to cover the excavated layer. The operation was questioned by *The Times* newspaper in March 1998, in an article headlined “Lethal Dome waste dumped in villages”. The article reported that 200,000 tonnes of soil heavily contaminated with cyanides, arsenic and asbestos had been buried in dumps near three villages in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Northamptonshire. The article then pointed out the irony of English Partnerships using the contaminated land to build an “environmentally friendly” village (HENDERSON *et al*, 2008: 1).

The clean-up of the Peninsula’s contaminated soil thus constituted a double erasure of the site’s past. On the one hand it was a process of erasing the site physically, of excavating the soil and putting new soil in its place. On the other it was the substitution of a past history of pollution by a future built on *another, new soil*: the making of the Peninsula from a *tabula rasa*.

5. Conclusion

As Marin points out, “Utopia is first and foremost a spatial organization designed for complete human dwelling” (MARIN, 1990: 203); it “points to a possible future reconciliation and a present acting contradiction of the concept, and of history” (MARIN, 1990: 8). But utopia works by arresting the flow of time and withholding the contests over space: by reversing “the movement from history to its schematic and monogrammatic figure in the fictional space of play, and also in the text” (MARIN, 1990: 203). This reversal can be observed in the construction of a Dome “portraying” Britain, and of a “Millennium Village” designed to become a community, both built on a deracinated land, on a clean slate from which history has been carefully expunged.

The construction of the Dome and the regeneration of Greenwich Peninsula can be understood as an exercise in *translating* New Labour’s “New Britain” – the country as Labour dubbed it following the victory of 1997 – into a space. By adopting a discourse of inclusiveness, consensus, regeneration, New Labour attempted to mark a break with the Conservative government that preceded it. Even though these projects were inherited from the Conservatives,

they were used by Labour to pursue a view that was intent on differing radically from their predecessors. That view was a utopian narrative based on the idea of redefining Britain, of making it anew.

The Millennium Dome held its exhibition from January to December 2000. Public reception of the exhibition was marked by overwhelmingly negative media coverage, with much criticism of the poor quality of the show, of the amateurish running of the operation, and of the overall cost – surpassing £700 million (MGUIGAN, 2004). After its closure in 2001, successive attempts to sell the Dome failed. Bids for the site were withdrawn after the state of the Dome's accounts was disclosed (MOORE, 2001); ideas were floated to turn the Dome into a e-business park, reflecting Canary Wharf's policy of stimulating high-tech industries, but were rejected. Finally, it was announced in May 2002 that the government was hoping to clinch a deal with a US-based leisure group, which planned to turn the Dome into a permanent 20,000-seat auditorium surrounded by 5,000 homes, and create up to 20,000 jobs (WHITE, 2002).

In May 2002, Forbes Magazine published a list of the world's ugliest buildings, as voted by 15 American architects (whose names were not disclosed). Top of the list of world eyesores was the Dome, condemned as a "space-odyssey novelty act" resting "in the architectural graveyard" (SCHIFFMAN, 2002). It took some two years for a deal to be reached as to the Dome's future. Now rebranded as "The O2", an entertainment complex, and stripped of any utopian rhetoric, the development, including the Millennium Village, appears set to repeat the route of market-led regeneration implemented across the water, in Canary Wharf.

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