# Gresham College Main logo

07 July 2015

**Replanning London**

**After The Second World War**

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*“… it is fortunately a fact that most of it [air raid damage] has either removed property that cried aloud for redevelopment, or has opened up hidden beauties which we hope will not be needlessly obliterated. There is thus presented to London a unique stimulus to better planning”. (County of London)*

**Introduction**

London, by far the UK’s largest city, was both its worst-damaged city during the Second World War and also was clearly suffering from significant pre-war social, economic and physical problems. Yet London was also one of the world’s largest cities; the focus of an empire, of international trade, and a national capital. Solving these problems was one of the world’s largest and most complex tasks. Much has been written about London’s re-planning and rebuilding and, although attempts to provide general accounts of London often drown in detailed data, there are significant factors that can only emerge from such an attempt. Most studies have focused on one plan or author, or compared a small number of plans: here I give a wider overview.

As in many places, the wartime damage was seized upon as the opportunity to re-plan, sometimes radically, at all scales from the City core to the county and region. London attracted a significant number of plans and planners; substantially more so than any other UK bomb-damaged city (Figure 1). Not only was a large number of plans produced, albeit concentrated into a short period, but they ranged from formal, to very informal, and from regional scale to the smallest local level. The hierarchy of plans thus produced, especially those involving Professor (later Sir) Patrick Abercrombie, is often celebrated as an exemplar of contemporary planning practice, cited as being highly influential in shaping post-war planning thought and practice, and innovative. But much critical attention has also focused on the proposed physical product, especially the seductively-illustrated but flawed *beaux-arts* street layouts of the Royal Academy plans.

Reconstruction-era re-planning has been the focus of much attention over the past two decades, which is continuing even in the quality media today; and it is appropriate now to re-consider the London experience in the light of our more detailed knowledge of processes and plans elsewhere in the UK. This paper therefore evaluates the London plan hierarchy in terms of process and product, examining exactly what was proposed, and the extent to which the different plans and different levels in the spatial planning hierarchy were integrated; and impact, particularly in terms of how concepts developed (or perhaps more accurately promoted) in the London plans influenced subsequent plans and planning in the UK. It draws on three sets of sources: the contents of the plans themselves; what was written about them at the time, including reviews and archive sources; and what has been written about them and their authors more recently.



Figure 1: Schematic representation of clustering of London-related planning activity

Before I review some of the issues surrounding the multiplicity of plans, the processes of re-planning, and the products, we should recall that planning as an activity was in great flux. There were unintentional and deliberate misunderstandings. Damage mean that re-planning was necessary, but then unbombed towns (and, in the London context, lesser-damaged boroughs) jumped on the bandwagon, perhaps to reposition themselves in the changing urban hierarchy of post-war Britain. Then there were misunderstandings about what planning could, and could not, do; what was realistic, and what was achievable. And who should do this re-planning – qualified planners were few, and both architects and surveyors laid claim to this territory.

**The context of regional-scale planning**

London, and the concept of a greater London, has long been associated with the emergence of planning and of regional planning. During the inter-war period there wasgrowing support for planning at the regional scale, deriving from region-wide surveys and American influence. An explicit regional perspective, and the commissioning of regional plans, had established a form foundation for planning activities: this was a period of active experimentation, not cautious consolidation.

The rise of interest in garden cities and concern for environmental protection and against suburban sprawl encouraged a wider approach to planning than local authority boundaries traditionally allowed, although there was no support for regional government *per se*. Yet there was a rise of Regional Advisory Committees, and a series of major reports produced for such Joint Panning Committees in the 1920s and 1930s was where the fundamentals of planning objectives in strategic terms were developed and tested.

Abercrombie, who features very heavily in the following saga of London’s re-planning, had a long-standing interest in regional planning. He was directly involved in no less than 18 of the key inter-war regional plans, a ‘senior consultant’ in the pioneering Doncaster plan (of 1922). He was also an influential planning educator, at the Universities of Liverpool and London teaching many of those who later wrote reconstruction plans; and he also wrote a standard planning textbook. His concerns are conservativism in terms of landscape and land use.

**The hierarchy of planning for London**

First, then, what was this hierarchy? The London County and Greater London plans stand out, but even formally there was competition between the much-criticised plan of the City of London’s Improvements and Town Planning Committee, and the replacement by consultants Holden and Holford. Even locally, there were Borough and lesser formal plans, and some much less formal, by individuals and local groups. The City itself attracted many informal proposals, as well as the quasi-official proposals of the Royal Academy. And there was the larger-scale MARS plan, of equally problematic status.

Underpinning this multiplicity is the variety of damage (Table 1). Let us not forget its variability: local damage was locally calamitous and often spurred a plan response, but was rarely of regional or national significance; and that local plan often conflicted with regional proposals even when these were already available. On a larger scale, though, the damage was scattered and much less intense than was suffered in bombing later in the war or by ground warfare in Europe and the Far East.

**A hierarchy of planning**

One problem with exploring the plans as a hierarchy rather than a chronology is that there was no structural (i.e hierarchical) logic in their timing. Plans were commissioned, delivered and commented upon in no logical order; in fact the highest in the hierarchy, the regional plan to which logically all others should be subordinate, was one of the last to appear. This is one of the greatest problems in dealing with London’s re-planning, and is largely a function of the gradual evolution of historical boundaries and responsibilities coupled with some clear reluctance on the part of various individuals and authorities to coordinate and collaborate.

***Table 1: Scale of war damage in London boroughs***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| London | War damage1  | DeclaratoryOrder granted2 | Number ofhouses destroyed3 |
| All 18 LCC boroughs |  | 1,312 | 47,314 |
| Beckenham | 20 | 6 |  |
| East Ham | 60 |  |  |
| Erith | 14 | 9 |  |
| Finchley | 15 | 6 |  |
| Hornsey | 20 | 10 |  |
| Leyton | 45 | 25 |  |
| Thurrock | 20 | 4 |  |
| Tottenham | 60 | 39 |  |
| Twickenham | 25 | 21 |  |
| Walthamstow | 20 |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| City of London |  | 231 |  |

1 Estimated figure, in acres, from HLG 71/34

2 In acres, from HLG 71/2222 and HLG 71/34

3 CAB 87/11 unless otherwise specified. “Houses” was taken to mean most types of dwelling, including accommodation over commercial premises.

**Greater London Plan**

In the history of town planning, Patrick Abercrombie’s ideas for the refashioning of London are most prominent for their investment in zoning principles and for their grand plans to remove over a million Londoners from the dreary and overcrowded city, largely into eight new satellite towns to be built beyond the Green Belt. The *Greater London Plan* was planning on the grand scale. This was a Ministry commission, this being desired by the County authorities as this would take the matter out of the range of local politics. Abercrombie was the prime author. Not only was he Professor of Planning at London University, but he had a long-standing interest in the complexities of planning for the capital city. However, as will be seen, Abercrombie had been identified by, and strongly promoted, by the Ministry even at Ministerial level.

The Minister (Lord Reith) promoted the view that a committee was unsuitable for this task at a meeting with the “outer Counties” on 21 January 1942 and it was agreed in principle to appoint Abercrombie – the meeting was strongly “steered” by Reith “so that the request to appoint Abercrombie should come from the representatives”. Even so, Abercrombie’s name had been raised in a letter from the Clerks of the Home Counties and County Boroughs to Reith in October 1941. The Ministry would have to pay for this first draft plan, although there was subsequent discussion on costs and staffing. The Treasury was asked to agree to a fee of £3000 plus staffing and other costs of £2000.

Here we see significant problems, not least over Abercrombie’s identification and appointment. At least one influential local individual complained over the perceived preferential treatment of this key individual, noting that there were other consultants, himself amongst them. And there was clear preference in the Ministry for Abercrombie: he was promoted by the Ministry to the Standing Conference on London Regional Planning, which agreed in May 1942 to appoint a consultant “who might well be Professor Abercrombie”.

Abercrombie proposed to start work on 10 August 1942 and proposed completion “within the year”. The plan was circulated in 1944 and published in 1945. Although the entire Plan was produced quickly, and with input from the Standing Conference and the affected local authorities, there was no absolute unanimity in responses. One of its key features was its heavy reliance on accurate data collection and presentation: this was a techno-centric planning approach, and indeed Abercrombie referred to himself and other planners in various places as “technicians”. The plan’s fundamental concerns were to control the haphazard growth of the capital city, to introduce a measure of decentralization, and to introduce controlled development of housing, industry and communications.

Modifying the ideas of Raymond Unwin and the Garden City Association earlier in the century, Abercrombie argued that a vibrant and healthy community was founded on the intermingling of different social groups. To this end, the *Greater London Plan* denounced the interwar speculative building of suburban estates for its removal of young middle class families from the city centre. Indeed, the ideas of growth and decentralization were fused together: In Abercrombie’s *County of London Plan*, unchecked suburban building was to be halted and growth was to be limited to a population density of 136 persons per acre, and 618,000 would be decentralized. The *Greater London Plan*, however, added 415,000 to this total. These would be housed in eight new satellite towns (later known as New Towns) (383,250), to be located outside the green belt ring; additions to existing towns (261,000); ‘quasi-satellite’ towns in the inner London built-up area, recognised as less than ideas (125,000). The remaining people would be moved to locations far from London. Industrial location was felt to be in some respects the most important part of the plan. It followed the recommendations of the Barlow Report (1940), assuming that new industry would not be permitted to locate in London, and that the pre-war drift from the depressed areas and other places of low prosperity to South-East England and London [would] not be permitted to continue. It begins to explicitly suggest a distance-decay factor in metropolitan influence and planning. More significantly, perhaps, in terms of the transferability of planning ideas, here we see the emergence of new towns and a more coherent green belt.

There was also some criticism emanating from the Ministry regarding Abercrombie. It was felt that Abercrombie’s text was incomplete and inappropriate; the whole thing was inadequate for publication.

**RIBA London Regional Reconstruction Committee plan**

This was a further unofficial large-scale plan. In 1941, RIBA constituted a London Regional Reconstruction Committee, advising on region-wide reconstruction planning. It first sought views from RIBA branches and members, although with little result. The task then fell to the committee itself, which was large and also represented the interests of the Architectural Association. Interestingly, Abercrombie was also evidently involved: he “became an increasingly important source of information. At the same time, he appears to have influenced the committee’s proposals, though without dominating or directing them”. The proposals, described as interim, were published in a small booklet and promoted via an exhibit in a regional planning exhibition at the National Gallery in 1943.

The LRRC plan explicitly identified seven factors necessary before re-planning could be implemented. These formed a significant conceptual contribution and distinguish this from most other plans for the metropolis. Perhaps of most significance was the call for the constitution of essential machinery for a national plan,and there was a call for the satisfaction of human needs as a foundation for reconstruction. Additionally, the plan covered four main elements: communications, the reconstitution of urban areas, industrial location, and the preservation of historical features and natural character. Trunk roads, railways and green open space would separate urban areas, which would be self-contained, “each with its own local sense and civic pride, each provided with its own amenities in the form of schools, clinics, hospitals, recreational, shopping and administrative centres, and each having planned provision for local light and domestic industries and for district distribution”.

A new ‘inner airport’ was planned for a large area north of the Isle of Dogs, well connected by rail and road. Industry would be segregated from residential and urban areas, and linked to the transportation system. The preservation of natural and historical features was seen as an integral part of planning, and some improvements, including slum clearance was heavily emphasised. Yet, despite this strategic perspective, consideration was given to the micro-scale design of trunk road interchanges.

However, it was clear by 1943 that the LRRC lacked the detailed data and analysis necessary for turning a realistic set of ideas into an implementable plan. The LRRC plan was therefore produced in a seemingly *ad hoc* manner, small in format and short, with crudely-drawn maps and diagrams. As published it focused on communications, but many of the planning details were, perhaps understandably, vague and underdeveloped. In fact, a fundamental criticism of the plan as displayed was that its terms of reference were too narrow, particularly in terms of the areal extent of coverage.

**County of London Plan**

Nestling within the spatial structure and theoretical construct of the *Greater London Plan*, and by the same main author but originating slightly earlier, was the *County of London Plan*. For this Abercrombie was appointed by the London County Council to work with J.H. Forshaw, who was the LCC Architect and Planning Officer from July 1941; although Abercrombie made it plain from the beginning that he would need to consider an area wider than the County itself. By February 1942, Abercrombie felt that he “had really done his part” although much discussion “would have to be endured” before the LCC would approve the plan.

There were comparisons between the two plans, yet the *County of London Plan* appears to be clearly dominant not just for its statistical base and its more sophisticated and better-articulated theoretical underpinnings. In particular, the problems identified and addressed by the Plan included:

* Traffic congestion, causing waste of time and loss of life
* ‘depressed housing’, a generalised view of poor conditions in the bulk of inner London’s housing
* Inadequacy of open space provision
* Environmental problems caused by mixing of housing and industry, and
* Destruction of countryside caused by continuing urban sprawl.

The latter problem was too large for this plan to address comprehensively, and its handling of this through decentralisation was also criticised. Lesser problems discussed in the Introduction included the co-ordination of railway development, and the lack of ‘coherent architectural development’ such as, presumably, the uniformity of the Georgian period.

The plan was dominated by concepts of London as a community, a metropolis and a machine. One of the key novelties here was the concept and diagrammatic representation of ‘social and functional areas’ – this is the community aspect. Known irreverently to civil servants as the ‘egg diagram’ the key graphic representation of this concept came rather late in the proceedings, disrupting publication and exhibition. Some of these between-spaces could be conceptualised as linear green spaces, having – on a much smaller scale – similar features as the regional green belt; such linear spaces were indeed suggested in the *Greater London Plan*. London as metropolis recognised the national and international functions of the city, including the business/finance centre of the City and the manufacturing, trading and cultural significance. Yet some were localised functions, including Westminster, the law courts and the university: the plan suggested that these functional zones should be treated as separate ‘precincts’. London as machine focused on transport, especially the proposed three ring roads.

Another key component was the reduction of London’s population and the calculation of optimum population densities in three tiers. These calculations were largely driven by the standard of public open space provision (four acres per thousand people). However, it has been suggested that such use of facts and standards was highly selective to the point of absurdity.

The Plan was published and rapidly reprinted in 1943 and 1944, and a ‘popular’ version was also produced. An exhibition was held at County Hall in July-August 1943, where it was visited by 54,732 people including the King and Queen, then moved to the Royal Academy in Piccadilly. Educational packs were made up by the LCC for schools and the armed forces. Once published this plan was widely reviewed; although one review noted its advantageous use of “a mass of statistical and research data available from official sources ...this fact is important to bear in mind when inevitable comparisons are made with previously-produced plans”.

Again there was wide communication with the constituent London Boroughs, and most agreed with most of the provisions; though there was some disagreement and “criticism” (a common term in the contemporary discourse of wider public engagement in planning!). Most boroughs, though, suggested numerous amendments; however these were usually detailed comments on the location of specific facilities and requests for much more specific information. Probably the most negative overall comment from one of the boroughs was that “final planning for the County of London is not possible until a national planning scheme and a Greater London planning scheme have been drafted”.

It could therefore be argued that the *County of London Plan* was widely perceived less as a strategic overview than as a series of detailed micro-scale proposals that happened to be presented at county scale. This can be seen by the Plan’s depiction of, for example, major road junction designs and even designs for individual urban quarters or, to use the then-common term, ‘precincts’ and through traffic was excluded from the precincts, leaving them “inward looking and separate from the city outside”.

**City of London plans (1) Improvements and Town Planning Committee**

The lowest level in the plan hierarchy spatially, and in terms of strategic thinking, was of individual boroughs and, particularly, the City of London itself. The City was the focus of greatest concentrated damage. Attempts had been made to suggest an external consultant, but the City Corporation instead first produced a report principally by F.J. Forty, the City Engineer, on behalf of the Improvements and Town Planning Committee. There was Ministry concern that the City had not discussed matters with Abercrombie, and had ceased communication with Sir Giles Scott, then working on a plan for St Paul’s for the Royal Academy.

On 9 December, Ministry staff visited Forty to see the draft plan, and highlighted their concerns in characteristically forthright terms. “We are not only disappointed, we are frankly alarmed. Never since 1666 has there been such an opportunity to re-plan parts of the City, and, if the plans we saw are adopted, this opportunity will once again be missed. Indeed, it will be more than missed; it will be deliberately passed by.”

The Corporation insisted to the Minister that it was too late to appoint a consultant, and their plan was to be published in response to public pressure. However publication was repeatedly deferred “in the best interests of the Corporation and of the City in its future”, causing adverse comment. The plan published in 1944 was illustrated by the best architectural illustrators of the period, including J.D.H. Harvey. It was also accompanied by an exhibition. A report of this scale can justifiably deal with detail, and this did so to some extent. It used perspective drawings by the best architectural artists to ‘sell’ its proposals; but the quality of these drawings was not always high, and this attempt failed. Yet one can see a very traditional design approach.

This plan was very heavily criticised by virtually all reviewers, as being overly cautious, traditional and short-sighted. “There is no such nonsense in it as vision, or adventure. The attitude obviously was how business can be brought back into the nearest equivalent of its old quarters without loss of ground rent to anybody”. In more measured tones, this was “a plan of orderly redevelopment, which shows a marked tendency to rebuild along the old lines”. The Ministry staff were particularly scathing and, as usual, passed up no opportunity to extol the virtues of their favourite planner, Abercrombie.

Three critical reports were prepared by the Ministry by October 1944. The Royal Fine Art Commission criticised the way in which the proposed street improvements would “make architecturally successful redevelopment difficult” and, more fundamentally, that the plan focused almost exclusively on the interests of the City businesses and failed to engage with wider interests, including the *Greater London Plan* and *County of London Plan*. Interestingly, in light of subsequent events, Holford, then both a senior Ministry civil servant and a member of the RFAC, helped to draft this critical letter. The Royal Academy likewise produced “drastic criticisms” of both detailed points and substantive principles, including the lost opportunities for comprehensive re-planning of seeming to rely on the wishes of property owners and giving insufficient consideration to infrastructure, especially of railways.

A key concern was that the plan proposed rebuilding, as far as possible, along pre-war lines. The control of the bulk of new buildings would be via limiting the proportion of the site to be built upon, and the height. To obtain the maximum bulk, it was feared that buildings would all be as large and tall as possible, responding to the Corporation’s desire for a 50 per cent increase in floor area, and resulting in dull and uniform frontage development and little scope for comprehensive redevelopment of backland areas. Neither would it facilitate resolving other issues including traffic circulation. In terms of promoting the redevelopment, the Corporation was disinclines to pursue the new powers available under the 1944 Town and Country Planning Act,

of large-scale site assembly through compulsory purchase. The Ministry felt that this was “waiting for developers to shape the City instead of planning for them”.

After some time – about a year – the Minister refused to approve the plan and again strongly recommended appointment of a consultant, rather than the City Engineer. The City authorities unsurprisingly took offence at this. They were reluctant to appoint any consultant, let alone to commission an entirely new plan; and, the Ministry felt, the City was reluctant, if not refusing, to make use of the expanded planning powers of the 1944 Act. There were delays within the Ministry in responding to this problem and Ministerial-level action was suggested. The then Minister, Silkin, stood firm in emphasising the need for some response, and the Ministry’s preferred consultants, the architect Charles Holden and the Ministry planner William Holford, were finally appointed.

**City of London plans (2): Holden and Holford**

Both Holden and Holford were Commissioners of the RFAC and were clearly aware of the perceived shortcomings of the City Engineer’s plan. Holden, a senior and respected architect, had the reputation to placate the City, but little planning experience although he was a member of the TPI. He was “perceived as neither a traditionalist, like the Royal Academy group, nor a die-hard modernist, like the MARS group”. He played a relatively small role in the London plan, focusing particularly on the architectural setting of St Paul’s. The wider planning expertise was supplied by Holford and a small team.

An Interim Report was produced in 1946, although this itself met some criticism. It “warns us not to expect too revolutionary a change in the more detailed proposals to follow” and also “affords some insight into the close oversight which has obviously been exercised on the Consultants” by the City’s officers and politicians.

The Interim Report focused on issues of broad principle. In part it disagreed with Abercrombie’s decentralisation proposals or, at best, did not suggest that the City contribute to them: office floor-space would instead remain at more or less its pre-war level. In fact, demand for central office accommodation might actually increase given the national and international pre-eminence of the City. The traffic proposals were not radical either, although one new north-south route was aligned west of the Guildhall, utilising an area of very severe damage. It was thought inevitable that some building area would be lost to traffic schemes to relieve congestion. The principle of reconstruction “should not be one of general expansion, but of balance between the increase due to greater efficiency of building, and the reductions necessary to secure efficiency of lay-out and circulation”.

They suggested a ratio of floor-space area to site area as the appropriate means of control, similar to (hardly surprisingly) the Ministry’s technical evaluation of the City Engineer’s proposals. Rather than a uniform maximum height built around courtyards, some buildings would be built higher, using set-back façades: this was seen as a more appropriate, effective and flexible mechanism of achieving this balance. The Interim Report also noted that the impact of these proposals on neighbouring Boroughs and on the County of London as a whole had been considered, but that a number of technical problems could only be satisfactorily resolved “on the basis of joint surveys and joint planning”.

There were critical comments of the Interim Report but *The Times* felt that the consultants “displayed more imagination than the authors of the original plan, but they ... also revealed a more realistic understanding of the needs and problems of the City as an imperial commercial centre than was apparent in some of the criticisms [of the City engineer’s plan]”.

The final report was presented in 1947 and, although clearly a development of the interim report, was a refinement with detailed proposals rather than a further rewrite. It has been described as “not a radical or visionary plan, and did not attract much criticism or attention”. Once again, the critical response was largely positive. That the Lord Mayor said that the “City of London Plan sent him to sleep” says more about the Mayor than the plan, to his detriment. The plan gave owners and developers some certainty; its timing, just after the Town and Country Planning Bill, brought yet more certainty. The plan clearly stated rebuilding targets after 10 and 30 years. Density control was significant, a ‘standard plot ratio’ of 5:1 being established.

The report was accepted by the Corporation, with Silkin himself writing that “the plan would prove a reliable framework” for the future.

Following the 1947 Act the planning system had changed, and the Holden/Holford plan could not be seen as independent of wider London planning. Although modified still further, recognisable elements of the plan were incorporated into the London County Development Plan (1951), and it was only then that the 1947 report, greatly extended with material on the nature and extent of the destruction, was published for public consumption.

**City of London plans (3) Royal Academy**

At a much less formal level, but still largely at the City scale, the same formal, traditional *beaux-arts* approach is seen in the plans from the Royal Academy. These dealt principally with traffic: the plan is much less ambitious than its wide-ranging title suggests. The RA team was led by that premier architect Sir Edwin Lutyens; Abercrombie was a member. Its remit was “to consider and plan a scheme for the architectural development of London”, preserving its essential character. The engineer Sir Charles Bressey was also a member, and clearly the proposals developed from the report were produced by Bressey (with some input from Lutyens) in 1937. The proposals, described as an Interim Report, were exhibited at the Royal Academy from 15 October 1942, and a version of the report was published by Country Life Ltd.

The proposals focused on roads and junctions; the road layout was *beaux-arts* and the architectural treatments were traditional and classical – albeit illustrated with arcaded frontages over pavements, and set-back upper storeys. Particular consideration was to be given, before detailed design and implementation, to building lines, junction design, scale and skyline. Open space was mentioned, and provision should ensure that all London residents and users should be within ten minutes’ walk of such facilities. Car parking provision was discussed, and there were suggestions for pedestrianising streets. These were drawn together by a dominant ring road around the central area, a clear descendant of the original Bressey/Lutyens plan. The published plan itself highlighted several “points of major interest” including:

* a ring road connecting all main line terminal stations, some of which are moved to new positions
* a new circular electric railway underground, connecting all terminal stations
* within the circle of the ring road all railway lines electrified and underground
* the canals treated as amenities as well as means of transport
* parks and open spaces provided for the east and south sides of London on the same scale as for the West End
* the river frontages developed with embankments and gardens from Putney to Tower Bridge
* the markets moved from the central positions they now occupy to positions on the ring road, as may be found convenient
* pedestrians given opportunities of gathering in relative safety and quiet in squares closed to wheeled traffic
* some small streets paved over as shopping centres for pedestrians, free from road traffic
* access to public buildings planned to give the maximum dignity and convenience in the means of approach
* relief roads provided to supplement the main traffic routes
* better building sites on important road frontages, and the opening of street vistas.

Despite Lutyens’s emphasis on these “points of major interest”, the plan received overwhelming criticism in the professional press – although some support in the popular press. One of main criticisms centred on how the plan had been designed in disconnected pieces; for example, the terminus rail stations were to be moved to meet the new ring road. While the term ‘*beaux-arts*’ was accurately used to describe the plan, it was used pejoratively; and it was officially suggested that, notwithstanding the original remit, the proposals did not take account of the City’s character. An otherwise measured critic wrote that this “introduces a symmetry of layout, as well as design of buildings, which is very foreign to Britain[[1]](#footnote-1) and has resulted in the coining of a word by its opponents – ‘vistamongering’ “. The critical reception focused on style more than substance; for example the formal layout around St Paul’s and the new processional way from Victoria Station to Buckingham Palace.

Despite Abercrombie’s membership, and we do not know how much he contributed, the plan seems to have ignored planning and planners: an anonymous comment being that planning was not “only an affair of Avenues, Places, Axes and Boulevards”. Although movement was indeed covered, wider social issues were not. The plan was later described by Lionel Brett (then Lord Esher; who himself had a small hand in post-war re-planning) as “a period piece of academic nostalgia incorporating every cliché in the beaux-arts repertoire”. Overall, it could be argued that this plan was limited in scope, traditional in focus, lacking in evidence of any foundation in survey or data, and unconvincing to contemporary professionals.

Revised plans and models were exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1943*.* A further revised version was exhibited and published in 1944. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, as Chair of the Planning Committee, noted in his Foreword that attention since the 1942 report has moved from “a general aesthetic approach” to “the practical details of one of the most important features of any town plan – communications”. Tripp was again a committee member and his influence is evident; but Scott also referred to other emerging plans including the LCC County of London Plan”.

Ring roads and major ‘sub-arterial’ roads were proposed, usually with large-scale geometric roundabout junctions. Some of the latter were so large that shopping centres were planned within them, where “refreshments can be taken and gossip exchanged in pleasant surroundings and the shade of trees”. In some cases the roundabout was to be raised above ground level. Although inevitably the views of these proposals showed buildings, they were far less architecturally developed than in the 1942 publication – indeed some were simply rendered as boxes – thus averting some of the specific criticism levelled at the earlier publication. Nevertheless the *beaux-arts* flavour remained with, for example, St Paul’s Cathedral being closely hemmed in by 3-storey Classically-detailed blocks.

Although this document was more favourably reviewed than its predecessor, there were far fewer reviews. Perhaps the time had passed; more likely the bulk of attention had been diverted by other plans for London, presenting a more holistic vision than the micro-scale roundabouts that this 1944 plan appeared to focus upon. Even the final words of this publication seemed to convey what could only be described as a lack of drive on the part of the Royal Academy Planning Committee, or an awareness that they had been thoroughly by-passed.

**City of London plans (4) Less formal**

More informal still is the raft of plans by individuals, local groups and so on, most usually for very localised areas within The City. These were of very variable quality, though where illustrations survive it is clear that they, too, were dominated by formal *beaux-arts* treatments. The exhibition by the architects Lindy and Lewis is an example. Their plan was publicly exhibited in early 1944 at the Incorporated Association of Architects and Surveyors. It showed no hard evidence of detailed factual survey or technical research, and hence was vague of issues such as building height even where building masses were depicted adjacent to retained existing structures. The proposals illustrated fall principally into the *beaux-arts* formulae of avenues and axes, with St Paul’s surrounded by a colonnaded ellipse, an axis to the Bank crossing where there is a fan-shaped layout, and so on. It was quite widely reviewed, but critically. The author’s treatment of implementation appears to have focused on the compulsory purchase of all land “by a company under City charter and its operation as a universal ground landlord in complete co-operation with the town planning authorities would vastly simplify the ultimate redevelopment” – hardly likely to pass the entrenched vested interests of City landowners!

The architect and structural engineer Harold Baily also produced proposals in 1944. Also using *beaux-arts* principles, he placed St Paul’s in formal gardens surrounded by a uniform arc of office blocks to the height of the cathedral’s cornice; there were more axial roads and vistas, and a ring road surrounding the central area. The plans were presented without comment in *The Builder* (1944b) and vanished without trace. However, if this is the “Mr Bailey” of the London Regional Offices of the Ministry of Home Security, the plans were seen in early 1943 by a senior Ministry official, who reported that “though in parts [they] are rather amateurish and mistaken the proposals had yet more vision than those of the City Engineer”.

One has to wonder how serious some of these informal proposals were: for Lindy and Lewis, for example, gaining considerable professional and mass media coverage with an exhibition may have been more for reasons of self-publicity and career promotion than with any serious hope of influencing planning. Their exhibition of proposals received wide professional coverage, but again most of it critical. It provided spectacular settings but nevertheless “entirely fails to realize the city’s essential characteristics”. The *Architect’s Journal* suggested that those who wished to devote their spare time, enthusiasm and talents to re-planning “should not be helping with the necessary groundwork of surveys by joining collective planning groups whose work is based on essential and thorough research”. It seems to be the case that the lure of re-planning London was irresistible for some individuals, who perhaps felt that this was an easy way to promote their own careers at a crucial period. But the negative reception of such proposals meant that such initiative backfired.

**Borough-level plans**

The lowest level of the hierarchy are those plans, formal and informal, for individual London boroughs and sub-areas (Table 2): they may rank lower than those for the City of London owing to the particular national and international status of the latter. Most of these were official, compiled by the professional staff of the borough or by the LCC. Kensington, however, engaged the well-known planner Thomas Sharp in 1946 to act as planning consultant and to prepare two small-scale plans.

**Table 2: plans for London boroughs**

Bermondsey (1942) U

Brentford (1943) O

Croydon (1943) O

Hornsey (1945) O

Kensington (1944-9) O

Lambeth (1943-5) O

Pimlico (1944-6) O

Rickmansworth (1944) O

St Pancras (1945-7) O; U

St Paul’s district (1945-6) U

Shoreditch (1945) U

South Bank (1944) U2

Stepney & Poplar (1941-8) O

Tottenham (1944) O

Tower Hill (1945) U

Twickenham (1946) O

West Ham (1949) O

Westminster (1946) O

Westminster (1947) U

Willesden (1949) O

O = official plan, report, exhibition etc

U = unofficial

The 1946 LCC plan for Stepney and Poplar is a useful and well-known exemplar. The proposals covered 1,960 acres, suggested wholesale demolition and redevelopment at a likely cost of £45 million, over a span of 30 years. The plan was approved by the LCC on 5 February 1946. Housing was to be rationalised in point and slab blocks, with some areas of new terraces, all set in green parkland; the pre-war population would be reduced by 58% to an average density of 136 persons per acre. Industry was important, focusing on the nearby docks and providing factories, including ‘flatted factories’. New roads would be an integral part of the plan, although the actual road layout had not by 1946 been approved by the Ministry of War Transport. Professional responses were generally positive; although, at such an early date in the re-planning and reconstruction processes, it was strongly suggested that the plan was too slow.

The plan for Willesden illustrates another approach. This Borough was extensively bomb-damaged, with over half of its houses being damaged; but there was little intensive damage. The plan itself, produced under the name of the Borough Engineer and Surveyor, was not published until 1950 and even then was more a survey of the existing borough than a redevelopment plan. Some of the proposals were explicitly compared to the recommendations of the *Greater London Plan* (for example identifying and remedying the deficiency in open space provision; and the proposed migration from areas of poor-quality housing out to Hemel Hempstead New Town). The specific chapter on redevelopment does identify ‘areas ripe for redevelopment’, most of which exceed the *Greater London Plan* density targets; one area, South Kilburn, is re-planned as an example. High-density Victorian terraced housing is replaced with 3/4-storey linear blocks of flats, with some houses, community facilities, and copious amounts of open space. Although a very late example of a reconstruction plan, and explicitly seeking to accommodate the proposals of the *Greater London Plan*, this is a broad-brush survey more than a detailed reconstruction plan.

**Overview: planners and planning**

In exploring the range of reconstruction planning for London it is difficult not, though invidious, to focus on one individual. Patrick Abercrombie, knighted in 1947 for his contributions to planning amongst which the Greater London and County of London Plans are prominent, is a major figure. There is still no definitive biography, although something is known of the development of his ideas and approaches and there is a short overview of his career. Yet, in the absence of a detailed and definitive biographical study, we have to question the nature and extent of his personal input to these plans. It should also be remembered that, at this time, he was busy but ageing; he only ran a very small office, and had to coordinate new seconded and temporary staff for these large commissions. But there seems to be a great facility for strategic overview, common in his other large-scale regional plans commissioned by the Ministry. The approach influenced other regional plans – yet was this in part a shared professional milieu; or the influence of the (still largely unexplored) Planning Technique section of the Ministry? There is little trace of his workings in archives; National Archive files on the *Greater London Plan* are procedural and relatively uninformative.

The prominence of Abercrombie, and other key consultants, at the time and since, as tended to devalue the direct contribution of co-authors such as J.H. Forshaw, co-author of the *County of London Plan*. Nevertheless, Forshaw was a significant contributor, and professionally influential: being then the LCC Architect, and between 1846 and 1959 Chief Architect to the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Housing and Local Government. That he was a Liverpool graduate and thus a former pupil of Abercrombie’s provides another interesting perspective on the working arrangements between the two men. In a similar vein, much more is known of Holford than his co-author of the City of London plan, C.H. Holden; although the recent authoritative biography does go some way to redress this imbalance for those interested. Nevertheless, Holford’s influence within the wartime Ministry, and his later elevation (knighted in 1953 and raised to a life peerage in 1965), ensured his pre-eminence.

All of the London plans were put together in an astonishingly short space of time (the only noticeable delay being promotional, between the first draft of the Holden and Holford plan for the City (1946) and its wider publication (1951)). The formal plans drew heavily on a wide range of data, much of which is tabulated and mapped within the plan documents. This was a very heavy workload. And yet the explicit link between data and specific plan recommendation is sometimes obscure.

What was also an issue – for some – is the way in which Abercrombie dominated London’s replanning. Clearly he was being heavily pushed by the Ministry – or some within it at least. To be recommended for all three layers in the hierarchy of scale, and actually commissioned for two of them, is surprising. He was also involved in the Royal Academy plan preparation committee. Yet Abercrombie’s approaches and plans for London and elsewhere were not uncriticised within the Ministry, usually (we presume) without his knowledge. And his plans are still cited, and arguably misunderstood, even today. Abercrombie’s personal views of the process of planning are clearly significant in the complex context of London. He met each of the local authorities which requested a discussion of his emerging plans, but later said “I had to avoid showing them anything”; and felt that his plan had come through the process of engagement with 130 local authorities “pretty well”.

**Conclusions**

London was indeed a valuable proving-ground for concepts of planning, and the communication of planning ideas, at this time. Its scale and variety allowed, indeed made necessary, the testing of planning concepts and practice from the smallest-scale local to the widest regional context. Yet it has been argued that the problems of London do not vary much from generation to generation, and that the unique circumstances of this particular period were the opportunity for reconstruction occasioned by the bomb damage and later facilitated by new legislation; the existence of the London County Council and its skilled staff; and the cooperation of the relevant Government agencies.

Much of the published research on this short period of intense planning activity focuses not on the delivery (or otherwise) of these plans, but on specific sectors and the harsh realities moving actual delivery often far from the ideal of the plans (eg Bullock, 1994, on LCC housing, and Garside, 1997, on East End industry). Yet this is a common fate of this period, caused in part by the radical restructuring of planning responsibilities by the 1947 Act and by the harsh financial position of the period. Political and economic realities meant that almost no reconstruction-era plan was implemented as envisaged: even Abercrombie’s plan for Plymouth changed significantly between inception and completion. However, this does not imply that all this expensive effort was wasted. In all, the cascade of plans for London in this short period provides not only a good snapshot of the development of professional practice, but real evidence of realistic (and some less realistic) approaches to complex problem-solving at a range of spatial scales. It shaped much contemporary planning and thinking about planning.

However, the sad final word belongs to a point made about the LRRC plan, but which could equally refer to the fate of most plans of this period:

“The future work of the LRRC depends on many factors, among which not the least is concerned with the material resources necessary for continuance of the work; money, labour, sympathetic interest are all required for the extension of the study and research and *to ensure that what has so far been done shall not be consigned to dusty pigeon-holes*” (LRRC, 1943, p. 49, our emphasis).

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1. Yet this is plainly inaccurate, as is shown by the set-pieces of Georgian planning, the streets, squares and crescents of London, Bath and Edinburgh New Town. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)