

Transforming Together

Omri Ben Chetrit suggests adopting London railway arches using the idea of commons approach



In the present climate of rapid urbanisation and the increasing pressure for new developments, cities are facing bigger and more complex issues. It has become almost impossible for cities to tackle local issues without engaging its residents. Using the idea of the commons approach, or knowledge shared for the common good, this project aims to study whether when applied to abandoned and neglected railway arches, it can help to generate a socially inclusive regeneration process.

London's railway arches were built in the 19th century to support the railways connecting the surrounding towns with the city. Infrastructure, such as this, provides essential linkages within the city, but it also acts as a physical barrier, causing segregation between neighbourhoods, dividing communities, and contributing to the social and economic fragmentation within the city.

Traditionally, railway arches were used for marginal industries, such as mechanics and metal working. This type of uses flourished due to the arches' low rental value and spatial advantages. Yet, many of them remained vacant and unused. In recent years, new types of uses have started to 'pop up' in the railway arches, usually trendy shops, bars or restaurants. This is a top-down design approach that aims to maximise the profit of private companies and not necessarily to enhance the needs of local communities.

VISION AND KEY OBJECTIVES

The project vision is to use London's railway arches to strengthen the local civic infrastructure, and to be a catalyst for urban

transformation that benefits local communities. It aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Frame a process that allows different actors to work together to address local needs
- Find possible uses that can suit the arches and contribute to local communities
- Explore methods to apply the common approach to the design process
- Analyse current and future uses for the arches and the effects they might have on the surroundings.

CHOSEN SITE

The project focuses on Deptford in London, a neighbourhood that is divided by railway arches. Deptford's attractive location made it part of the Thames Gateway project, the most significant regeneration initiative in northwest Europe. It also was named as an Opportunity Area in the London Plan. Those two regeneration projects create a unique pressure to develop the area and pushed 'elite stakeholders', such as the UK government and Greater London Authority to be more involved in the decision-making.

Despite significant economic investment in regeneration projects in Deptford in the last decade, it is still among the most deprived areas in London. The public and private sectors have failed to address local issues, so that residents have lost their trust in the planning system.

DESIGN PROPOSAL

To improve the social values in the neighbourhood and promote a more inclusive urban transformation, the project highlights the importance of a process rather than an

individual specific project. The proposed process, composed of the following actions, aims to involve different actors and encourage the residents to take part in all design stages. The proposed actions are:

1. Identifying local actors and building trust based on shared goals.
2. Using the common knowledge to unlock latent assets, understanding the character of the place, its real opportunities and constraints
3. Promoting small and medium sized interventions in public places and vacant arches, based on local mapping
4. Monitoring the effect that the local projects have on the neighbourhood
5. Scaling the successful projects into permanent use, implementing the needs of the community and adjusting local policies.

Based on those design actions, the project proposes a new design process to transform Deptford's arches.

PHASE 1 – SHORT TERM

The first phase starts by revealing a new 'common trail' that connects different civic places in the neighbourhood to the arches creating new places for residents to walk and use. The trail runs through local public places (squares and parks) that can be used for events to increase participation and local awareness. New digital interactive elements located at key points, in addition to an online platform, help to map the different actors, create new connections, and understand the real needs of residents. In other areas, hard elements such as an urban mood board can be used to invite residents to share their ideas.

In parallel, abandoned arches can be transformed into a new community centre to allow discussions between different actors, engage in informal talks, and build new connections. Identifying local actors and understanding the needs of the residents are the key elements of this phase.

PHASE 2 – MEDIUM TERM

In this phase, new east-west and north-south connections along the arches are opened to encourage people to walk and use new spaces adjacent to and in the arches. Vacant land and arches along the new routes will be transformed using low-cost and small-scale interventions. At this stage of the process, some of the interventions are local initiatives, while others are in partnership with different local actors.

- 1 A visualisation of the Phase 1 'common trail'
- 2 Phase 1 Short term activities
- 3 Phase 2 Medium term initiatives
- 4 Phase 3 Long term projects

This stage aims to bring new types of uses into the arches and encourage people to use them. In parallel, monitoring the successes and failures of projects and mapping the common good that started in phase 1 will be continued.

PHASE 3 – LONG TERM

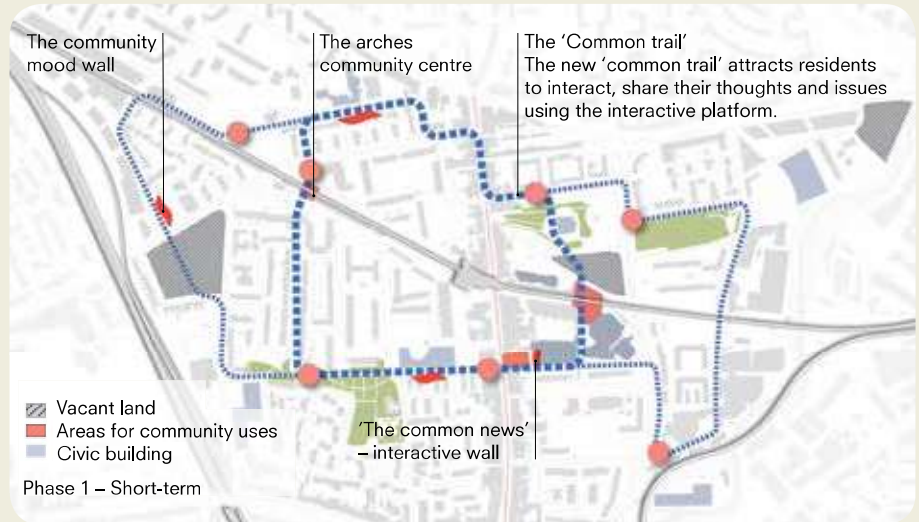
In the third phase, different actors trust each other and work together towards common goals, to create successful partnerships with private or public sector actors. Therefore, a larger and more complex intervention can take place, which can have a significant effect on the neighbourhood.

In the context of the chosen site, larger schemes can be proposed on three vacant sites, as well as improving the existing light industrial areas, and if necessary providing new industrial areas in the neighbourhood. This stage has the potential to affect and improve aspects not only around the arches but in the whole neighbourhood.

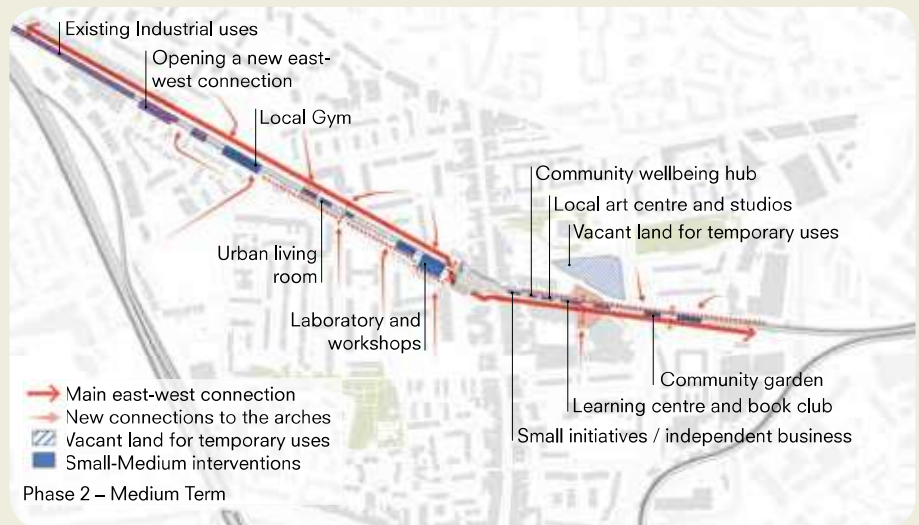
LESSONS LEARNED

Shaping a productive dialogue between the various actors is necessary to the success of urban transformation projects. Different actors hold different knowledge: while the public and private sectors have the expertise and financial capability to build larger and more complex schemes, local communities can help to discover place identity, unlock hidden assets and improve the sense of belonging amongst residents. Without local knowledge and the trust of local communities, urban developments often fail to address the local issues. Therefore, only by working together, all types of local issues can be addressed, and projects at different scales can be built.

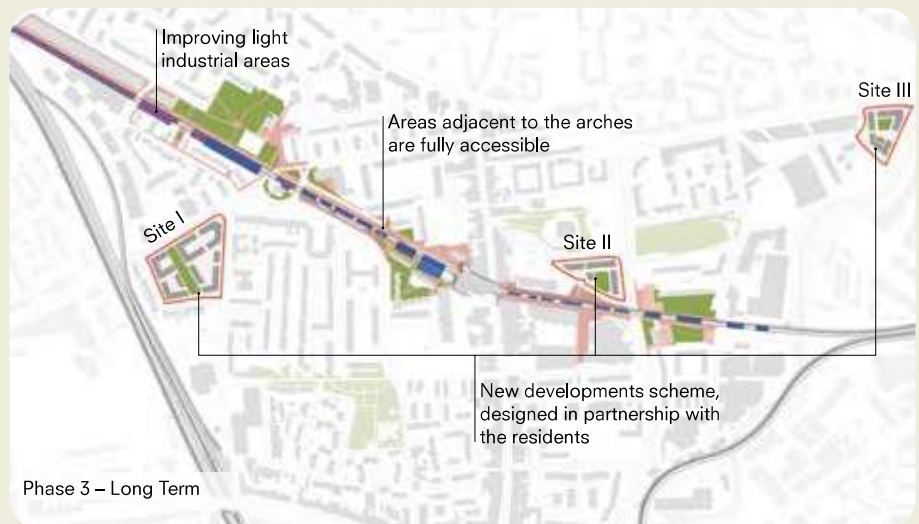
New technologies have the potential to connect citizens and public and private actors directly. This can change the way that citizens participate, build trust among different actors, and make residents an active group in the design process. Integrating these technologies in a design process can reframe the basis on which citizens, the private and the public sectors can work together to build a commons approach, with the private sector in particular, as endorser rather than enemy of the community. ●



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