The UCL London 2062 Project
An interdisciplinary perspective of London today
and a London of tomorrow

Long-term forces and factors shaping London

London is the capital city of the United Kingdom and the location of central government, global business interests and the financial markets, a site for significant arts and cultural facilities, a place of tourism and a renowned centre for education. London is home to a diverse population, bringing tension as well as vibrancy. A range of interventions by government have demonstrated a commitment to promote and strengthen London over time as the UK’s premier city in the face of global competition.

This briefing is the distillation of a pamphlet – arising from a series of workshops held at UCL in 2010 – intended to provoke debate and inform decision-making. The UCL London 2062 Project workshops addressed the future of London as a sustainable city, a healthy city, a thriving city and a world city. Contributors came from disciplines across UCL, including engineering, urban planning, epidemiology, crime science, architecture, heritage management, economics, transport studies, geography and demography. They were asked to consider the key features of London today, the driving forces that led to this point, what might happen in the future, what decisions and actions could be taken, and what London might look like in 2062.

The discussions across different disciplinary perspectives led to three overarching themes: resilience, wellbeing and sustainability.
London’s resilience

In the next five decades London will experience shocks and disruptions of varying magnitudes, some that we can anticipate and others that will be surprising. We can foresee dramatic changes in energy and commodity prices, more extreme weather events, economic turmoil and terrorist threats. Detailed forecasting and preparedness for specific conditions is important to prevent potential disruptions and mitigate their impacts, but it is also important to prepare for conditions of inherent uncertainty.

This is of particular concern in managing London’s essential systems. The resilience of London’s infrastructure and economy depends on its ability to adapt to changing demands and requirements from its citizens and industries, while maintaining capacity to deal with shocking events and uncertain conditions that are beyond reasonable measures of control.

The early work of the UCL London 2062 Project provides some insights into the resilience of the city’s energy, flood-defence, water, food, waste management and financial systems. These systems will all need to adapt to changes in underlying demands and constraints, as well as prepare for the unexpected.

London’s wellbeing

The notion of ‘wellbeing’, encompassing security, physical and mental health, participation in social life, culture, the quality of the built and natural environments, and a multitude of other factors which contribute pleasure and pain in our individual and collective lives. Maximising ‘wellbeing’ can be considered an ideal for society, politics and the city.

The UCL London 2062 Project has so far considered the future wellbeing of the inhabitants of the city in the key areas of security, health, air quality, culture and heritage. Although wellbeing is an inherently subjective phenomenon it cannot be understood only in terms of individual preferences and experiences. The wellbeing of Londoners will be shaped by their social and economic conditions and the physical environment of the city.

London’s sustainability

The need for coherent sustainability principles within and across London, and between London and the rest of the UK, is arguably more important than ever. London has become increasingly a world city region, possessing inter- and intra-dependencies and a diverse composition that makes coherent government and intervention problematic.

The London 2062 Project has so far considered issues of population dynamics, governance, housing and transport. Against this backdrop of changing conditions and demands within London, north to south, east to west, and of an increasingly diverse population with global, national and local concerns, there is a prospect that the historical paradigm to restrain the physical extent of London in the interests of containment may not be feasible long term. Already, the dominance of London can be identified in areas some distance away from the metropolitan region, through migration and commuting patterns, residential and business property prices, and even planned development growth and infrastructure expansion. Further densification of London may therefore be inappropriate. More land at the edge of the metropolitan area may have to be utilised for homes and for essential services. Long-term scenarios could see the development of ‘growth corridors of opportunities’, based on green services, green businesses and infrastructure.

The future of London

Expert academics alone are incapable of predicting, proposing or planning a future for London. In partnership with London’s diverse institutions, professions and communities we can contribute analysis, data and ideas about the factors that will shape our city over the next 50 years, and highlight and inform decisions to be made and possible circumstances to prepare for.

From our discussion of London’s resilience, wellbeing and sustainability some key points for further investigation and discussion have emerged:

• reconsidering London’s global competitiveness to explore possibilities for collaboration with other regions and cities. The potential for London to experience disastrous decline of competitiveness in relation to emerging global powers is linked to the prominence of the financial sector in London’s economy. Reconsidering the concept of competitiveness will require reflecting on London’s governance and could lead to a shift from competition to collaboration to secure the appropriate skills, business environment and infrastructure for the future.

• building resilient communities that can cope with future shocks. The relationship between diversity, equity and resilience in preparing London for a future shocks requires further reflection. Resilience can be improved by increasing diversity, but this can also lead to conflicts, tensions and setbacks that should not be underestimated. Divergent ways of living in London can bring strengths and vulnerabilities.

• building partnerships for community engagement to account for and nurture the resources available within communities is essential in moving away from individualist-oriented behaviour in order to face climate change and its implications (for example, flooding or scarcity of resources). Issues of social inequality cannot be ignored in constructing unified ideas about ‘community’ in London, and engagement with diverse communities can be a means of generating shared visions of the future and collective change.

• accounting for levels and instruments of governance that would enable policies to target London in particular and engage a large span of stakeholders into the governing process.

• furthering stakeholder engagement with the management of resources, through developing tools such as visualisation.

• implementing measures such as metering that would reflect effectively the economics of resources.

• adopting a reflexive perspective in order to understand environmental circumstances, global conditions and subsequent risks.

• improving our theoretical tools in order to help identifying pressure points for political intervention, public funding and regulation needed to meet the requirements of tomorrow’s services.

• relying on people’s expectations, and what they imagine for the future, in order to bring a desirable futures. The opportunities lie in capturing real-world data that would reflect the conditions for change rather than forecasting practices that project the future according to past trends.

These key points for further consideration and all the data and ideas presented in this briefing provide the foundation for further analysis and debate about the future of London. The UCL London 2062 Project provides a forum for UCL academics, our partners and communities to deliberate about the factors that will shape London over the next 50 years and our capacity to steer our city in a favourable direction.

The UCL London 2062 Project is an initiative of the UCL Grand Challenge of Sustainable Cities. The pamphlet upon which this briefing is based is available online (www.ucl.ac.uk/london-2062).