

# **CUSTOM HOUSE**

*A quest towards trust,  
transparency and freedom*

Aïssatou Diallo, Alejandro Torero,  
Carlotta Trippa, Fernando Silva López,  
Hanyu Song, Naiara Yumiko, Ziyue Ni

**DEVP0002**

April 2020

Fig 1. Custom House - Freemansons Road (Source: Knecht, 2020)



**006** EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**008** BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION  
OUR POSITIONALITIES  
ACTORS AND SPACE  
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS  
CURRENT LIMITATIONS & FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

**024** NARRATIVE OF INTERVENTIONS

VISION  
DESIGN PRINCIPLES  
DESIGN GUIDELINES

**028** STRATEGIC RESPONSES

RESPONSES FOR CUSTOM HOUSE  
STRATEGIC LOCATIONS  
IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE  
R1 - SAFETY NETWORKS  
R2 - ACTIVATE NEGLECTED SPACES  
R3 - INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SAFETY  
R4 - ANTI-EVICTION MAPPING PROJECT  
R5 - IMPROVEMENT TO COUNTER EVICTION  
R6 - SPACES FORENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

**046** CONCLUSION  
REFERENCES

Figure 1.	Custom House - Freemansons Road (Source: Knecht, 2020)	002
Figure 2.	Map of Actors in the Custom House neighbourhood	012
Figure 3.	Recent spatial transformations in Custom House and its surroundings	014
Figure 4.	Canning Town and Custom House Planning Schemes (Source: Newham London, 2018)	016
Figure 5.	Custom House First Regeneration Phase Plan (Source: Newham London, 2019)	017
Figure 6.	Dispossessed tenants in Canning Town (Source: Someerville, 2019)	018
Figure 7.	Ash Sakula architecture team proposal (Source: Ash Sakula Architects, 2019)	019
Figure 8.	Farrells architecture team proposal (Source: Farrells, 2019)	019
Figure 9.	Map of strategic responses	033
Figure 10.	Safety Networks response map	034
Figure 11.	Mutual assistance networks	035
Figure 12.	Activate spaces along the way home	035
Figure 13.	Neglected spaces response map	036

Figure 14. Street ground floor response map	036
Figure 15. Possible intervention to activate neglected public spaces	037
Figure 16. Possible intervention to activate ground floors	037
Figure 17. Infrastructures for safety response map	038
Figure 18. Possible intervention around the current community garden	039
Figure 19. Possible intervention to improve an existing alley	039
Figure 20. Anti-eviction mapping webpage	041
Figure 21. Broken drainage (Source: Somerville, 2019)	043
Figure 22. Custom House social housing units (Source: Somerville, 2019)	043
Figure 23. Broken drainage (Source: Somerville, 2019)	043
Figure 24. Spaces for engagement and participation map	044
Figure 25. Temporary installation near the ExCel	045
Figure 26. Custom House Urban Lab	045
Figure 27. Custom House from DRL station (Source: Knecht, 2020)	046

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Custom House: a quest towards trust, transparency and freedom” aims to critically understand the regeneration process that is currently being carried in the neighbourhood of Custom House and proposing an alternative to it. The process of writing the following brief is supported by a methodology based on three sequential questions:

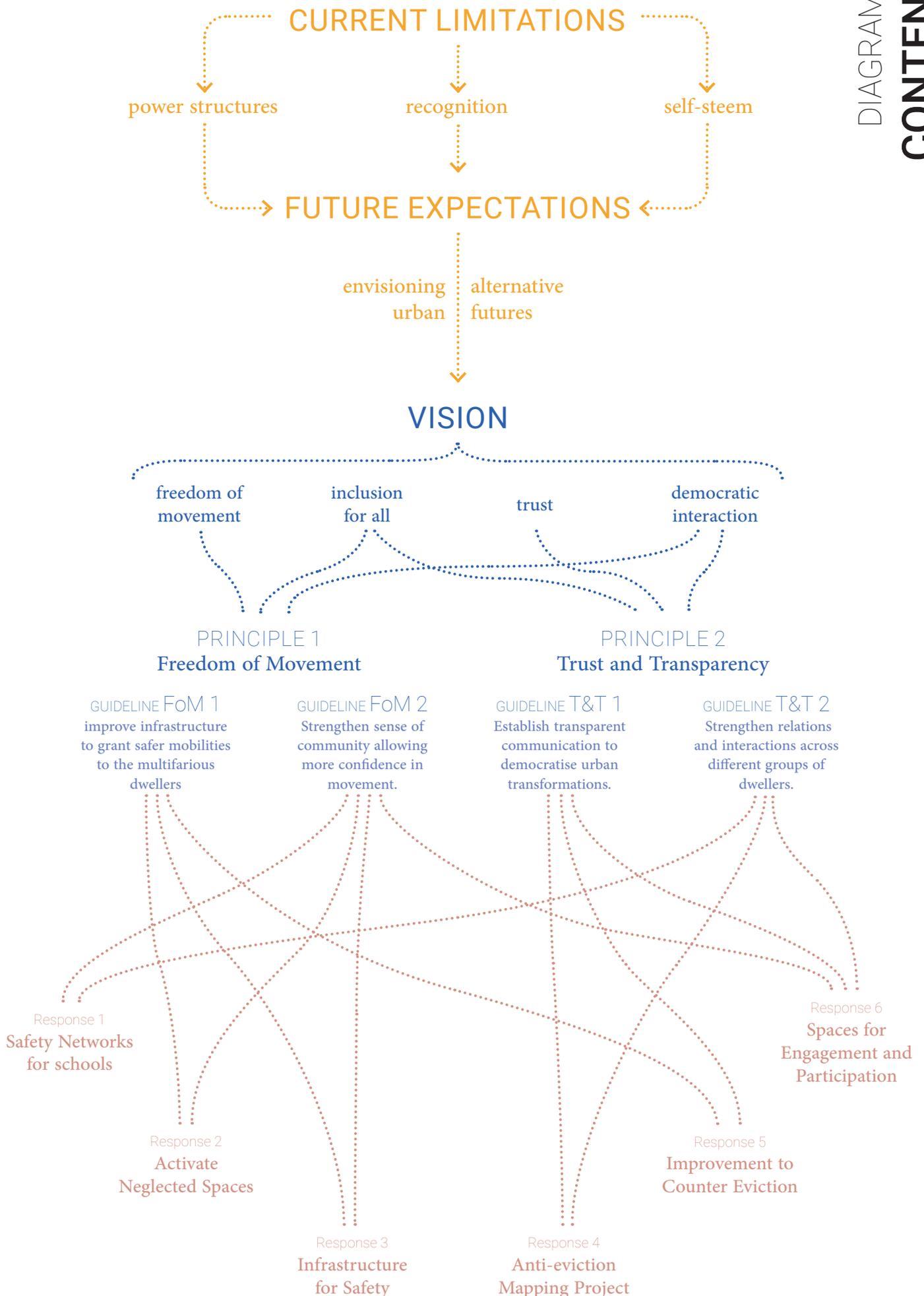
What is the vision that we want to achieve for the inhabitants of Custom House?

How does this vision translate for principles and guidelines for future interventions?

What are the possible socio-spatial responses that can be developed from these guidelines?

The methods to follow this process of inquiry have been based on both community engagement and discourse analysis, as a means to analyze the gaps in which the actual expectations of the community were not taken into account. These expectations were analyzed by defining which are the **current conditions** shaping the life in Custom House and how those conditions could change in the **future**. This allowed us to focus on two main issues: **Transparency** and **Freedom of Movement**, which became the two key principles used as the basis for a future neighbourhood **Vision**.

For each developed principle, we aimed to define both a social and a material dimension for the Vision in its urban implementation. This was fundamental for us to delineate specific guidelines for the following **strategic responses**, as a way to ensure that each intervention was coherent with the established Vision for Custom House.





The present document was executed by a group of seven students attending the MsC BUDD Building and Urban design in Development within the Development Planning Unit at University College London. It was developed during the second part of Term 2 of the core module Transforming Local Areas. The objective of this academic exercise is to present a Development Brief based on the real urban context of the **Custom House neighbourhood**—an area included within the eastern London borough of Newham. The neighbourhood is currently exposed to the possibility of future redevelopment under the lead of the Newham Council, whose objectives are to improve the living conditions of the area. Our role as students was to develop a critical understanding of the regeneration process the neighbourhood is facing and provide **a set of alternatives** to the official plans, based on our external point of view. Due to the nature of our positionalities (next page), we have inevitably faced a sense of distress towards the market-driven interests that the area is subjected to, which, during the first phase of the development of our proposal, felt beyond our capacity or will of action. Nonetheless, based on the aspirations of Custom House's inhabitants, the more we got to understand the multiple intricate layers of power dynamics taking place in the neighbourhood, the more we found windows for future interventions. This piece of work is the result of seven radical hopeful minds who believe in **just urban transformations**.

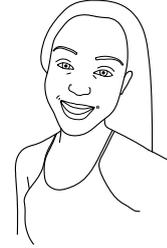
“**Positionality** is the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world. In this context, gender, race, class, and other aspects of identities are indicators of social and spatial positions and are not fixed, given qualities. Positions act on the knowledge a person has about things, both material and abstract. Consequently, knowledge is the product of a specific position that reflects particular places and spaces.” (Warf, B., 2010)

**Alejandro**  
Peruvian  
*Architecture /  
Urban Design*



I have always thought of my work as an act of service to others. This proposal for Custom House tries to tackle issues of security and eviction, matters that I have never experienced as intensely as many others. Therefore, I intend to develop more sensitivity towards insecure experiences in cities, especially those of women. Also, to understand better the struggles of migrants, refugees and evicted people in their right to live with dignity. These struggles are also very relevant in my country. Nevertheless, I am aware that as a mixed-race, Latin American, young professional man, I would never have enough experience on the matter. Therefore, if I want to work in tackling these issues, I need to keep learning from those who face those problems every day.

**Aïssatou**  
French / Guinean  
*Architecture*



I am a black (Afro-European) middle class female having lived in East London for 2.5 years. I chose early on to focus my study on the experience of women's safety in the Custom House neighborhood. This was directly linked to my own feelings of unsafety navigating the city, allowing me to identify and connect with some female inhabitants on a more direct level, making conversations more informal and relatable. As an academic living in a gentrifying neighborhood with similar social-economic roots, my intervention was marked by privilege and as much as grounds for identification could be found my position remained very external.

**Carlotta**  
Italian  
*Architecture /  
Urban Design*



I am a white female who, when first approached the area of Custom House, had lived in London for nearly four months. At the time I was living in the eastern part of the city, in the gentrified neighbourhood of Dalston. Even though less than 30 minutes apart, the urban life of the two areas are significantly different, to the extent that the physical distance seems to not match with the economic disparities between the two. While approaching the urban dynamics in Custom House I was able to grasp the substantial inequalities and social injustice that are embedded into the wider urban context of London.



**Fernando**  
Chilean  
*Architecture*

As a recently arrived latino man, this project has proved to be a challenge regarding my previous notions of what constitutes displacement and disrepair. The conditions of Custom House prove how the logics of urban dispossession can have multiple manifestations, and simultaneously what are the spaces in which us as students can provide a small but meaningful insight into future urban transformations based on justice and equality.



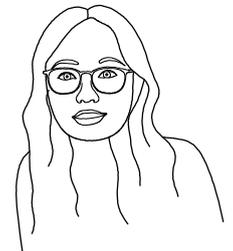
**Hanyu**  
Chinese  
*Urban design*

As a Chinese female student who has lived in London for less than a year, I often feel uncomfortable and distrustful about unfamiliar spaces, which may be as same as the residents of Custom House. Violence and crime events reported on various social networks also panic me. This design strategy of trying to establish a network of security to create trust and careful space makes me feel the same. In addition, I am also concerned about how to realise the fairness and justice of space through urban design.



**Naiara**  
Brazilian  
*Architecture*

I am a latino-asian adult woman living in London. At this precise pandemic moment, the positionality I am being able to address is that one intrinsically associated with the displacement my South american migrant status provides me. My identity is being reconstructed everyday and, now, at a very fast pace. My contribution to this work is hence inevitably associated with ideas of adaptability (added to a pinch of defiance) the condition of being portrayed as 'the other' implies.



**Nicki**  
Chinese  
*Human Geography /  
Urban-Rural Design*

As a Chinese born and bred, my new study life in London started half a year ago. Because of floating on the local cultural background and relying heavily on online information acquisition, strangeness and mild anxiety have become universal emotions. For the area of Custom House and Royal Docks, early interests were in its future revivals, intercultural development, and connections to East Asia. In this context, the psychological connection of multiple background residents in the community and opportunities to build off-line social relationships and get to know others are the focus.

# ACTORS AND SPACE

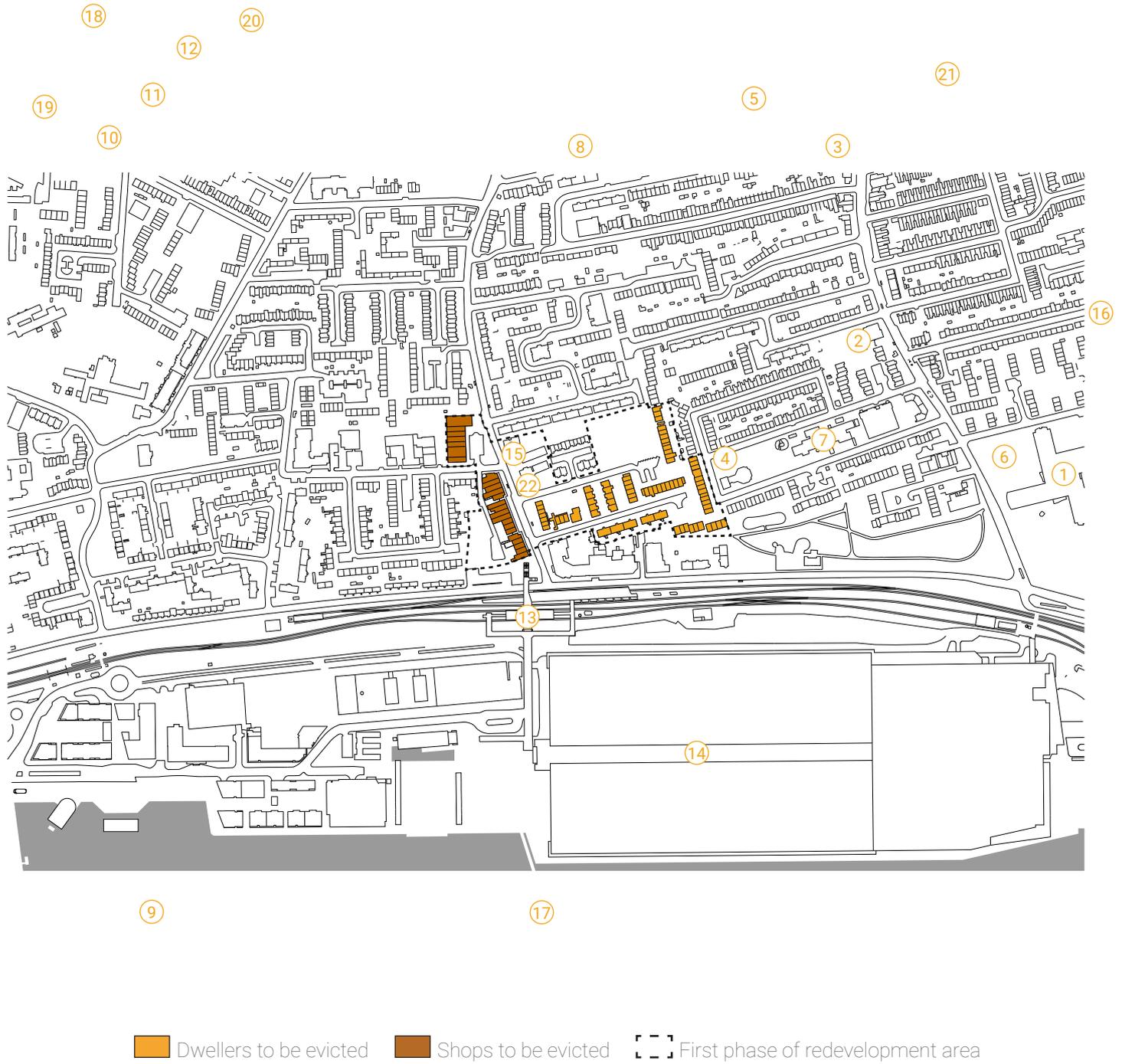


Fig 2. Map of Actors in the Custom House neighbourhood

## MAIN ACTORS DESCRIPTION

### 1. People's Empowerment Alliance for Custom House

**PEACH. Community empowerment** in Custom House: homes people can be **proud** of, streets where people feel **safe** in and jobs that offer **stability and dignity**.

### 2. Shipman Youth Centre

**Community engagement** on supporting young population and promoting sports and cultural activities.

### 3. Custom House Baptist Centre

Girls & Women, Youth Training & Career sharing, Children Sunday and Holidays School, Ethnic Groups.

### 4. St. Anne's Catholic Church

**Community connection** and reunion of diverse groups.

### 5. Custom House Library

Regular **meetings** with **Newham Council** officers and local stakeholders; Voluntary work; **Events** for children and young people.

### 6. Royal Docks Community School

Community school for pupils aged 11 - 16.

### 7. St. Joachim Catholic Primary School

Local children and young catholic educational centre.

### 8. Edith Kerrison Children's Centre

Nursery school and children centre.

### 9. ELBA - East London Business Alliance

**Connection between businesses and local communities**, to help **build the capacity of local organisations**, support young people in education and place people into employment in London.

### 10. East London Business Place (ELBP)

**Support and supply-chain brokerage organisation**. Small, medium and micro enterprises, enabling them to bid successfully for new contracts and works opportunities.

### 11. Neighbourhood Watch Team

Neighbours will look out for you, your family, your home and your street or estate, and you will do the same for them.

### 12. CCTV

Cameras covering high streets and other busy areas

including many residential streets, helping to stop and solve crimes and dwellers to feel safer in public spaces.

### 13. TFL - Custom House Station

Award of **£135,000** for a **Liveable Neighbourhood proposal** for the Custom House area.

### 14. Excel

Exhibitions and international conventions centre. In March 2020, it was **converted into the NHS Nightingale Hospital** as part of the response to the 2020 corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic.

### 15. Citizens Advice Newham

**Provide free, confidential and impartial advice** for communities in regards to issues affecting people's lives.

### 16. Community Garden

Promote **active life** among community residents, **environmental awareness** and **community encounters**.

### 17. Royal Docks Enterprise Zone

£1bn deal for **global trade**, £1.5bn deal on purpose-built **pavillions for product innovation**, 11,000 new homes in **floating village**.

### 18. ABP Royal Albert Dock

Creation of a **new business district** with supporting residential, retail and leisure facilities **serviced by improved transport links**

### 19. Adam Khan Architects

**Main consultant** for Newham Council's Custom House Co-Production scheme.

### 20. Mears

**Housing related services provider**, working alongside Local and Central UK's Government, Housing Associations, private landlords, and tenants and service users.

### 21. Newham Council

Bid for the Liveable Neighbourhoods programme in partnership with TFL and Mayor of London.

### 22. Custom House Surgery

Two partner local practice. Salaried Doctors, three Nurse Practitioner and a Healthcare Assistant.

# ACTORS AND SPACE

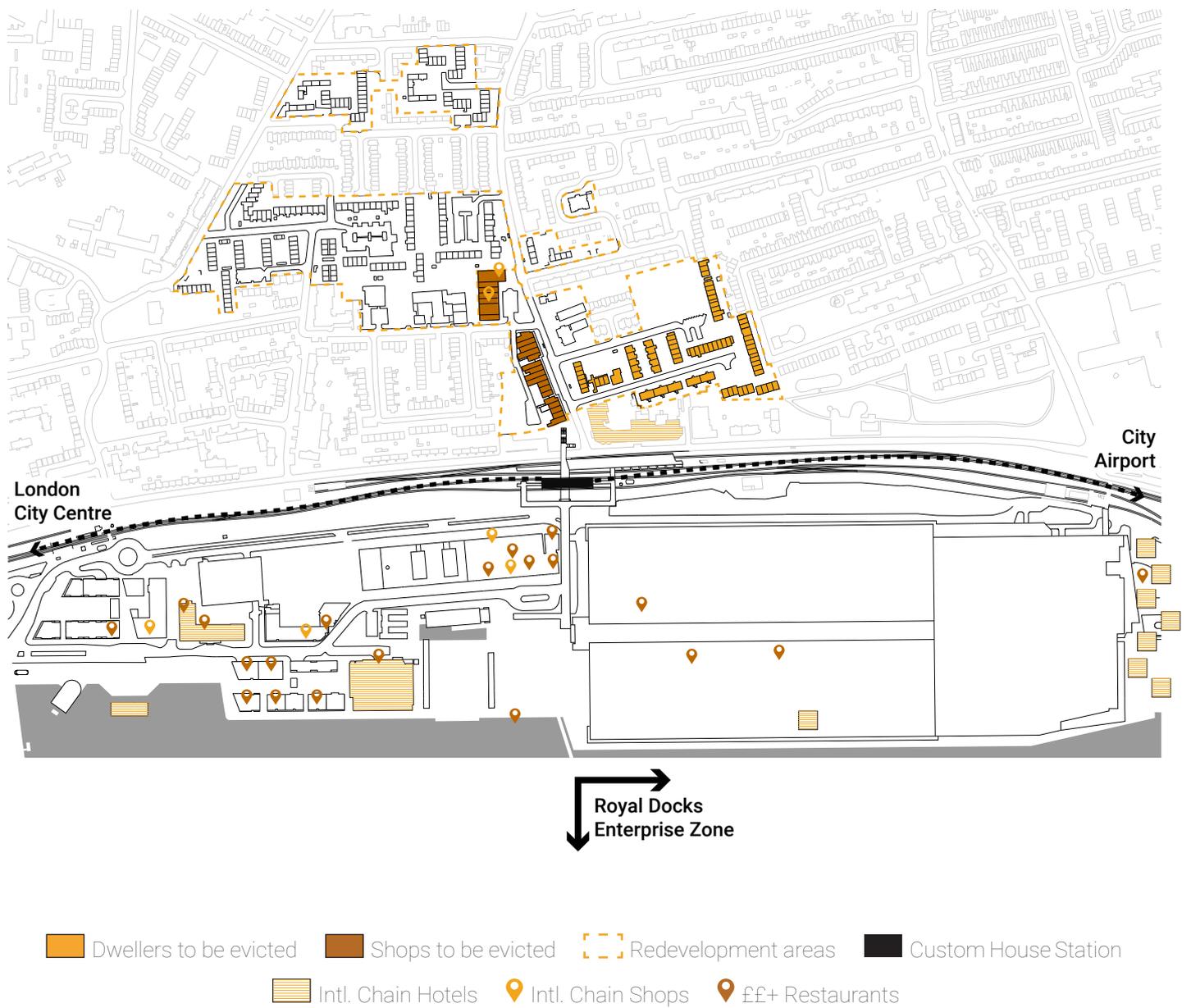


Fig 3. Recent spatial transformations in Custom House and its surroundings

## SPATIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

With the previous map it is possible to localise and name the main actors responsible for the present urban dynamics occurring in Custom House. The idea of placing actors in space emerged from the hypothesis that spatial proximity could build and reinforce not only discourses, but also local networks of urban transformation and resistance.

As the main actors map shows, there is already a clear spatial separation between community-led initiatives and those funded by international capital. This discrepancy becomes even more evident adding the analysis made on the spatial transformations map.

On this second map, three major aspects of Custom House's power struggles reflected in space are stressed:

1. *The massive investment in transport as the 'major catalyst for regeneration' (Royal Docks, 2020), represented by the affirmation of **Custom House Station as an important global link** for international investment in this 'new London's centrality'.*

2. *The inherent **territorial division** caused by the rails being reinforced by the **scale of new developments** (located at the bottom part of the map) in comparison to the already existing pattern. This separation is embodied in the territory by the bridge that leads to the Excel and the so-called 'Enterprise Zone', connected via Custom House Station.*

3. *The **typology of new developments**, which acts in the territory as a propagator of the 'Opportunity Area' discourse. However, the opportunity is emerging for bigger investors of international chains of restaurants, markets and hotels, whilst local entrepreneurs and dwellers are prone to be evicted.*

Therefore, acknowledging the power imbalance promoted by the access of global capital and financialisation of land, and recognising the significant changes they are promoting in the territory, it is critical to find alternatives to **readjust the levels of agency** of the diverse actors present today in Custom House.

# DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of the following discourse analysis is to understand and make explicit the overarching ideas behind the regeneration planning schemes for Custom House. We argue here that urban planning and urban design projects should be explicit about the objectives and methods used when envisioning an urban transformation. This would allow for residents, authorities and other stakeholders to participate as equals in the formulation of planning schemes and design proposals. The “right to exercise citizenship by participating in decision-making that affects one’s life” is what Levy (2015) frames as *“parity political participation”*, a key component in cities that aim to promote social justice for all. Therefore, through the analysis of official documents and plans we aim to investigate whether transparency and citizen participation are currently accomplished through the urban future proposals of Custom House.

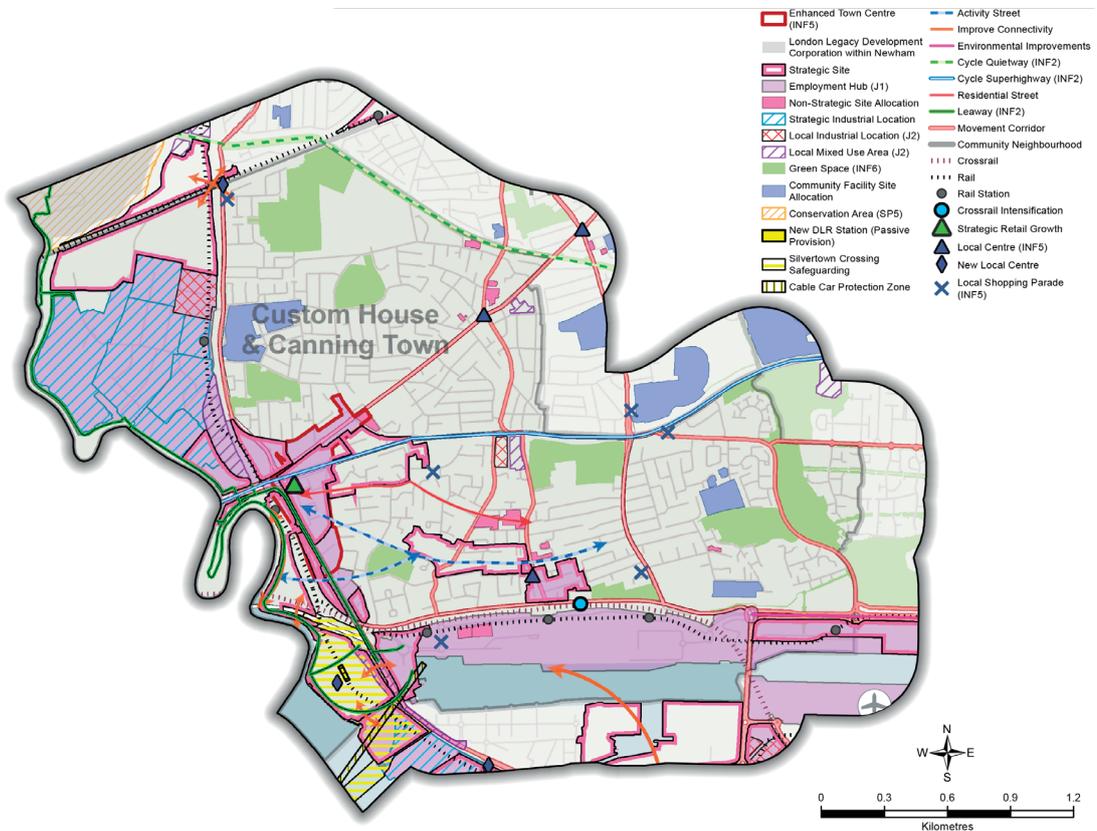


Fig 4. Canning Town and Custom House Planning Schemes (Source: Newham London, 2018)

## CURRENT PLANNING SCHEMES

The relevant documents that one should analyze in order to understand the future vision of Custom House are the Newham Local Plan 2018, the Royal Docks Regeneration Updates, the Custom House Newsletter Updates and finally, the Adam Kahn Architects webpage.

“Custom House station will become the centre of an effective transport interchange that connects with Freemasons Local centre and through to the ExCeL Centre, London City Airport and beyond, supporting a renewal and expansion of the centre, welcoming both local residents and visitors to ExCeL and other dockside destinations.” (Newham London, 2018)

This passage (cf. quote above) while portraying a vision of the neighbourhood as the focal center of future mobilities, also shows a **lack of understanding of local dynamics**. Indeed, the type of users that daily frequent the ExCeL and London City Airport are not the same populations which interact within the public spaces of Custom House and Freemasons Road. In fact, those are mostly local residents. From here, we can draw the conclusion that the urban transformation pictured by the **development plan does not reflect the reality of dwelling** of the neighbourhood, and perhaps this can be linked to a broader lack of will to acknowledge or even understand it.

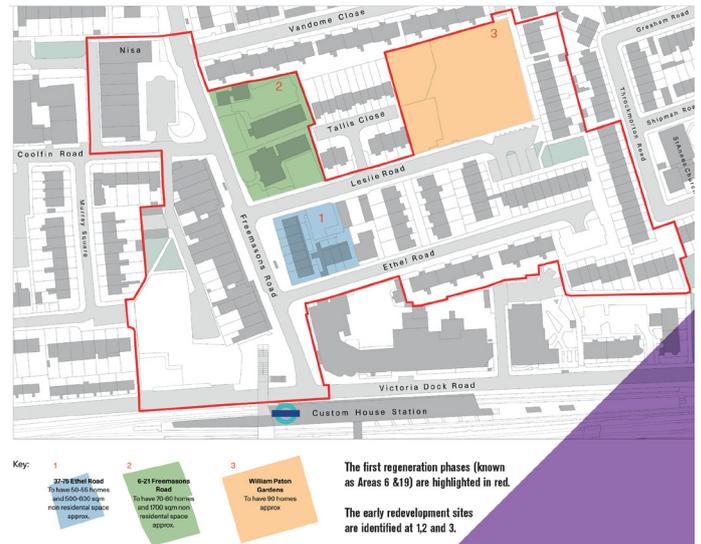


Fig 5. Custom House First Regeneration Phase Plan (Source: Newham London, 2019)

“Development will be intensified in the vicinity of Custom House and Royal Victoria stations, making **best use of land** including undergrounding of pylons should opportunities arise, whilst not contravening sustainable community and design quality objectives, achieving coherence and integration with other development in the area;” (Newham London, 2018)

The use of such **repetitive vocabulary** as “best”, “sustainable”, or “design quality objectives” is common to development plans. The tendency of describing the future vision through vague terms gives an **opaque understanding of the actual objectives of the plan**. For example, if we analyse the passage in which the plan states the will of “making best use of land [...] whilst not contravening sustainable community”, we encounter different levels of unclarity. When one mentions the “community”, it should be clearer what is the population that is being addressed. As we know, in the case of Custom House, there are multiple communities coexisting and co-inhabiting the neighbourhood, and based on principles of ethnicity, gender, class, or intersectionality of the latter, each one of them is characterised by different challenges and experiences of the urban.



Fig 6. Dispossessed tenants in Canning Town  
(Source: Somerville, 2019)

“The Mears Group is a UK-wide outsourcing company that made a profit of £24m last year, including hundreds of thousands for temporary accommodation in Newham. It manages 9,500 properties in the UK and recently won a £1.15 billion Home Office contract to provide asylum housing. The value of the Canning Town and Custom House contract is not known, but the company is likely to be collecting around £3million a year in rent from ex-homeless families, levels of which were agreed with Newham. [...] They added that Mears had arranged a free pest control service for tenants. This took place in October 2019 after discussions with Newham. The spokesman said: ‘We are sorry to hear about the specific complaints and we acknowledge there have been ongoing issues with cockroaches and rodents within the estate. **It is unfortunate we have had to put these measures in place.**’ ” (Somerville, 2019)

The investigation conducted by Hannah Somerville (2019) for the Newham Reporter, examines the condition of public housing in the neighbourhood of Custom House, specifically in the area where the redevelopment plans are located. It describes how 250 housing units have been taken over by MEARS, a private firm dedicated to administer and repair public housing units, while at the same time charging commercial rents to the inhabitants. What initially began as a **temporary scheme to provide emergency repairs** to these units for a limited time, in reality has **continued for the last ten years without a clear end**. The framing given for this scheme is entirely dependant on the supposed regeneration plan that should be implemented in the area in the near future, but since there still isn't a clear date for this plan to be executed, the affected families are left in a situation of **extreme vulnerability**, as every repair could be seen as spending money into infrastructures that will be eventually demolished anyway.

The language used to frame the discussion makes urban renovation seem both inevitable and imprecise, since for the last ten years it has been used by MEARS as a framework to provide low assistance to the families it currently hosts, while simultaneously generating profits as a real estate manager. This could be understood as **targeted disrepair**, by which both the council and the firm can dissipate responsibility regarding social housing while regeneration plans exist somewhere in the future. Meanwhile MEARS demands for more funds to conduct the repairs and the council sees the regeneration plan as the only way forward. This **mutual cycle of responsibility shifting fails to actually provide a concrete solution to the infrastructural needs of the affected families**.



Fig 7. Ash Sakula architecture team proposal  
(Source: Ash Sakula Architects, 2019)

“Almost all proposals include a larger, improved public square on the Custom House side of the tracks, and explore ways of making Freemasons Road more pleasant, safe, and useful — and so more of a destination in its own right. They also make the most of the waterfront. As one delegate pointed out, the dockside is one of the few south-facing waterfronts in London that is more-or-less unused. Barges, jetties, promenades, and lidos were all proposed as ways of making this enjoyable for everyone.” (Mayor of London and Newham London, 2019, our emphasis)

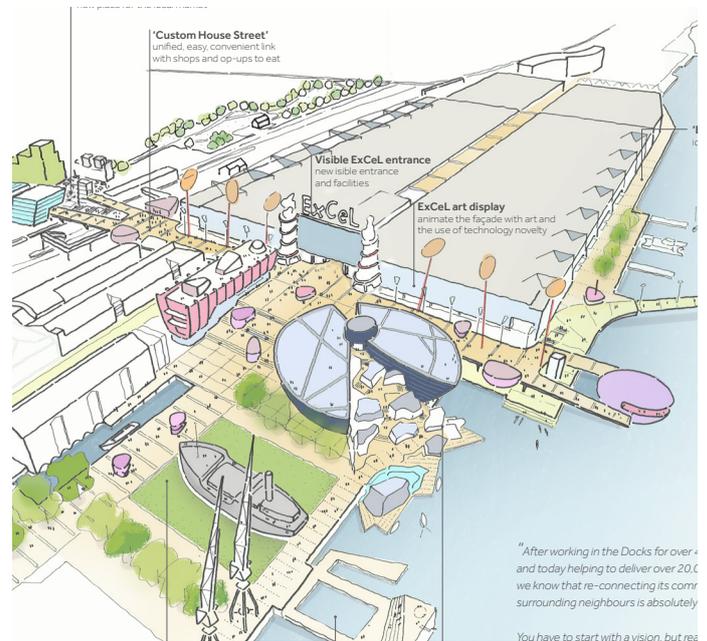


Fig 8. Farrells architecture team proposal  
(Source: Farrells, 2019)

The Newsletter Updates (Newham London, 2019) states that the administration is ‘developing plans for the **regeneration** of Custom House’ (p. 2, our emphasis), to then use the term **redevelopment**. It is relevant to notice that this notion of regeneration is the same that has been used by the Royal Docks project for industrial areas being converted into residential areas. We identify here a first disorientation, being the land use of the Royal Docks project fundamentally distant from the one of Custom House. In fact the two areas, by presenting different characteristics, should require distinctive challenges and needs. Moreover, by applying the same **standardised vocabulary** to regeneration schemes that aim to intervene on urban contexts which inevitably differ from one another in terms of socio-economic characteristics, historical background or residents’ urban aspirations, the risk is to flatten or even disrupt the pre-existing social fabrics.

Finally, according to the Adam Khan Architects website, the Custom House project is a Residential/Masterplan/Community and Landscape project, without giving any further description of the project. Again here we witness an **opaque delivery** of the objectives and aspects of the plan, which result in the **inability of any other actor to participate in its development or question its assets**.

### SUMMARY

The main concept behind the planning schemes of Custom House is that of *regeneration*, also referred to as *redevelopment* within the official documents. Both terms, although varying in meanings (Roberts, 2017), are used interchangeably in the discourses of the planning schemes for Custom House. This not only proves to be problematic, but also highlights a **lack of clarity regarding the intentions of the proposals**. Furthermore, the visual analysis of the proposals proves that the main strategy for transformation is understood as the demolition of 'decaying' buildings and the construction of new ones that would hold more intense land use patterns.

This transformation method has been used mostly in deteriorated urban environments that urgently need an integral intervention to improve their security, liveability and connection to the broader city. For example, areas containing factories in cities that are going through processes of deindustrialisation tend to be transformed into mixed-use neighbourhoods with housing, cultural and commercial activities. Nevertheless, this strategy has also been used by urban developers and private investors **as a means for profit, speculation and densification, resulting in private accumulation of capital and lack of social benefit for the city as a whole**.

The actuation of this type of regeneration/redevelopment schemes in residential areas is usually highly problematic. In these cases, the social structures are broken, people are often displaced, and gentrification processes are very likely to take place. This is extremely relevant in London, where many areas of the city are increasingly vulnerable to experiment gentrification processes (Yee and Dennett, 2020).

Our present proposal aims to be an invitation to think of other models for urban transformation. For example, instead of using the concept of regeneration or redevelopment, some planning departments (Department for Communities, 2013; ISVIMED, 2020) work on principles based on the transformation of residential areas via schemes of *neighbourhood upgrading or neighbourhood renewal*. This means that instead of implementing a ‘tabula rasa’ strategy (demolishing most existing buildings and constructing new ones), the neighbourhood is improved via interventions that carefully maintain and reinforce the social networks, reinforce community capacity building and provide spaces for citizen participation. The main objective of this kind of intervention is to provide a *better quality of life* for people already living within the neighbourhoods.



The socio-spatial condition of Custom House can be grasped through the expressions of local inhabitants' limitations and expectations towards the urban transformation of the area. Through interviews and first-hand surveys conducted in the area in the months of January and February 2020, we were able to draw **three** broad **dimensions** of perception, which generate consequential narratives. These categories can be read and applied to both **present** and **future**, as a reflection of both the current state of affairs and our proposed planned responses for the transformation of the area.

By these categories, it is possible to identify which are the elements that dwellers think Custom House is lacking, and what expectations should be tackled by the guidelines for future interventions.

The division of these levels represents different levels of social interaction. Starting from how the neighbourhood shapes self-perception [self-esteem], the inter-social relation between neighbours [recognition], and the position of the dwellers within a wider urban governance [power structures]. These three scales of perception relate to the different scales in which dwellers position themselves in urban spaces, whether as individuals, as part of a community or inhabitants of a city.

**Self-esteem** is understood as how the daily living conditions of Custom House is shaped by its **reputation**, that is repeated both inside the area and through London as a whole. The neighbourhood is seen as a place of crime

and neglect by some locals, a narrative that is replicated in the media and shapes the idea of it as an undesirable place to live. But simultaneously, some communities resist this perception and provide spaces to shape the area into one of pride through its inclusivity and possible aspirations. The tension between these two perceptions provides a clear idea of how future developments should provide a sense of pride and belonging to the community.

**Recognition** analyzes how different members of different communities relate to one another on a daily basis. Urban space is shaped not just by its material conditions but also by the interactions between identities and privileges that shape the ways in which dwellers operate in the city. This phenomenon can be both restrictive and emancipatory in different contexts, and by tracing these interrelations it is possible to equalize how different identities can use with **freedom** and move with **safety** through urban space.

Finally, **power structures** are used to understand how decision-making operates as a political and hierarchical distribution of **agency**. Since different organizations hold varied amounts of asymmetrical power that allows for different capacities over the neighbourhood, the aim is to provide more horizontal spaces for dwellers to decide over Custom House. Either by improved transparency of advocacy for grassroots organizations, by strengthening the social fabric of the area it is possible to increase their future leverage and agency against vertical modes of power.

# Narrative of Intervention

# VISION

freedom of  
movement

inclusion  
for all

trust

democratic  
interaction

Through our proposals, we hope to foster safer spaces allowing **freedom of movement** across the **myriad of identities** that shape the dwelling communities of Custom House. Our previous research revealed disparities in the ways different groups perceived, experienced and navigated space with regards to safety. This sense of safety pertained to actual or reputed criminality of the area. Moreover, beyond criminality in a traditional sense, the pervasive uncertainty related to future neighbourhood development, fueled a distinct lack of safety: one concerned with the potential negative implications on livelihoods, such as evictions and gentrification.

Safety, we opine, as revealed through our contact with Custom House's communities, is inherently linked to **trust**. We hope trust can be strengthened horizontally across dwelling communities and the way they communicate to achieve a safer, more interactive and confident use of space. In addition, acknowledging the vertical power dynamics behind spatial transformation, it is crucial that trust be borne on a vertical level. We aim to create **democratic spaces of interaction** and inclusion for all citizens and institutions.

### Freedom of Movement:

Acknowledge the social dynamics, infrastructural deficiencies and imbalanced power structure conditioning life in public space to ensure the capacity for all dwellers to navigate space more freely.

### Trust and Transparency:

Promote transparent dialogue between both horizontal and vertical stakeholders in order to ascertain more inclusive future neighbourhood developments.

### Freedom of Movement 1:

Tackle oppressive and alienating urban design by improving infrastructure in order to intensify the use of public space and to grant safer mobilities to the multifarious dwellers.

### Freedom of Movement 2:

Strengthen sense of community, improve perceptions across different groups to create more inclusive spaces allowing more confidence in movement in the neighbourhood.

### Trust/Transparency 1:

Strengthen relations, interactions and connections across different groups of dwellers.

### Trust/Transparency 2:

Establish explicit and transparent vertical communication channels, allowing wider community agency and space of negotiation with powerful actors in order to democratise urban transformations



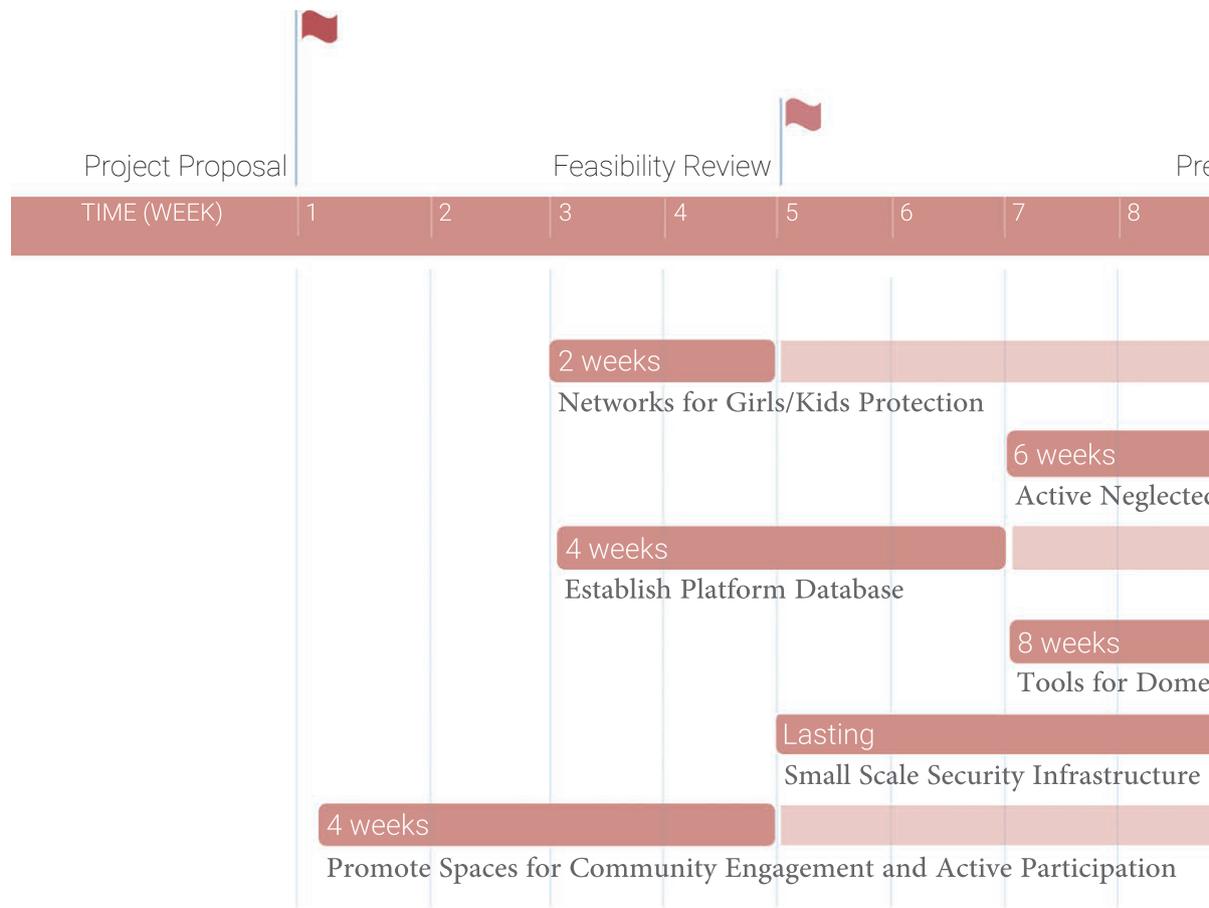
From the previously developed urban analysis, a series of strategic responses have been designed to tackle specific sets of issues in the Custom House area. By approaching the neighbourhood from a **socio-spatial framework**, the following responses aim to resolve the variety of damaged perceptions that currently exists across the area. These interventions entail the collaboration of **actors at different levels of governance**, from grassroots organizations to the Newham Council, and consider the varied expectations that dwellers of Custom House have over their lived space.

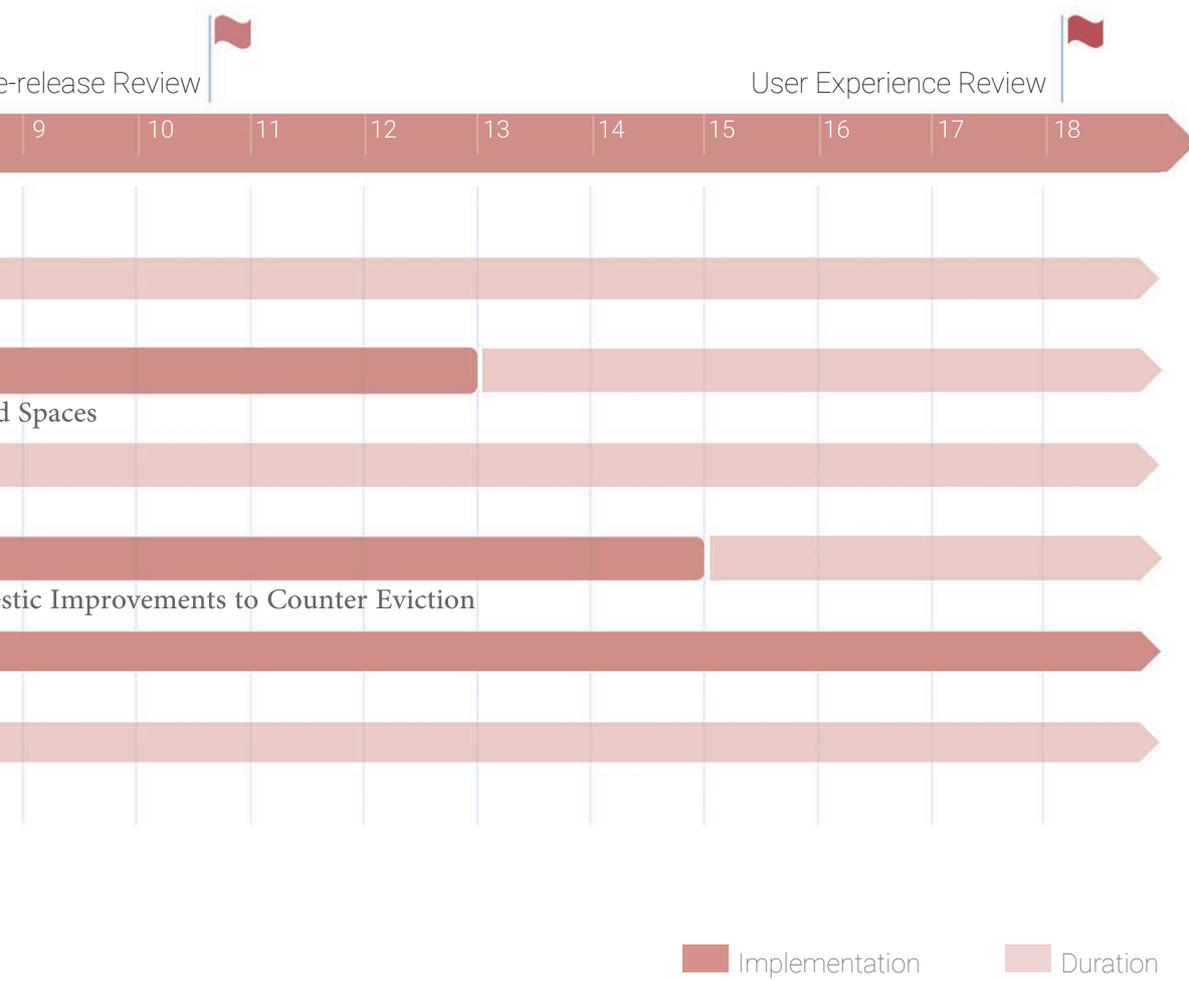
The approach to each intervention has been devised through the guidelines previously described. Through both projects and policies we aim to **shift the dwellers' perception of uncertainty** and transform the neighbourhood into a place where its residents can **safely conceive their aspired future**.

The following strategic responses are not intended to operate as individual solutions, but rather as **a network of interventions** working sequentially in conjunction with one another. This is done to provide an integral response to the current conditions of the area. The implementation times of each project correspond to the organizational effort required for it to be operational, as most of them are designed to become **ongoing practices of urban governance and solidarity**.

# IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

Due to the different priorities of the strategic responses, we set the timeline to allocate the timeframe of each intervention, and estimate its implementation and duration of continuous impact. In addition we consider reviewing and evaluating before, during and after implementing each response.





# VISION

freedom of movement

inclusion for all

trust

democratic interaction

PRINCIPLE 1

Freedom of Movement

PRINCIPLE 2

Trust and Transparency

GUIDELINE FOM 1  
improve infrastructure to grant safer mobilities to the multifarious dwellers

GUIDELINE FOM 2  
Strengthen sense of community allowing more confidence in movement.

GUIDELINE T&T 1  
Establish transparent communication to democratise urban transformations.

GUIDELINE T&T 2  
Strengthen relations and interactions across different groups of dwellers.

Response 1  
Safety Networks for schools

Response 2  
Activate Neglected Spaces

Response 3  
Infrastructure for Safety

Response 4  
Anti-eviction Mapping Project

Response 5  
Improvement to Counter Eviction

Response 6  
Spaces for Engagement and Participation

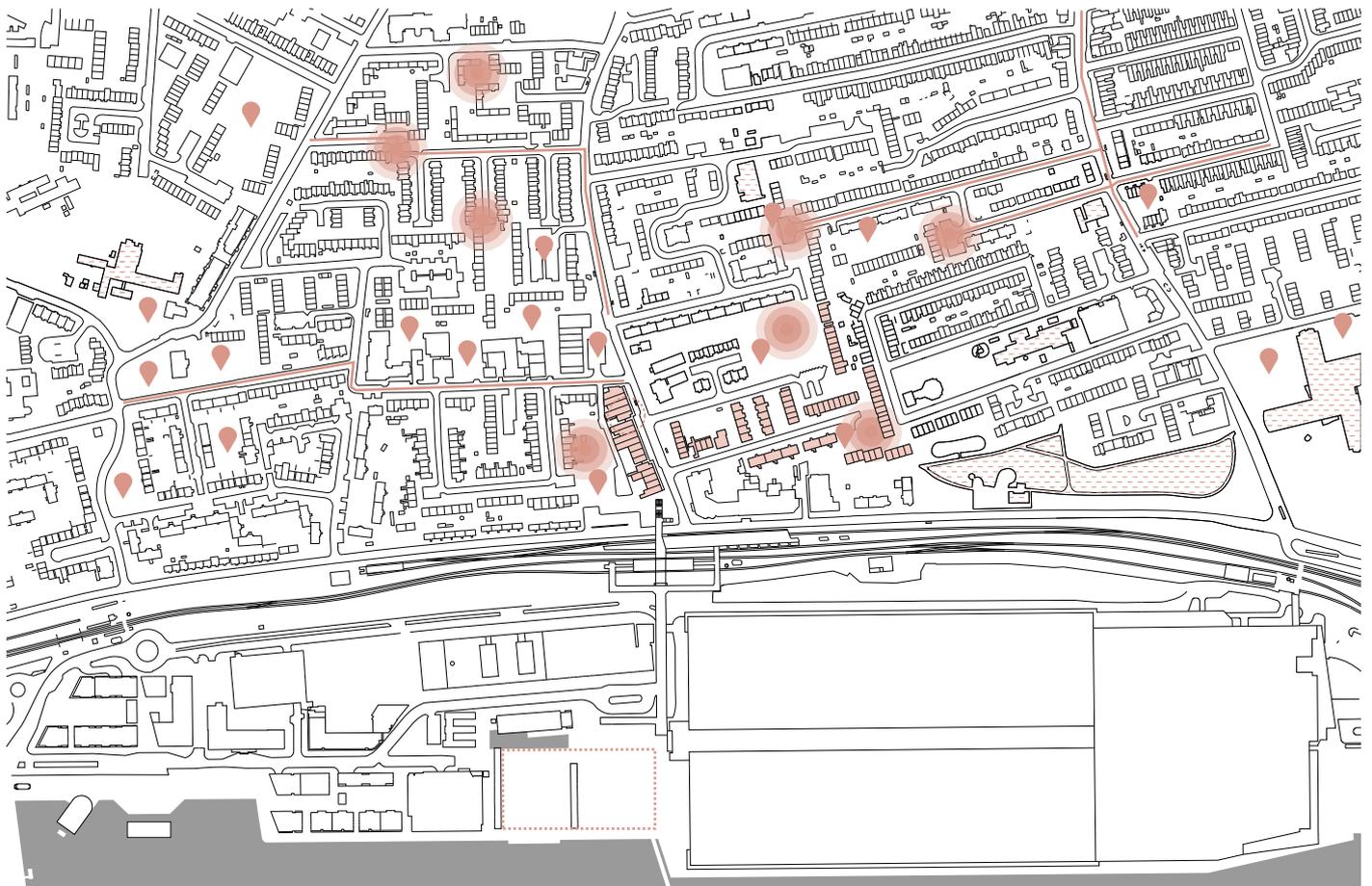
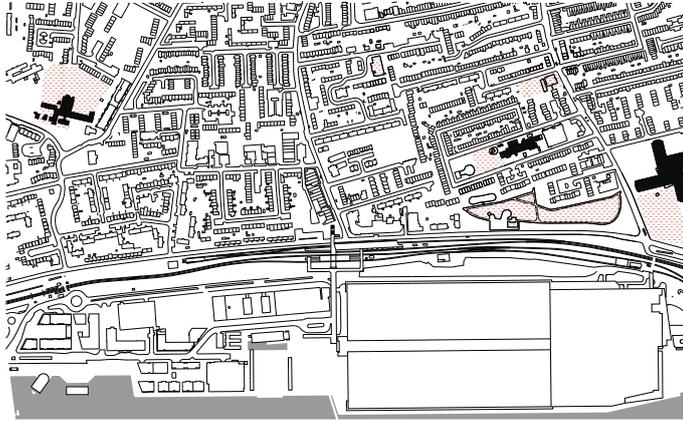


Fig 12. Map of strategic responses

# RESPONSE 1: SAFETY NETWORKS FOR SCHOOL-AGE GIRLS AND KIDS

Fig 13 Safety Networks response map



- activate spaces
- mutual assistance network

The safety, wellbeing, and free movement of school-age children is a front that school staff and parents can unite on. This strategic response attempts to tap the interactive potential of residents with empathy as a bond. In order to improve children’s sense of comfort and security in the community and create acquaintance between neighbors, space intervention includes the following two parts:

## 1) Establish the mutual assistance network

With the support of local schools, Shipman Youth Centre, After School Club, and the Community Center, to establish a timely information platform for parents and build neighborhood care and trust through the network. Based on the students’ key activity fields, this project could support picking up of lower-graders students with assistance, girls protection, and safe home after school.

## 2) Activate space along the way home

The accent of intervention is activating space along the higher-grades students’ way home, such as Cundy Park, Prince Regent Lane and Freemasons Road. Enhance space security through book-sharing boxes, entertainment and recreation facilities. This project is also closely linked to other projects including Urban Lab and small-scale infrastructure.

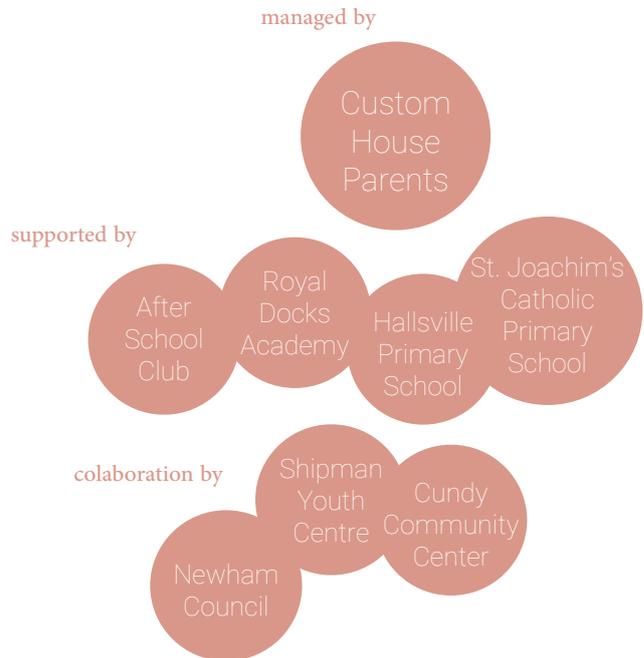


Fig 14. Mutual assistance networks

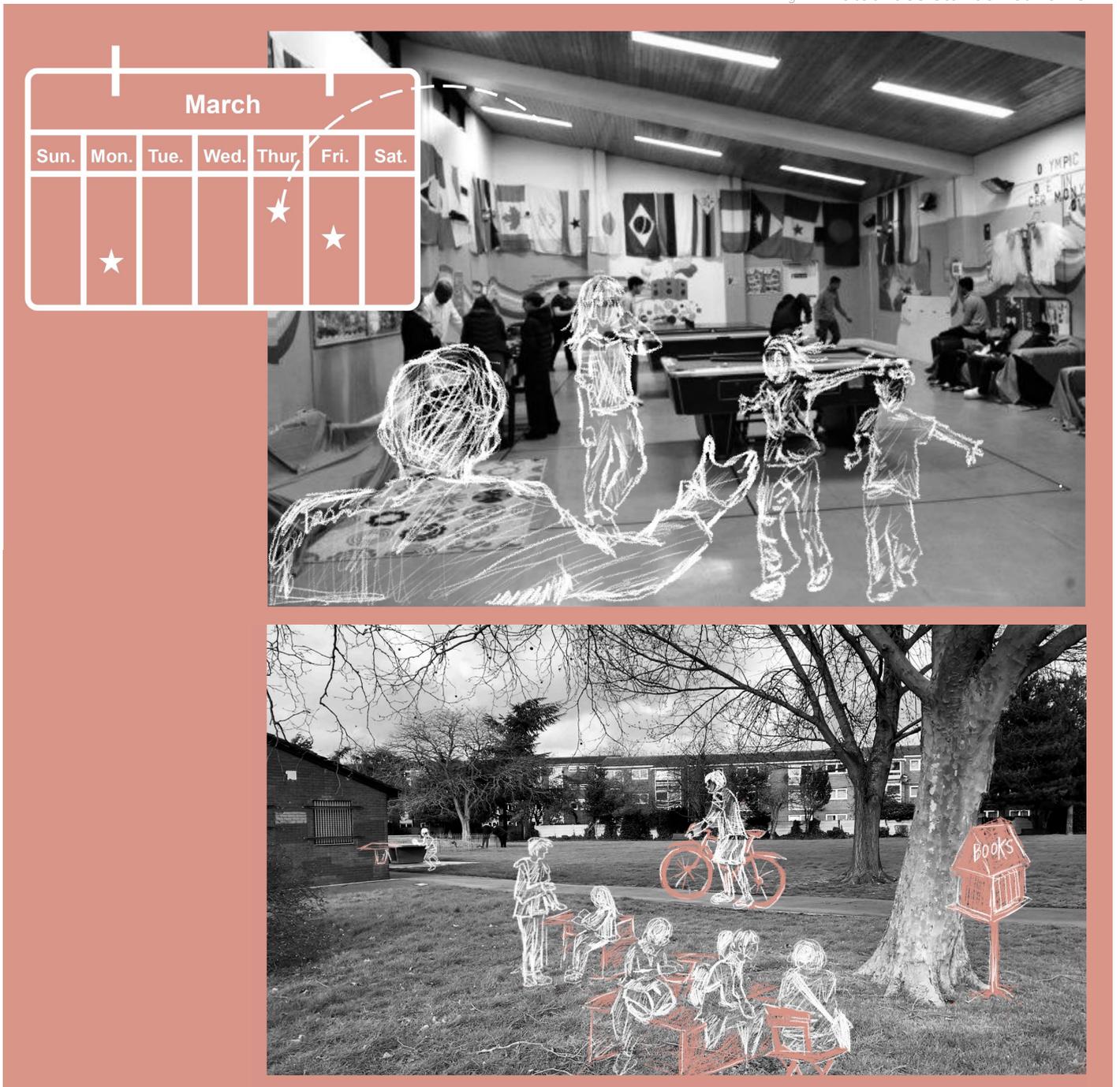


Fig 15. Activate spaces along the way home

## RESPONSE 2: ACTIVATE NEGLECTED PUBLIC SPACES



The objective of this series of intervention is to increase outdoor activity and street's livability, in order to generate a safer urban environment. This specific response unfolds into two distinctive actions.

The first one suggests to increase the number of permanent commercial activities in areas that are the least frequented by the inhabitants and where, according to the Metropolitan Police Service, episodes of crime are oftenly happening. These are mostly secondary streets that currently lack active frontage at the ground floor. In fact, by encouraging the opening of new commerce through council's subsidiaries, the aim is to attract more people to the outdoor environment which will contribute to the increment of the street life.

Alongside with the first permanent intervention, we propose a temporary use of neglected spaces. Parking lots, abandoned plots and residual areas within the neighbourhood are currently affecting both the perception and the use of Custom House's urban environment by its inhabitants. Again, according to the data produced by the Metropolitan Police Service, these are areas where episodes of violence and crime are likely to happen and therefore impact on the dwellers' use of the space. The response aims to change the image and experience of these areas through the creation of temporary activities. Through the organisation of festivals, Sunday markets, temporary installations and outdoor screenings, the neglected areas assume a new connotation, transforming from spaces of distress to places of neighbourhood interaction.

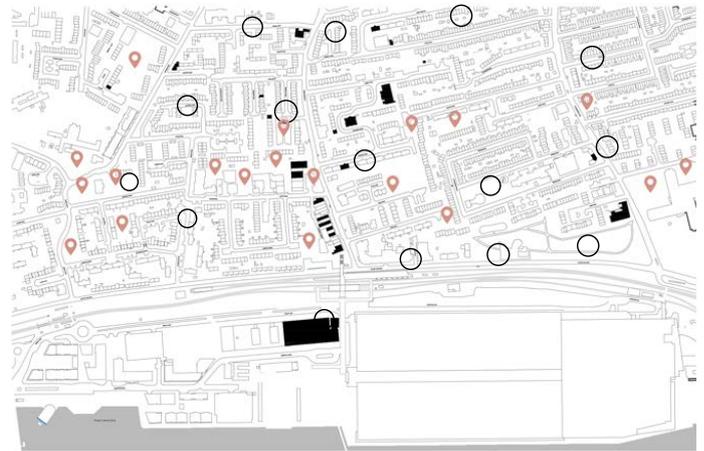


Fig 16. Neglected spaces response map

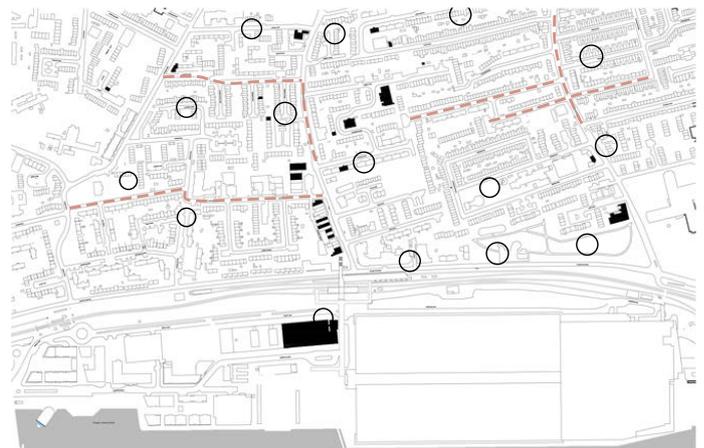


Fig 17. Street ground floor response map

- existing ground floor activities
  - 📍 neglected spaces for possible temporary use (proposed)
  - streets with ground floor activity (proposed)
  - areas with reported episodes of crime
- (Source: MetropolitanPolice Service, 2020)



Fig 18. Possible intervention to activate neglected public spaces



Fig 19. Possible intervention to activate ground floors

## RESPONSE 3: SMALL-SCALE INFRASTRUCTURE TO IMPROVE URBAN SAFETY

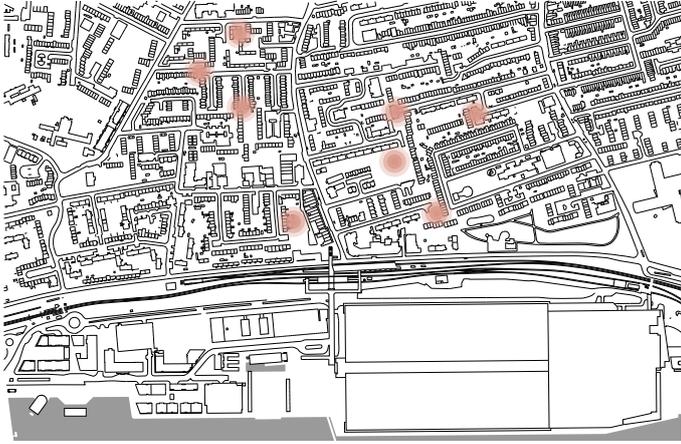


Fig 20. Infrastructures for safety response map

Intervene unsafe streets, alleys and other public spaces with measures to improve urban safety and the perception of security for pedestrians that move across Custom House. The measures should focus on enabling even the most vulnerable groups to move freely among the neighbourhood. This should specially consider the perception of women, and more specifically those that do not have networks of safety to rely on. The identified unsafe spaces should go beyond the polygons of redevelopment for Custom House, as safety and freedom of local mobilities is an issue that goes beyond specific areas of the neighbourhood. The modifications of these spaces should cover:

1. Installation of streetlights to increase luminosity.
2. Widening of narrow alleys to increase visibility.
3. Modification of gardening to increase visibility.
4. Opening new pedestrian paths within the redevelopment plots to ensure connectivity and avoid dead end streets.
5. Creation of spaces of gathering to increase activity in the public space. This measure should be connected with the Response 2: Activate neglected public spaces.

proposed by



Fig 21. Possible intervention around the current community garden

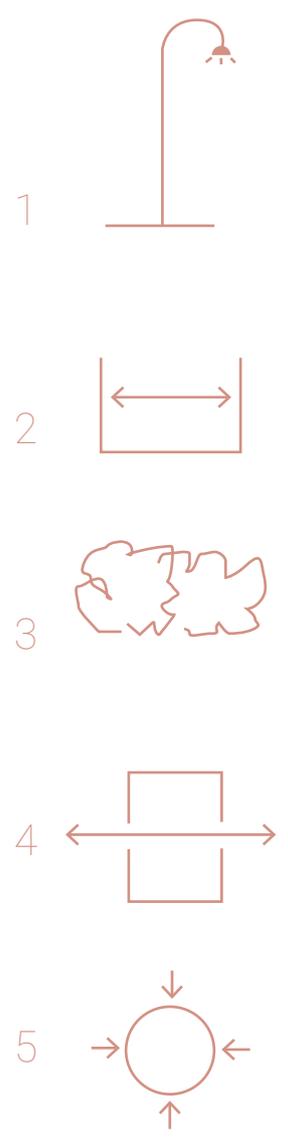
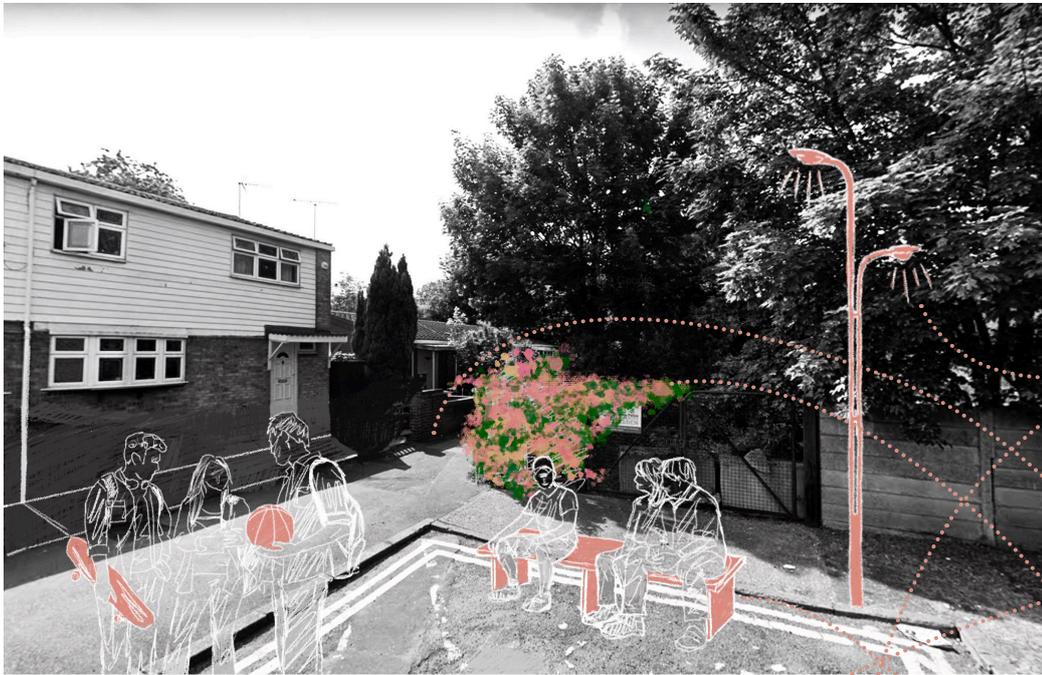


Fig 22. Possible intervention to improve an existing alley

# RESPONSE 4: CUSTOM HOUSE ANTI-EVICTION MAPPING PROJECT



This intervention is an interactive mapping platform, in which residents can pinpoint different evictions that have taken place in the neighbourhood. Similarly to the anti-eviction mapping project in California, this map is associated with a questionnaire which lets evicted residents tell their story and the context under which their eviction took place. This is particularly relevant in the case of Custom House, where a number of evictions took place in a context of neglect from private maintenance firms (Mears). While this information is disseminated through the local press, an interactive map gives a platform of agency to the residents, informing not only the Custom house population of what is happening but also of the entirety of the city and beyond. Providing a questionnaire allows to collect data on the identity of the evictees, which would deliver an understanding of the types of people targeted by the evictions.



ADD ENTRY

Date of your eviction

How long had you been living in this residence?

Where are you today?

Tell us the story behind your eviction

How old are you?

What is your gender?

What is your ethnicity?

Do you have any disability?

What is your yearly income?



**TOTAL  
NUMBER OF  
EVICTIONS**

**2#6311**

[view data per age](#)

[view data per ethnicity](#)

[view data per income level](#)

[view data per ability](#)

Fig 23. Anti-eviction mapping webpage

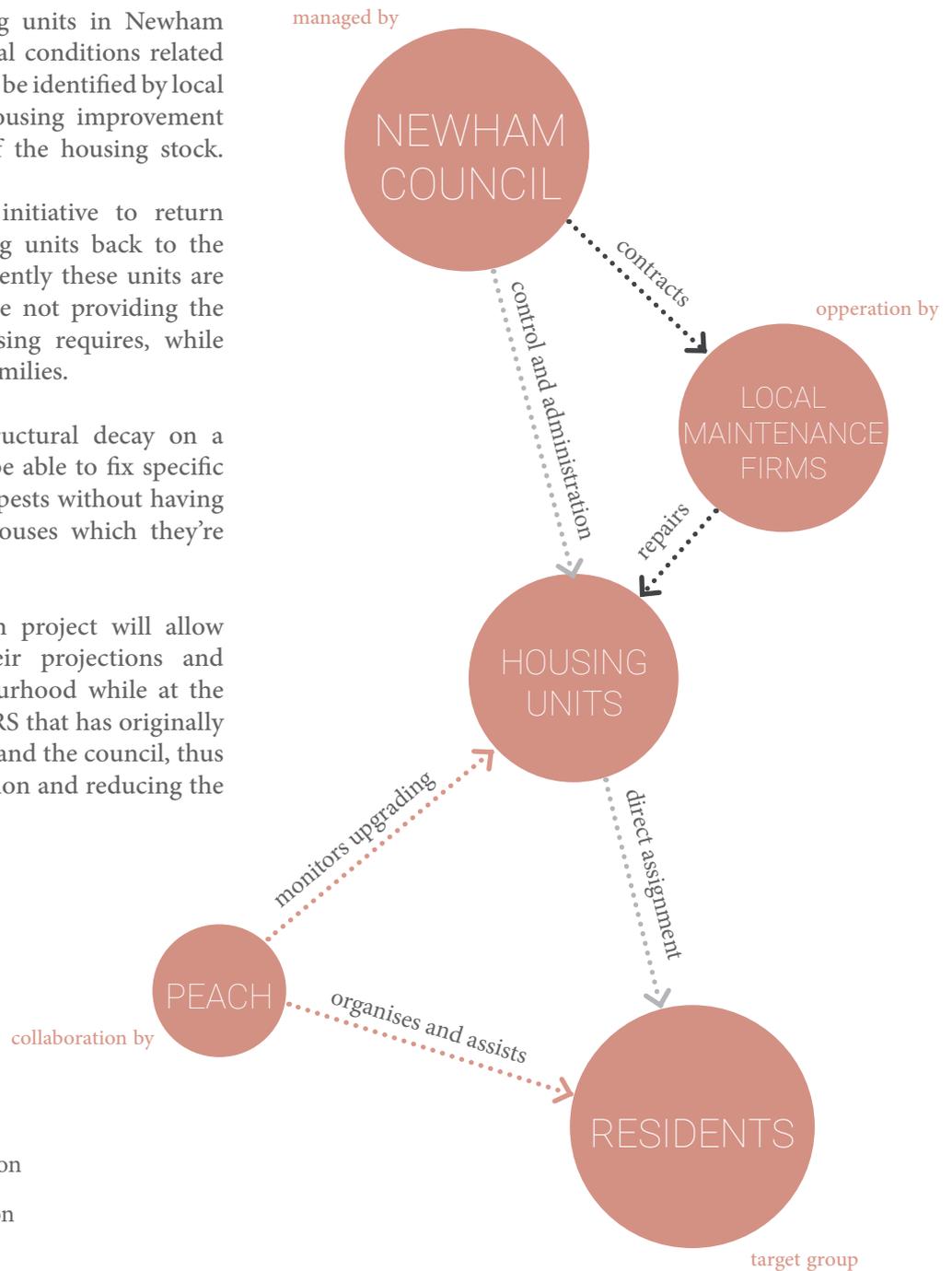
## RESPONSE 5: SMALL-SCALE DOMESTIC IMPROVEMENT TO COUNTER EVICTION

The current stock of social housing units in Newham present several lacking infrastructural conditions related to repair and maintenance, which will be identified by local grassroots and financed through housing improvement schemes instead of full renewal of the housing stock.

This response is a council-based initiative to return the administration of social housing units back to the stock of the Newham Council. Currently these units are maintained by MEARS and they are not providing the minimum services that social housing requires, while charging rents above the mean for families.

By addressing the issue of infrastructural decay on a case-by-case basis, the council will be able to fix specific problems such as piping, heating or pests without having to remove the families from the houses which they're already occupying.

This downscaling of the renovation project will allow families to remain secure in their projections and expectations to stay in the neighbourhood while at the same time removing profit for MEARS that has originally caused conflict between the dwellers and the council, thus increasing trust and mutual recognition and reducing the risk of possible evictions.



- Occupancy and direct administration
- Social organizing and data collection
- Infrastructural upgrading



Fig 24. Broken drainage (Source: Somerville, 2019)



Fig 25. Broken drainage (Source: Somerville, 2019)



Fig 26. Custom House social housing units (Source: Somerville, 2019)

# RESPONSE 6: PROMOTE SPACES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

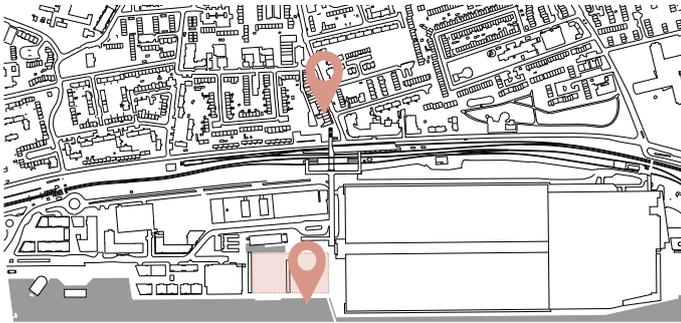


Fig 27. Spaces for engagement and participation map

This response aims to enhance the potentiality of community participation in the urban transformation processes occurring in Custom House. The participatory process is already part of both Newham's Council and the urban developers acting in the area discourses, and the efforts of achieving this can be seen on PEACH's, Royal Dock's and the Council's documents. However, by interviewing dwellers on the streets of Custom House, it was possible to apprehend either animosity against the process or lack of awareness.

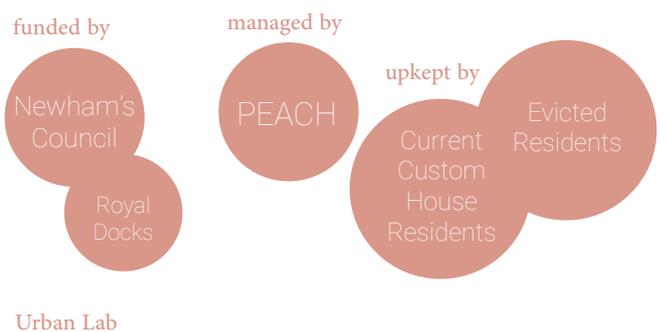
In order to achieve a more open dialogue, bring dwellers to the decision-making table and possibilitate the continuity of the participation process, this response is divided in two spatial intervention projects:

## 1) Temporary Installation in front of the Excel

This intervention aims to foster interaction among different actors that cross the Excel everyday and Custom House dwellers. The ideas are to raise awareness about the urban changes being implemented in the area, encourage dwellers to occupy the surrounding areas - breaking social barriers the spatial changes are imposing - and open dialogue stressing the conditions of developments in the area amongst locals and visitors.

## 2) Create a fix Urban Lab at 25 Freemasons Road

This project aspires to spatialise the participatory process and symbolise its continuity. The appropriation of the derelict shop that is being used as the Regeneration Hub could contribute open to a better relationship between dwellers and developers. The shop would serve as an open space for community encounter and a catalyst of community projects.



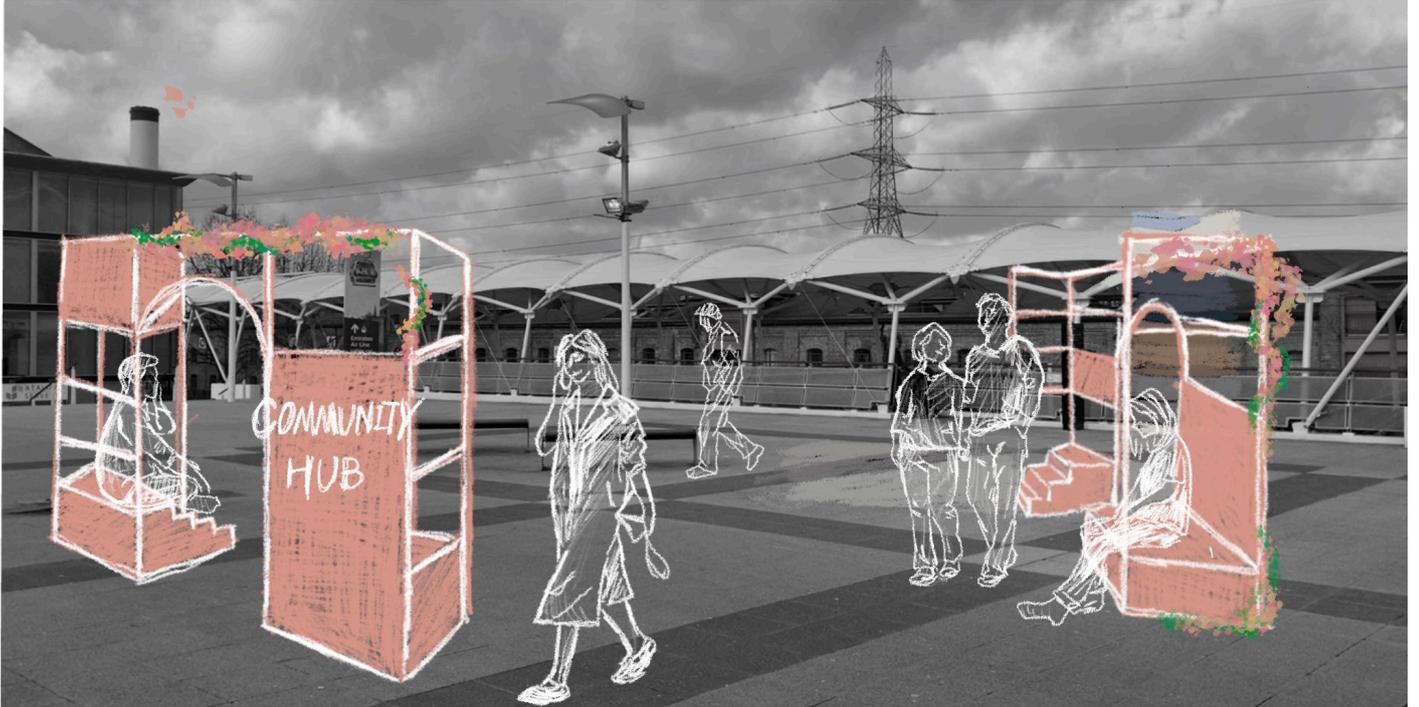


Fig 28. Temporary installation near the ExCel



Fig 29. Custom House Urban Lab



Fig 30. Custom House from DRL station (Source: Knecht, 2020)

The proposal that we have developed for the future transformation of Custom House has been largely based on three main overarching themes: **self-esteem, recognition and power structures**. Each one of these categories respond to narratives and perceptions based on information gathered through interviews with the dwellers themselves which encompass both the physical and affective relations they face every day. The inhabitants' reflections on Custom House as a neighbourhood of uncertainty and unsafety have proven to be embedded within a larger discourse regarding the consolidation of trust during processes of urban renewal, alongside with the political repercussions of these discourses. With this work, we aim to provide a view centered around the dwellers aspirations, in an effort to **repoliticise** their right to **safely project their lives** as the inhabitants of Custom House.

This perspective has taken into consideration how trust is built both horizontally and vertically amongst the different communities that live within the area, and how imbalances of agency have been perpetuated by the socio-spatial configuration of the neighbourhood. Each one of the proposed strategic responses aims to counter this imbalance by **providing the inhabitants with the organizational tools and physical means** to address the reported issues. The two principles that guide the interventions provide a framework that includes different scales of intervention, ranging from the security of children in public areas to the long term occupation of social housing.

It is key to acknowledge the **limitations** that our proposal inevitably face when dealing with urban transformations at this scale. Understanding our role within academia, the approach that we provide operates on a bottom-up level of analysis, as the dwellers themselves represent our entry point. This has proved to be an invaluable asset regarding the daily conditions of life in Custom House, while simultaneously providing only a **partial understanding** of how local governance actually operates. In relation to this gap of knowledge, there is space for these strategic responses to be further developed, as both the Newham Council and the dwellers have the opportunity to accommodate and repurpose them, based on principles of **transparency** and **freedom of movement**. In addition to the interventions, what we aim to provide is a framework based on **negotiation and mutual recognition** in which all parties can operate democratically.

# REFERENCES

## LIST OF

Ash Sakula Architects (2019) *New Ground at Custom House*. Available at: [https://www.royaldocks.london/media/articles/Ash-Sakula-Architects\\_Royal-Docks\\_A2-Board.pdf](https://www.royaldocks.london/media/articles/Ash-Sakula-Architects_Royal-Docks_A2-Board.pdf) (Accessed: 10 March 2020).

Department for Communities - Northern Ireland Executive (2013) *People and Place: A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*. Belfast. Available at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/neighbourhood-renewal-people-and-place> (Accessed: 18 March 2020).

Farrels (2019) *One street – connecting all the Communities*. Available at: <https://www.royaldocks.london/media/articles/Farrells-LFA-Design-Charrette-The-Royal-Docks-Final.pdf> (Accessed: 10 March 2020).

ISVIMED - Alcaldía de Medellín (2020) *Programas Mejoramiento Integral de Barrios*. Available at: <http://isvimed.gov.co/programa/mejoramiento-integral-de-barrios/> (Accessed: 24 March 2020).

Levy, C. (2015) 'Routes to the just city: towards gender equality in transport planning', in *Gender, Asset Accumulation and Just Cities: Pathways to Transformation*, pp. 135–149.

Mayor of London and Newham London (2019) *Local groups come together for Custom House design challenge*. Available at: <https://www.royaldocks.london/articles/local-groups-come-together-for-custom-house-design-challenge>. (Accessed: 10 March 2020).

Newham London (2017) *Canning Town regeneration update July 2017*. Available at: <https://www.newham.gov.uk/Documents/Business/CanningTownRegenerationUpdateJuly2017.pdf> (Accessed: 03 February 2020).

Newham London (2018) *Newham Local Plan 2018*. Available at: <https://www.newham.gov.uk/Documents/Environment%20and%20planning/NewhamLocalPlan2018.pdf>. (Accessed: 10 March 2020).

Newham London (2019) *Your Custom House, Winter 2019 - Issue 2*. Available at: <https://www.newham.gov.uk/Documents/Business/CustomHouseNewsletterWinter2019.pdf>. (Accessed: 03 February 2020).

Roberts, P. (2017) 'The Evolution, Definition and Purpose of Urban Regeneration', in Roberts, P., Skyes, H., and Granger, R. (eds) *Urban Regeneration*. 2nd Editio. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: Sage, pp. 9–43.

Somerville, H. (2019) 'Broken boilers, cockroaches and asbestos floors: Dispossessed tenants in Canning Town have waited eight years for change', *Newham Recorder*, 6 December. Available at: <https://www.newhamrecorder.co.uk/news/custom-house-canning-town-mears-tenants-speak-out-1-6412095> (Accessed: 19 March 2020).

Warf, B., 2010. *Encyclopedia of geography* / Barney Warf, editor. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412939591> (Accessed 09 April 2020).

Yee, J. and Dennett, A. (2020) *Unpacking the Nuances of London's Neighbourhood Change & Gentrification Trajectories*. Working Paper 215. Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis - University College London, London. Available at: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/casa/sites/bartlett/files/working\\_paper\\_215.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/casa/sites/bartlett/files/working_paper_215.pdf) (Accessed: 24 March 2020).

# **CUSTOM HOUSE**

*A quest towards trust,  
transparency and freedom*