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The making, unmaking,
and remaking of
Thamesmead.

A story of urban design,
decline, and renewal in
postwar London

Ariana Markowitz

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Abstract. This working paper tells the story of the making, unmaking, and remaking of Thamesmead in southeast London, a major housing project intended to address the postwar housing crisis and the site of an equally major regeneration project today. Situating Thamesmead in the context of the dominant planning regimes in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century—the Garden City, the Radiant City, and the New Town—this paper frames the area’s decline in terms of rising crime rates. Drawing from Schubert (2016), the literature on crime and design is divided into three theoretical silos: rational actor, collective efficacy, and actor-network. There is a disproportionate focus here on the first one, embodied by Newman’s

doctrine of Defensible Space which is arguably the most influential concept in environmental crime prevention to date. The case study describes planners’ efforts to build an ambitious New Town within London that prioritized innovative design, connectivity, the integration of nature and green space, and the segregation of motorists and pedestrians. In evaluating these features, the paper concludes that South Thamesmead’s decline was less the result of misguided efforts to “design out crime” than of the same types of miscalculations that felled housing estates throughout Britain. Current regeneration efforts in South Thamesmead offer opportunities to correct the mistakes of the past.

Content

1. Introduction	5
1.1. Beginning	5
1.2. Methodology	6
2. Contextualizing: from Garden Cities to New Towns	8
3. Framing: crime and design	10
4. Applying: the case of Thamesmead	13
4.1. Making (through the 1960s)	13
4.2. Unmaking (1970s - 1990s)	17
4.3. Remaking (2000s - present)	21
5. Reflecting	25
References	25
Appendix	28

List of figures

2.2. L'Unité d'Habitation
3.1. Defensible space versus indefensible space
3.2. Pruitt-Igoe
4.1. The Gooch family arrives in Thamesmead
4.2. Timeline of key events in Thamesmead
4.3. Flood-resistant building typology
4.4. Thamesmead's masterplan by the numbers
4.5. GLC sketch showing the expected role of water
4.6. GLC sketch of elevated pedestrian walkways
4.7. Filming location of "A Clockwork Orange"
4.8. Thamesmead and its surroundings
4.9. Elevated pedestrian walkways
4.10. Garages at street level
4.11. Crossrail construction at Abbey Wood
4.12. Green space
4.13. Self-building in garages
4.14. Maquette used for community consultations
5.1. Lakefront towers

List of maps

1.1. Location of Thamesmead in London
1.2. Initial site analysis
4.1. GLC's 1967 masterplan for Thamesmead
4.2. South Thamesmead today
4.3. MD in Thamesmead relative to England

List of acronyms.

BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation
CDA - Crime and Disorder Act
CIAM - International Congress of Modern Architecture
DLR - Docklands Light Rail
CPTED - Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design
GLA - Greater London Authority
GLC - Greater London Council
IMD - Index of Multiple Deprivation
LBB - London Borough of Bexley
LCC - London County Council
MoMA - Museum of Modern Art
TCPA - Town and Country Planning Association
TT - Trust Thamesmead

1. Introduction

1.1 Beginning

In 2014, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York put on an exhibition called “Design and Violence.” Rather than focus on aesthetics or commercial success, the curators sought to situate objects, systems, and processes in the context of the destruction they have caused or could cause in the future. “Traditionally designers have set out to better society, their objectives ranging from the quotidian (spoons) to the autocratic (cities),” the curators wrote. “Yet at times they may find it all too easy to overstep, indulge in temptation, or succumb to the dark side of a moral dilemma; they may also simply err” (Antonelli and Hunt, 2015, p.10).

This paper takes that critical eye to modernist postwar housing development in London. After the war, British society placed its faith in the state to deliver large-scale, high-quality, and affordable development to millions of people in urgent need of housing assistance. New forms of building and design, policymakers believed, could create environments that would enable people to live healthy, comfortable lives in the new era of peace and prosperity. Three distinct types of urban planning colored their approach. Howard’s Garden City (1898) combined the benefits of city and country in an accessible, environmentally conscious town under community stewardship. A few decades later, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier proposed stretching the Garden City upwards into a futuristic “radiant city” of high-density skyscrapers in open parkland. The New Towns Act of 1946 merged the connectivity, environmentalism, and small town feel of Garden Cities with Le Corbusier’s towers. Over the following quarter-century, the British government designated more than 20 New Towns throughout the country and created and expanded overspill settlements in urban peripheries and suburban areas (TCPA, 2014).

But in stark contrast to the unflinching optimism and images of opulence that accompanied the construction of new housing projects, by the 1970s the media was covering the sights and sounds of deteriorating living conditions and the voices of the people subject to them. Perhaps the clearest indication of failure was rising levels of crime in social housing, a situation that drove the production of theories positing a relationship between crime and design. First among these theories was Newman’s *Defensible Space* (1972), which assailed Corbusian tower blocks as “containers for the victimization of their inhabitants” (p.8). When *Defensible Space* drew fire for its determinis-

tic assumption that the wrong kind of design would drive any rational actor to criminal behavior, planners added a sociological dimension to the theory inspired by Jacobs’ work from 1961. Design that strengthened social bonds such that people felt responsible for their neighbors and, by extension, public and semi-private space, was thought to keep streets safe through “collective efficacy” (Carrabine, 2008). The most recent generation of thinking uses Latour’s actor-network theory (2007) in pursuit of a more holistic strategy for preventing crime, exploring how human and non-human actors interact.

These theories indicate an evolving “understanding of what it meant to be an inhabitant...from a uniform passive beneficiary of public services to a diverse set of active participants and consumers of lifestyle” (Cupers, 2014, p.xxv). Specifically, the state missed three critical issues from its bird’s-eye vantage point in the postwar era. The first was the diversity of users: an environment that might be novel and modern to one person could be sterile and intimidating to another. The second was that these users were not passive recipients of aid but active producers of space. Applying the ideas of sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, if 100 people live in identical houses, all of them will create unique homes for themselves with distinct short- and long-ranging effects on their neighbors, the area, and the city as a whole. Finally, borrowing another Lefebvrian idea, the state and its cadre of designers failed to recog-

Map 1.1. Location of Thamesmead in London map by Adrian B McMurchie (www.amcmurchie.com). Source: www.deadfamouscities.com (2017)



nize that space is both political and politics itself (Dikeç, 2012). Postwar housing was a stage on which the shift from public largesse to economic contraction and privatization played out in the late 1970s and 1980s. It was also an actor, influencing the terms and the direction of the debate. These and other shortcomings brought the postwar social housing project to a grinding halt, with the prevailing view among scholars and the public alike that the state's efforts came to naught or less. "[T]hree decades of building production have become synonymous with modernism's failure: its rationalistic hubris, its inflexible and inhumane treatment of urban space, and its outright denial of people's needs and aspirations" (Cupers, 2014: xiii-xiv).

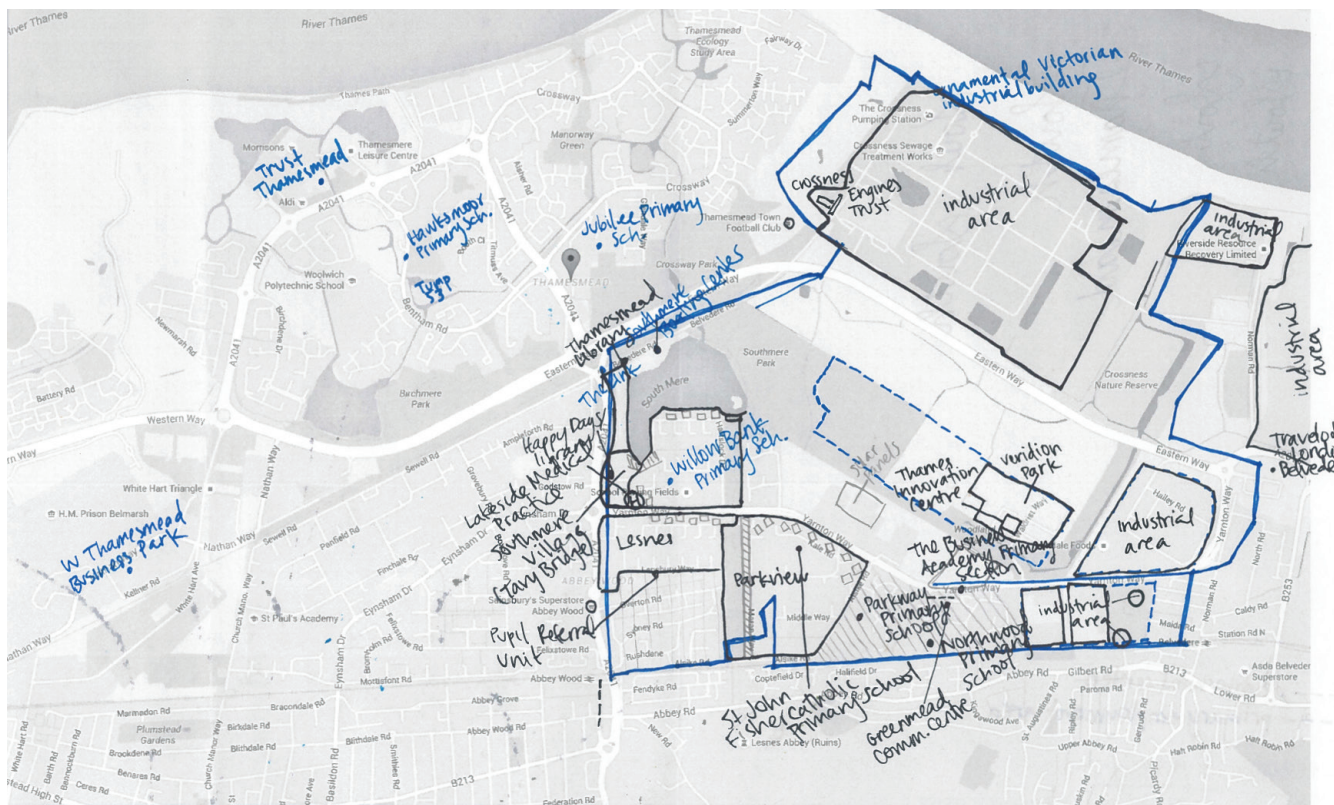
With London again in the grips of an acute housing shortage today, the government has announced sweeping initiatives to regenerate large areas of the city. While the 2011 London Plan, the city's official guide to urban planning and development, does not provide a specific definition of regeneration, it does indicate that regeneration is based on "social and economic aspirations, but with the emphasis on economic growth and a more intensive use of land" (Campkin, 2013, p.5). The depth and breadth of these projects afford London and its growing array of partners a unique opportunity for planning: correct the mistakes of the postwar social housing project with the benefit of nearly half a century of hindsight.

To that effect, rising rates of crime were primarily the result of the same types of miscalculations that felled housing estates throughout Britain rather than of misguided efforts to "design out crime." And yet, British society has nonetheless stigmatized modernist social housing projects and their residents as dangerous, even criminal. In 1974, a BBC documentary described London's Aylesbury Estate as looking "almost as if creatures from another world have come down and built their own environment" (Mansfield, 1974). In 2016, more than 40 years later, David Cameron characterized "the worst estates" in a *Sunday Times* op-ed as "concrete slabs dropped from on high, brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers."

1.2 Methodology

With the arc of history providing the underlying logic and momentum of this paper, the neighborhood of South Thamesmead provides an apt case study to illustrate these trajectories. The broader area of Thamesmead is the size of central London, 1,300 acres straddling the Boroughs of Greenwich and Bexley along more than three miles of the south bank of the River Thames. Bordered by Woolwich to the southwest, Abbey Wood to the south, and Belvedere and Erith to the southeast, Thamesmead was an inhospitable marshland and a major munitions

Map 1.2. Initial site analysis: borders, typologies, land use, and community capitals. Source: Author (2016).



factory before the Greater London Council (GLC) acquired the land in the 1960s with promises to build one of Britain's most ambitious postwar housing projects. Through a mix of terraced housing, maisonettes, and Corbusian towers, Thamesmead was intended to provide 60,000 people with new modern homes. The plans drew upon the principles of New Town development, with a particular focus on innovative design, connectivity, the integration of nature and green space, and the segregation of motorists and pedestrians. Despite winning architectural awards and drawing crowds of thousands after the first residents arrived in 1968, the plans were mostly abandoned by the mid-1970s and the town began to unravel. The bold design of South Thamesmead's four housing estates—the sites of Thamesmead's most iconic architecture and the only areas built mostly to the specifications of the original masterplan—did nothing to prevent the town from becoming a hotspot for crime and antisocial behavior.

After decades of decline, South Thamesmead was designated a housing zone opportunity¹ area in 2015 with the impending arrival of Crossrail² in Abbey Wood in 2018. Peabody Trust, a prestigious social housing

association in London that recently became the major land owner in South Thamesmead, is now leading a £1.5bn regeneration initiative in South Thamesmead, one of the largest such schemes nationwide (TT, 2014). Its efforts show early promise, but after only two years of work, it is not yet clear whether the association and its public and private partners will succeed in remedying the missteps of the past.

To gain a better understanding of the site, in August 2016, I visited and walked around with Susie Hamilton, a regeneration officer at Peabody, and Adam Khan, founder of Adam Khan Architects in Hackney, one of the firms working with Peabody. I also corresponded with Paul Fowler who does communications work for Peabody in Thamesmead to obtain socioeconomic data on the neighborhood. In addition to off-site and on-site mapping, I reviewed a range of materials, including historical sources, government documents, academic books and journal articles, newspaper articles, and documentaries. In addition, I made extensive use of historical photo archives. To capture my view of South Thamesmead, I took and have included several of my own photos.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. The city government defines opportunity areas as, "London's major source of brownfield [formerly industrial] land which have significant capacity for development...and existing or potentially improved public transport access. Typically they can accommodate at least 5,000 jobs, 2,500 new homes or a combination of

the two, along with other supporting facilities and infrastructure" (Mayor of London and London Assembly, 2016).

2. Crossrail is an east-west railway set to open in London in 2018. According to the Crossrail website, the project "is one of the largest single infrastructure investments ever undertaken in the UK."

2. Contextualizing: from Garden Cities to New Towns

In Europe and especially in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century and into the postwar period, three paradigms dominated urban and suburban development. The Garden City, the Radiant City, and the New Town were related but distinct forms of planning, each responding to the mood and the needs of the times in terms of its scale, style, and priorities. At a fundamental level, the men who devised each model were “anti-urban in conceiving of the city as having a ‘natural’ predisposition to disorder that architecture and planning needed to address” (Campkin, 2013, p.1). Order would follow from the right type of design, they reasoned, and with it prosperity and harmony.

Ebenezer Howard worked as a British parliamentary stenographer and never studied urban planning. His 1898 book, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, describes the ideal place to live as one of limited size and density with abundant green space, fusing the most desirable aspects of city and country (TCPA, 2014). A green belt would form a fixed border around the town and a community trust would permanently hold the land “to prevent it from becoming a city” (Jacobs, 1961, p.24). Other guiding principles were housing affordability, walkability, environmentalism, excellent pedestrian and cycling infrastructure as well as transit links, and close proximity to jobs, schools, and entertainment (TCPA, 2014). Howard’s vision inspired the construction of Welwyn Garden and Letchworth in the early 1900s, both located in Hertfordshire about 20 miles from London, as well as towns in the United States and continental Europe (Woodman, 2014).

Some 30 years after the establishment of the Hertfordshire towns, the International Congress of Modern Architecture, or CIAM by its French initials, met to discuss Europe’s ailing cities. CIAM’s architects determined that light, space, and air were the solution to overpopulation, pollution, and unhealthy conditions (van Soomeren et al, 2016). “High buildings, set far apart from one another, must free the ground for broad verdant areas. Indeed, they will have to be situated at sufficiently great distances from one another, or else their height, far from being an improvement on the existing malaise, will actually worsen it” (CIAM quoted in van Soomeren et al, 2016, p.225). With Europe laid to waste in the war and in the midst of a dire housing crisis in the mid-1940s, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier summarized CIAM’s findings. “Le Corbusier believed the tower block was the solution for rehousing the masses that had been displaced during the second

world war, and that high rise building could be used to create spacious city homes with the same amenities as a typical street” (Frearson, 2014). The tower block would be a “vertical Garden City” of skyscrapers in a park. It would be dense at 1,200 people per acre, but the height of the buildings would allow for 95 per cent of the ground space to be left open (Jacobs, 1961).

In London after the war, pressure mounted to devise a way to house the homeless and booming population. London County Council’s (LCC) efforts to build temporary houses fell short, exacerbated by a simultaneous campaign to clear the city’s teeming slums (Wigfall, 1997). Inspired by Le Corbusier, planners began advocating tall, high-density buildings as the most effective way to mitigate the housing shortage (Wigfall, 1997). At the same time, to alleviate demand in the city and better distribute economic activity throughout the country, the 1946 New Towns Act provided for the establishment of eight towns of 50,000 people each (ibid). Nine principles factored into New Town design (TCPA, 2014):

1. Clustering houses around schools and other facilities to build a localized sense of community
2. Building houses and industry in different but well-

Figure 2.1. Le Corbusier’s l’Unité d’Habitation.
Source: FLC/ADAGP (1956).



linked places, enabling easy transit between them without anyone having to live among the noise, pollution, and traffic that industry causes

3. Building covered shopping malls and pedestrian-friendly town centers
4. Separating motorized and pedestrian transit
5. Integrating a network of green space into the town's fabric
6. Constructing and designing in innovative ways
7. Prioritizing the provision of social housing
8. Avoiding dormitory towns by ensuring self-sufficiency in terms of work, study, and leisure opportunities within the town
9. Allocating space for social and communal uses

The ideology that animated New Towns overlapped with Howard's Garden Cities, but with some important differences. Though the early New Towns were kept at 50,000 people, neither they nor subsequent towns had the Garden City's green belt to keep growth in check. Moreover, because New Town construction happened in response to a crisis, the scale and speed of delivery were greater than the Garden Cities.

Le Corbusier's thinking percolated through the first wave of New Town construction from 1946 until 1950, and in 1952, he translated his vision into concrete with his *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille (Frearson, 2014). The *ville radieuse* ("radiant city") was a tribute to modernism and new building technology, "admired for its rough finished 'Breton Brut' concrete, parkland setting and elevated walkways or 'streets in the sky'" (Arnold, 2012). In *l'Unité*, Le Corbusier transformed high-density housing "by reimagining a city inside an 18-storey slab block" (Frearson, 2014). Conscientious of the fact that several tall buildings could cause even a large open space to feel confined by interrupting lines of sight on the ground, Le Corbusier elevated *l'Unité* on huge concrete stilts (Mansfield, 1974).

The building was showered with awards and planners throughout Europe rushed to design and build tower blocks surrounded by open space (Cupers, 2014). In Britain, the radiant city merged with New Town ideology, and high-rises became the standard building type for

both public and private development (Wigfall, 1997). Industrialized building practices had already become commonplace at the time, enabling the new model to spread since it was inexpensive to stack one apartment on top of another identical one (*ibid*). "The post-war aspiration was that the new 'flats in the sky', with their bathrooms and fitted kitchens, would replace the slums of old, with their overcrowding and outside toilets" (Minton, 2009, p.92). The popularity of towers peaked in London in the mid-1960s; in 1966 more than a quarter of all plans that GLC¹ approved were for high-rise buildings (Wigfall, 1997).

By the mid-1960s, unexpected challenges began to puncture the gospel of Le Corbusier and the "architectural determinism" (Schubert, 2016, p.121) that his work assumed. Because of the expansive space required around towers, supposed high-density housing did not necessarily accommodate more people, and the need to build garages and construct new roads often offset the lower costs of the building construction (Wigfall, 1997). In addition, despite planners, designers, urban sociologists, local politicians, and local government authorities typically favoring more open space, they reached a point at which there was too much space to manage and maintain (*ibid*).

Perhaps most critical was that, "[F]eelings of insecurity and fear of crime" seeped into housing estates and their surroundings," wrote van Soomeran et al (2016). "But even worse, these neighbourhoods were often plagued by too many real crimes such as robbery and violence" (p.225). From the early 1970s through the 1980s, crime became a rising and persistent issue in modernist post-war housing estates not just in Britain but throughout Europe and in the United States. The prevalence of crime cast doubt upon the utopian ideals on which these estates were based and resulted in the almost complete abandonment of publicly funded housing projects by the mid-1970s (Cupers, 2014). By then, "Modern architecture seemed no longer necessary. Its social project became a social problem. With the vilification of architectural modernism and state-led modernization, the social lost ground as a positive force for the organization of space. It remained a guiding imaginary, but an increasingly negative one" (*ibid*, p.319).

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. GLC replaced LCC as London's central housing authority in 1965.

3. Framing: crime and design

Just as the second wave of New Town development was starting in the early 1960s with its renewed promise of designing a high quality of life, Jane Jacobs published her seminal book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). In it, she introduced “new principles of city planning and rebuilding, different and even opposite from those now taught in everything from schools of architecture and planning to the Sunday supplements and women’s magazines” (1961, p.5). This marked the genesis of a new body of literature on how the built environment affects crime. Schubert (2016) identifies three theories underpinning the development of these ideas: rational actor, collective efficacy, and actor-network. Their progression reflects an increasing recognition of the difference between a passive inhabitant and an active user.

In the context of crime prevention, rational actor theory “is based on the behaviouristic assumption that the actions of an individual can be controlled and positively influenced by environmental design” (Schubert, 2016, p.121). Like the planning regimes discussed earlier, rational actor theory infers that an individual’s surroundings, not the individual herself, dictate whether or not she will commit a crime. According to this theory, people will commit crimes if they can get away with them (*ibid*), meaning that reducing crime requires altering space.

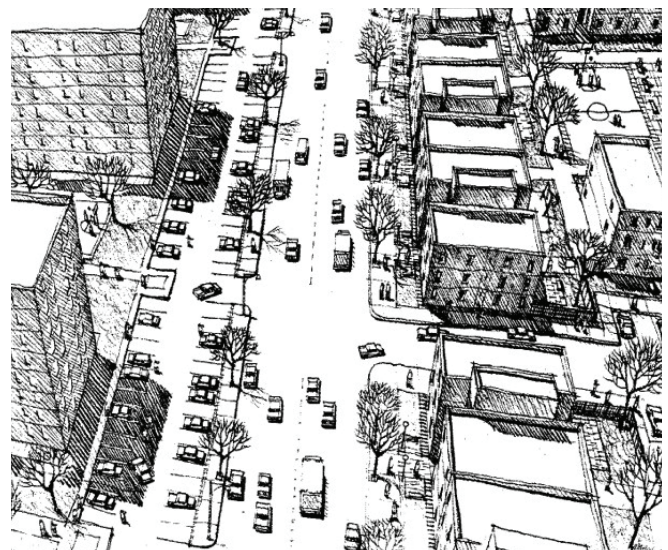
This theory found a champion and a catchy moniker in 1972 with Oscar Newman’s book *Defensible Space*. Newman, an architect and city planner, put forth “a model for residential environments which inhibits crime by creating the physical expression of a social fabric that defends itself” (p.3). The design of buildings, he said, could spur or deter people from policing their neighborhoods. “‘Policing’ is not intended to evoke a paranoid vision,” he clarified. Rather, it “refers to the oldest concept in the Western political tradition: the responsibility of each citizen to ensure the functioning of the *polis*” (*ibid*). Defensible Space dovetailed with Jeffery’s 1971 book *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design*, a theory that came to be known as CPTED.

Newman conducted extensive research in social housing projects in impoverished areas of New York City and concluded that the design of high-rise tower blocks made them particularly vulnerable to crime. He highlighted four features in particular. The first was their withdrawal from urban life—a “giant superblock, closed to city traffic” (p.22) that separates the people of a city from the city’s

streets. This was problematic because “[t]he street, without the continued presence of the citizen, will never be made to function safely for him” (p.15). Next, Newman denounced the lack of semi-private space, the buffer between the private apartment and the public grounds over which residents feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, as in a garden or a shared courtyard. In addition, he noted that high-rise complexes provide few opportunities for natural surveillance, or “the ability to observe the public areas of one’s residential environment and to feel continually that one is under observation by other residents” (p.78). Finally, he criticized the singular appearance of New York’s housing projects. “The introduction of a large grouping of new buildings of distinctive height and texture into an existing urban fabric singles out these buildings for particular attention. If this distinctive image is also negative, the project will be stigmatized and its residents castigated and victimized” (p.102).

Defensible Space represented a counterpoint to the Radiant City. While Newman sympathized with the need for dense housing in order to accommodate the greatest number of people possible, he disputed Le Corbusier’s assertion that tower blocks were the answer. A 1974 BBC Horizon documentary on Defensible Space recount-

Figure 3.1. Oscar Newman contrasts Indefensible Space on the left with Defensible Space on the right. Source: Newman (1996: 21).



ed the story of Pruitt-Igoe, a massive social housing project in St. Louis designed following Le Corbusier's vision. Though Pruitt-Igoe opened with fanfare and architectural accolades, the project soon failed and its demolition in the mid-1970s 20 years after it was built was widely televised (Mansfield). Among others, the Aylesbury, Heygate, and Ronan Point estates in London reinforced the belief that tower blocks were unsafe.

With failed or failing high-rise housing projects seemingly proving the veracity of Defensible Space, the theory caught fire in the United States and the UK.¹ Technocratic and impersonal, Defensible Space seemed like a quick fix, an alluring promise that crime could simply be designed out (Cupers, 2014). As the theory rose to greater prominence, however, it attracted more scrutiny. Newman's critics charged him with granting outsize importance to a place's spatial characteristics relative to underlying social and political issues that impact crime. Hillier's 1999 study used quantitative data to dispute the effectiveness of Newman's ideas, concluding that, "locations which conventional 'defensible space' theories expect to be safest turn out to be the most vulnerable, and vice versa" (p.348). Minton (2009) asserted that Defensible Space "produces isolated, often empty enclaves which promote fear rather than the safety and reassurance which automatically come in busy places" (p.72).²

The criticism resulted in the injection of sociology into Defensible Space beginning in the mid-1990s, an acknowledgement that people are actors in urban design rather than simply its objects. Jacobs' assertion that strangers' "eyes on the street" are essential in preventing crime overtook Newman's insistence that strangers are dangerous intruders (Minton, 2009).³ The community and its social dynamics thus became part of urban safety, ushering in a new "communitarian" approach to preventing crime. "Communities with high levels of 'collective efficacy'—or high levels of cohesion and mutual trust—will be willing to intervene to challenge behaviour in a given setting and stop it from escalating. Communities with low levels of 'collective efficacy'...will be less willing or able to intervene" (Carabine et al, 2008, p.139). This notion formed the basis of the UK's 1998 Crime and Disorder Act (CDA), which essentially criminalized antisocial behavior, and the 2003 white paper "Respect and Responsibility—Taking a Stand Against Anti-Social Behaviour."⁴ By involving the community in preventing the quasi crime of antisocial behavior, these policies hold communities responsible for noisy neighbors, bad parents, and rebellious teenagers, the most common targets of this legislation (Minton, 2009).

Taking the notion of agency a step further, the most recent generation of crime prevention theory turns its attention to networks. "[T]he focus is not on the individual actor on

Figure 3.2. Pruitt-Igoe shortly after its completion in the mid-1950s. The Horizon Documentary (Mansfield, 1974) claimed that the complex violated all of the main tenets of Newman's theory of Defensible Space. Source: Marshall (2015).



the one hand and the isolated (urban) construction on the other hand. It is more on a ‘hybrid actor’ as a collective combination of people and artefacts” (Schubert, 2016, p.132). As in Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, people, non-human beings, and things have equal weight insofar as they are affecting a process (2007). This type of thinking enables the discovery of “interdependencies”—for example between mobile technology and green space or the Department for Education and vandalism—that may reveal new avenues for preventing and reducing urban crime (Schubert, 2016).

For now, however, mainstream crime prevention in the UK remains grounded in Defensible Space moderated by communitarianism. In the same 2016 op-ed in which David Cameron bemoaned modernist construction and its connection to crime, he asserted that, “The police often talk about the importance of designing out crime, but these estates actually designed it in.” In addition to championing the tenets of Defensible Space, the Cameron ad-

ministration upheld the antisocial behavior laws passed during Tony Blair’s government, which ensured that the onus of policing was shared between the community and traditional law enforcement.

In tandem with Cameron’s public statements, real estate company Savills released a report in January 2016 describing “how the regeneration and intensification of housing estates could increase London’s supply of homes and benefit residents.” The report provided a blueprint for large-scale estate renewal in London, encouraging neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy while grounding in the tenets of Defensible Space. Among the estates highlighted in this and other recent publications on regeneration are Southmere, Tavy Bridge, Lesnes, and Parkview in South Thamesmead in the London Borough of Bexley, which were constructed during the third wave of New Town development. The following case study traces the rise, fall, and nascent regeneration of these estates and the surrounding area.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. Alice Coleman became the chief proponent of Defensible Space in the UK with her publication of *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* in 1985. She went on to work for the Thatcher government. Newman and Coleman’s work inspired the Secured by Design initiative in the UK, which was codified in law in the 2004 Sustainable and Secure Buildings Act (Campkin, 2013).
2. In addition to Minton and Hillier, Bristol (1991) also offers pointed criticism of Defensible Space.
3. Newman himself revised his theory to better account for social factors, releasing *Creating Defensible Space* in 1996.

4. CDA defines antisocial behavior as “acting in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household as [the defendant].” Behaving in an antisocial way earned the offender an “antisocial behavior order” which prohibited repeat behavior. Since the definition of antisocial behavior was so broad, however, repeat offending was almost inevitable and carried with it the potential for jail time. This meant that someone could face imprisonment for something that was not actually a crime (Minton, 2009).

4. Applying: the case of Thamesmead

4.1 Making (through the 1960s)

The Woolwich-Erith Riverside Project began in the mid-1960s—the heyday of New Town construction in Britain—with pomp, circumstance, and postwar optimism. A new town for the new century, LCC and then GLC intended for the project to provide homes for 60,000 people, making a sizable dent in London’s postwar housing shortage (Waite, 2014). A competition to name the new town got 565 entries with Anthony Walton of Barnehurst winning £20 for “Thamesmead,” a name that evoked placid meadows on the banks of London’s great river (Wigfall, 1997). Terry Gooch and his family became Thamesmead’s first residents when they moved from Peckham to Coralline Walk in South Thamesmead in July 1968, arriving at their new address in a chauffeured car (Cooke, 2008). To earn this honor, Gooch and his family went through a rigorous selection process before GLC determined that the family would be the face of the new town. Indeed, Southmere, one of South Thamesmead’s housing estates, garnered architectural awards, and tens of thousands of tourists flocked to see the area’s elevated “streets in the sky” (Wigfall, 1997). Attesting to Thamesmead’s early popularity, GLC received over 100 applications for Thamesmead’s first 11 commercial spaces, despite having made no special efforts to attract business tenants (Bugler, 1968).

What is now Thamesmead was originally the Erith Marshes and Plumstead Marshes, land so saturated and prone to flooding that its first inhabitants, Augustinian monks from Lesnes Abbey, were unable to farm (LBB, 2013). During the reign of Henry VIII, the area became part of the Royal Arsenal, a munitions factory that tracked the rise and fall of the British Empire. The marshes were ideal for testing and manufacturing weapons because few people lived in the area and the soft ground muffled the sound and impact of explosions (Wigfall, 1997). Discussions about developing the Erith Marshes began in the late 1950s when LCC obtained a portion of Arsenal land and 500 acres of marshland (LBB, 2013). In 1962, LCC released a plan to transform the area into “The Town-on-Stilts,” a New Town in miniature for 25,000 people. Because the physical conditions of the area were so challenging, however, LCC could not justify the effort required to ready the land for building and establish all of the services and infrastructure necessary for a place with a relatively small population (Wigfall, 1997). Three years later, GLC, which replaced LCC earlier that year, purchased 1,000 more acres of former Arsenal land from

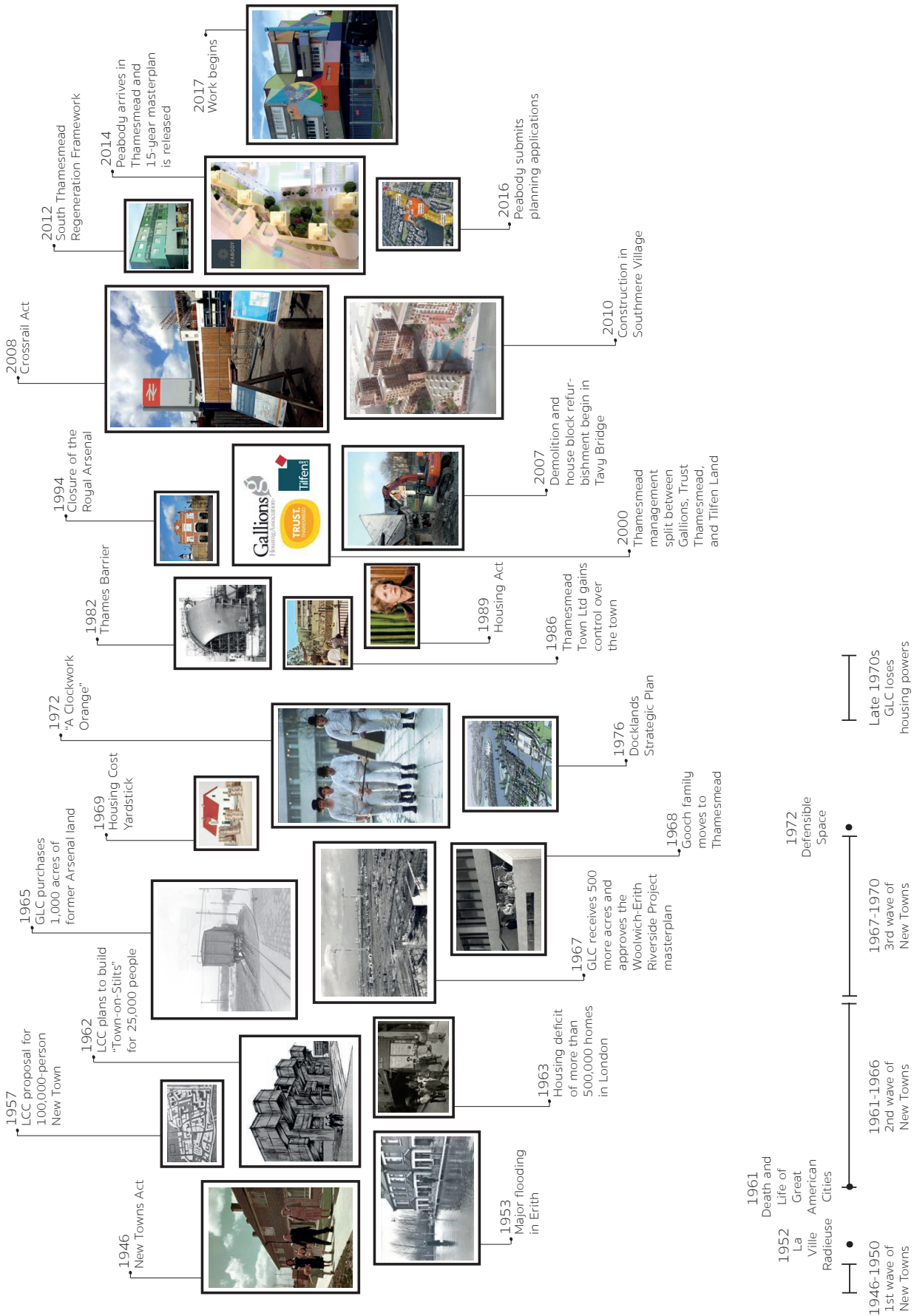
the Ministry of Defence (ibid). The expanded scope of the project made the investment worthwhile and engineers got to work installing two pumping stations, digging canals and channels, and raising and strengthening three of the most vulnerable miles of the Thames riverbank (ibid).

In a faithful representation of New Town principles—in particular innovative design, connectivity, the integration of nature and green space, and the segregation of motorists and pedestrians—Thamesmead was designed to be “a self-contained, balanced community” (LBB, 2013). Residential and commercial areas would be interspersed or nearby, and industry would be accessible without being bothersome to residents. Thamesmead would have its own schools, parks, clinics, pubs, cinemas, offices, and more, ensuring sufficient possibilities for work, study, and entertainment. Located nine miles from central London, the town would have the advantage of proximity compared to other New Towns like Milton Keynes, constructed at the same time as Thamesmead 45 miles away in Buckinghamshire. Plus, with the amenities of Woolwich and Erith nearby, relative to the residents of other New Towns, the people of Thamesmead would be spoilt for choice (Bugler, 1968).

Figure 4.1. The Gooch family arrives in Thamesmead (Peabody, n.d.). “The plans were so revolutionary,” recalled Terry Gooch. “We thought we’d be the start of that revolution” (Cooke, 2008). Source: Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre, reference number 38_4 (1968).



Figure 4.2. A timeline of key events in Thamesmead. Source: Author (2016). For photo credits, see Appendix.



Thamesmead's design was unusual for practical, psychological, and aesthetic reasons. After major flooding in Erith in 1953, the Council ruled that all dwellings needed to be built at least 8 feet 6 inches above the high water mark (Wigfall, 1997). The law drove architects to develop an innovative building typology: villages elevated on concrete platforms linked via a network of bridges (BBC, 2008). The unconventional design also contrasted with the stark landscape. LCC noted in 1962 that, "The setting...effects one with a strong desire for the possibility of physical and visual shelter and with the need for large-scale forms to hold their own with the power of their surroundings" (Wigfall, 1997, p.14). The design was intentionally exceptional, said architect Richard MacCormac, declaring "that this is a new community whose surroundings will be an artificial environment of streets and alleyways enclosed by concrete" (ibid).

GLC put connectivity at the center of the plans for Thamesmead, dividing the town's roads into "those that take the traveller swiftly through the development and those that serve him on local journeys within Thamesmead" (GLC, 1967, p.23). To that effect, the masterplan included a highway with at least three lanes of traffic in each direction enabling drivers to reach central London via tunnel and linking to other throughways in southeast England (ibid). The highway also served as Thamesmead's east-west spine road, bisecting the town halfway between Abbey Wood and the river. The spine branched north and south into local roads, creating smaller neighborhoods clustered around their own schools and high streets (Bugler, 1968). With respect to public transit, GLC proposed replacing Plumstead station to the southwest with a new train station closer to Thamesmead. No home would be built more than a short walk from a bus station (GLC, 1967).

Figure 4.3. Buildings in Thamesmead elevated to first floor level approached via raised pedestrian bridges. Source: Author (2016).



Thamesmead's design hinged on two principles, both of which drew on New Town ideology. The first was to treat the abundance of open space and especially water as an asset rather than an obstacle. "The design gives the community a firm riverside identity," GLC wrote in a 1967 brochure (p.6), promising that, "The entire landscaping of the area is being planned with conservation and circulation of water in mind" (p.19). With new buildings expected to eliminate much of the natural drainage capacity of the marsh and existing ditches, engineers built canals and two lakes to compensate. Beyond allowing for drainage, the waterways beautified the town "with the ultimate objective of being able to travel by punt right across the site along four and a half miles of canals" (Wigfall, 1997, p.21).

The second design principle was to segregate motorists and pedestrians. Planners created a network of walkways elevated to first floor level running through and between neighborhoods and services. These walkways, the designers maintained, would enhance mobility and safety for everyday tasks and recreation. According to GLC, "The worries of shopping with young children will be removed by this absence of the motor car which will be 20 feet below the pedestrian deck" (GLC, 1967, p.15). Without the distraction of non-motorists on the road, vehicular traffic would flow smoothly, uninterrupted by pedestrian crossings. The prospect of having to navigate Thamesmead's waterways provided an additional deterrent to "indiscriminate crossing," encouraging pedestrians to stay on their own paths (ibid, p.24).

A massive, continuous slab concrete block along the river marked the town center with the town's most important commercial and recreational areas in the middle

Figure 4.4. Thamesmead's masterplan by the numbers. Source: Author (2016).



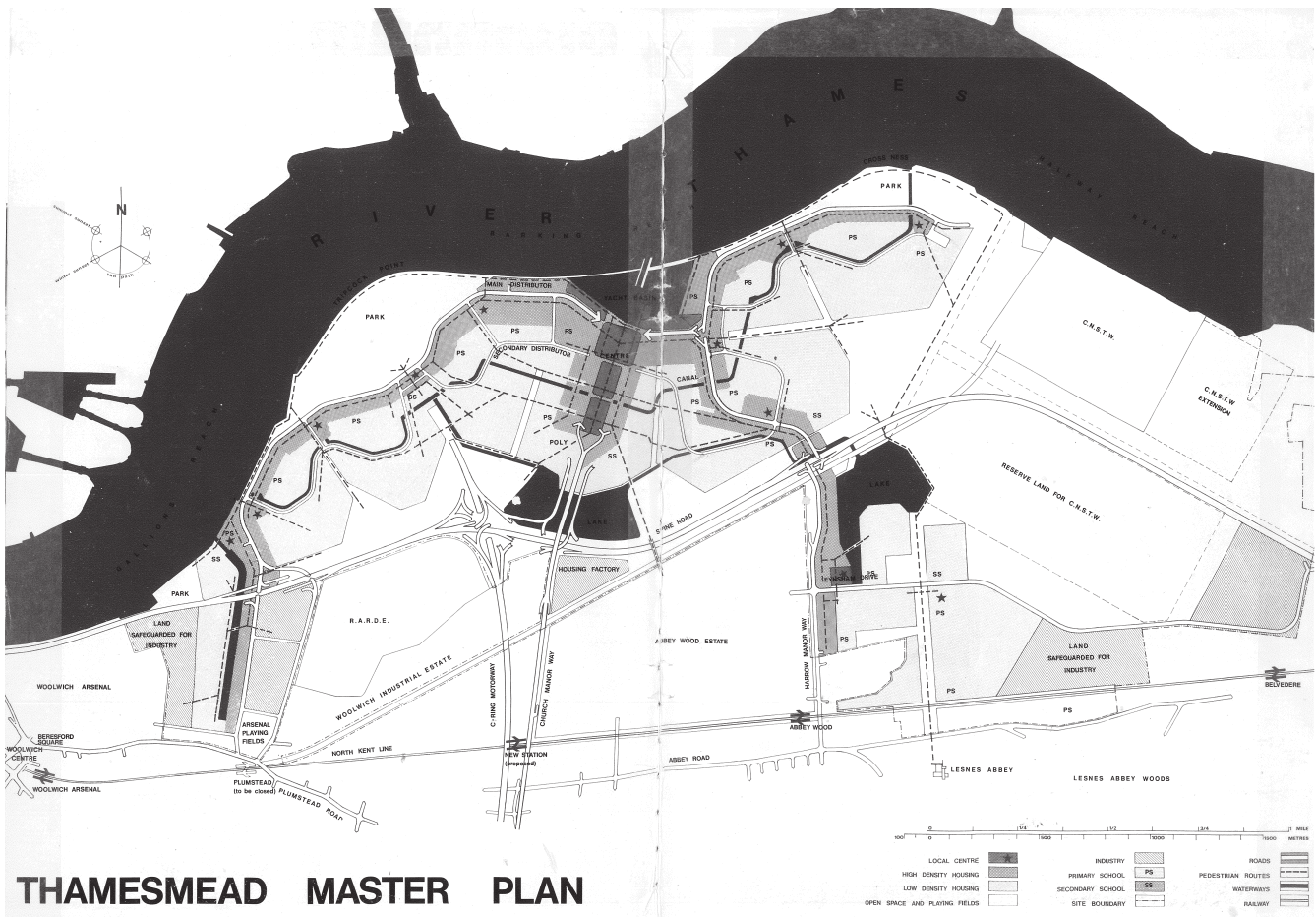
flanked by high-density housing. “The aim,” said GLC, “is to create an excitingly varied but compact area in which residents will be able to combine shopping trips with visits to the cinema, going to evening classes or a stroll around the yacht marina or along the river to watch the ships” (GLC, 1967, p.15). More than 80 per cent of the town’s total population would live north of the spine road and designers endeavored to provide as many of them as possible with unobstructed views of the Thames (Bugler, 1968).

GLC began construction at the southern edge of the neighborhood below the spine road, building from the outside in to eliminate “any chance of totally separate development” (ibid, p.948). South Thamesmead’s five neighborhoods—Tavy Bridge, Southmere, Lesnes, Parkview, and Rushdene—had their own waterfront and secondary town center along the western bank of the 25-acre Southmere Lake. The neighborhoods’ construction happened in three stages. Tavy Bridge, Southmere, Lesnes, and some of Parkview were completed during Stages One and Two with concrete slab apartment blocks “fitted together, rather like giant Lego” (LBB, 2013). To comply with Erith law and

in anticipation of rising car ownership, these blocks contained garages on the ground floor and dwellings on the first floor and above. The most radical design was at Tavy Bridge—a raised public square and shopping area—and the Thamesmead Lakeside Health Centre suspended over the lake. Twelve-story upscale towers and terraced houses lined the lakefront, additional towers were built along Yarn-ton Way, and three- and four-story maisonettes filled in the remainder of the residential space (GLC, 1967). The third stage began in the early 1970s as plans were finalized for the Thames Barrier. With the imminent downgrading of the flood risk, Stage Three’s mid-rise brick apartment buildings followed more traditional design standards with ground floor homes (O’Neill et al, 2012). Elevated walkways, playing fields, and/or landscaped embankments separated homes from the main roads (GLC, 1967).

Avant-garde design, natural beauty, and a mix of dwelling types and tenure schemes would contribute to Thamesmead’s lure for middle- and upper-income families like the first arriving Gooch’s. Though most housing was council flats since Thamesmead was a GLC project, more

Map 4.1. GLC’s 1967 masterplan for Thamesmead showing land use, primary and secondary roads including the spine road, pedestrian walkways, railways, waterways and open space, the town centers, areas of high- and low-density housing, and schools. Source: GLC (1967).



than a third of properties were available to buy, “an early example of the percentage-juggling that now dominates ‘affordable housing’, although with the overwhelming emphasis then on the public provision, not, as now, on the private sale” (Hatherley, 2015). There were also plans to build a yacht marina on the Thames with space for 2,000 boats to tie up and berths for 200. GLC predicted that, “The associated yachting paraphernalia would colour the scene” (GLC, 1967, p.19). Said Jack Whittle, deputy GLC architect, “If this doesn’t encourage a multi-class community, one almost gives up” (Bugler, 1968, p.948).

Figure 4.5. A 1967 GLC sketch of Thamesmead showing the expected role of water in the town. The town center was “more like Venice than south-east London with its pedestrian concourses and bridged canal.” Source: Hatchett (1987).

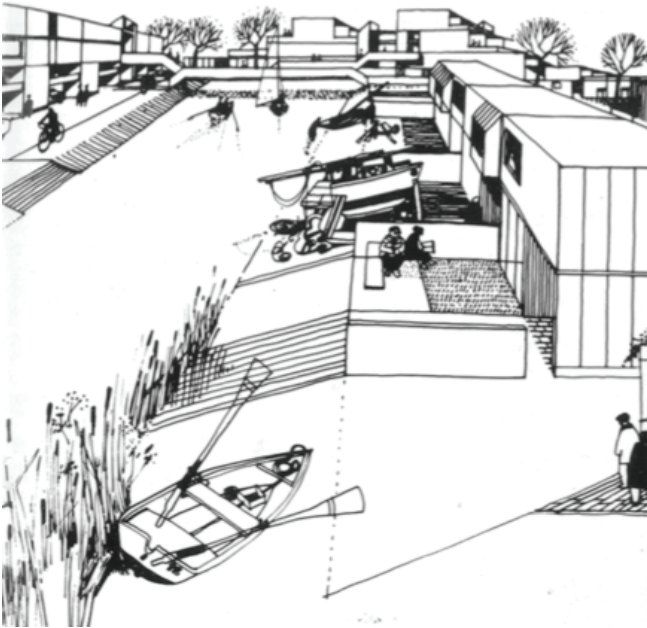


Figure 4.7. Alex and his “droogs” walk along Southmere Lake. Source: “A Clockwork Orange” (1971).



4.2 Unmaking (1970s - 1990s)

Because of extensive construction, the Gooch family had no neighbors for six months (Wigfall, 1997) and when people did start to move in, their memories of the early days in Thamesmead were mixed. “[A]ccording to my Mum it was like paradise compared to the conditions she lived in in Peckham,” said one person. “It was a fantastic place to grow up in the 70s and early 80s with playgrounds, lots of open spaces and Southmere Lake...I still think myself lucky to have spent my childhood there” (Kemp, 2009).

Figure 4.6. Another 1967 GLC sketch depicting the elevated pedestrian walkways with garages at street level. Reinforcing the role of water in the town, boats are shown pulling up to houses. Source: Hatchett (1987).



Figure 4.8. A horse among high-rises: Thamesmead was distinct from its surroundings. Source: Sadler (2014).



Another person said she jumped at the chance to leave after three years. "The walkways always left you with a sense of fear, especially after dark, and were covered in graffiti, as did the stairwells and even the lifts" (ibid). Mr. Gooch reflected that, "We thought [Thamesmead] was going to be the be all and end all of everything—and it appeared to be at first" (Cooke, 2008). Across the Atlantic, *The Boston Globe* wrote that, "Every old American city needs a Thamesmead" (Menzies, 1970, p.10).

The ebullience of postwar planning quickly ran up against dwindling public funding in the early 1970s. Thamesmead's developers curtailed their ambitions when costs began to balloon, resulting in "the dilution and adaptation of the original plans with the development being delayed and reduced in both quality and scale" (O'Neill et al, 2012). An early casualty of cost-cutting was the tunnel river crossing, which, with its £18m price tag, was quickly deemed too expensive. GLC dismissed an alternate proposal for a £12m eight-lane suspension bridge, saying it would decrease the area on which housing could be built by 80 acres or more than 2,100 homes (ibid). Bexley, Greenwich, GLC, and others were unable to agree on what type of river crossing to build, with the result that nothing was built and commuting to central London by road was almost impossible. Without a river crossing, the motorway never took shape; the multi-level interchange became a roundabout with strong east-west links but little to connect north and south. Rail transit was equally challenging. The proposed station nearby went the same way as the river crossing and Abbey Wood station was not equipped to handle the nearly 8,000 people that GLC predicted would be commuting from Thamesmead (GLC, 1967). In fact, British Rail's "most optimistic estimate" was that schedule changes might accommodate a quarter of that number (Bugler, 1968).

The 1976 Docklands Strategic Plan sought to remedy this with calls to extend the newly constructed Jubilee Line through the Docklands until Thamesmead (Fitzgerald, 2014). The government could not attract sufficient funding for the project, however, and the construction of the DLR in the 1980s made the extension mostly redundant—except in Thamesmead. The DLR only went as far east as Woolwich and Beckton, leaving Thamesmead, an area at the heart of the Royal Arsenal's rail network at the turn of the 20th century, without any trains. Despite Thamesmead's much-touted proximity to central London and elaborate transit plans, the town was isolated and disconnected.

Beyond the difficulties with mobility, Thamesmead was unable to deliver on its New Town promises of services and amenities. According to Alison Breese of Gallions Housing Association, the main landlord in Thamesmead, "As the development progressed, and as usual as money ran out, we just started to build housing, not the infrastructure to go with it" (Cooke, 2008). There were schools, clinics, and open space, but no pubs, cinemas, theaters, or banks; a

shopping center around a marina was cut from the plans as well (BBC, 2008). Thamesmead was "a Brave New World made up of high-rise flats and low-rise blocks of family homes intended to help solve the capital's housing shortage" (Spittles, 2016)—but nothing more.

Less than four years after the Gooch's moved in, Stanley Kubrick released the iconic film "A Clockwork Orange," a violent, dystopian crime story set in near-future England. Kubrick's selection of South Thamesmead's Tavy Bridge Centre and Southmere Lake as locations for the film projected an image of the breakdown of social order, inverting Thamesmead's already fraying utopian beginnings. Innovative, modernist design to keep the new town's pioneers safe from flooding morphed into soulless concrete boxes and menacing voids. The streets in the sky showed the extent to which people had literally been lifted away from the moderating effects of traditional urban neighborhoods. South Thamesmead became the embodiment of failed postwar development and misguided urban planning, a reputation that the town has yet to shake.

Ultimately, Thamesmead followed "the dominant three-step narrative—with a first moment of architectural invention, a second one of massive construction, and a final one of contestation and crisis" (Cupers, 2014, p.xxiv). It was more dormitory town than New Town, a garden city without the city. With nothing but houses, Thamesmead could not achieve the self-sufficiency that is a hallmark of New Town planning. There were not enough jobs in the town to employ its residents, but neither could these people leave easily to find work elsewhere. Intended as a 10- to 15-year project, the original designs were mostly abandoned by 1974, including the riverfront spine that was supposed to be the town's core. "In parts of the site it won't much matter—the overall Thamesmead conception won't be affected. But in the high density spines, and especially in the riverfront spine, cost cutting might not be so limited in effect" (Bugler, 1968, p.949). The yacht marina, the great hope for a mixed community, disappeared from GLC's reports by 1980 (Wigfall, 1997). South Thamesmead was left an incomplete peripheral area with no center of gravity.

Prior to the introduction of housing benefits in Britain, public authorities were under no obligation to assist or accommodate struggling residents. It was for this reason that GLC was able to be so selective in Thamesmead, "implementing a social housing programme based not so much upon housing need, but rather respectability and ability to pay rent" (Wigfall, 1997, p.61). With Thamesmead's poor connectivity and limited amenities, however, GLC could not attract the quantity or quality of tenants it expected. In the late 1970s, GLC lost its housing powers and transferred control over all of its estates, except Thamesmead, to the London boroughs in which the estates were located (Wigfall, 1997). Faced with undesirable residents, councils throughout the city deferred to GLC and the only place

that GLC could house these residents was Thamesmead. The town became a giant “sink estate,” accelerating and exacerbating its ongoing decline. Occupancy rates fell and empty homes and other vacant areas became the targets of vandalism (BBC, 2008). The area’s population peaked at 40,000 people, a full third less than GLC predicted (Bill, 2014). South Thamesmead in particular was “an area with focused deprivation, a high turnover of residents and a lack of social and financial investment by the community” (O’Neill et al, 2012, p.16).

The carefully crafted design features from the original masterplan were insufficient to staunch the town’s mounting problems. Indeed, they contradicted two of the key principles of Defensible Space that have weathered the test of time: promoting active frontages and enabling lively streets (Minton, 2009). Because of concerns about noise from traffic and to meet the Corbusian standard of open space around tower blocks, the highest density housing in South Thamesmead was set well back from primary and even secondary thoroughfares (Eastern Way, Harrow Manor Way, and Yarnton Way). As a result, since the beginning, much of the town’s public life has taken place in areas that face inwards (Wigfall, 1997). Moreover, because pedestrians had their own walkways, South Thamesmead’s main streets were car-centric with more than one lane of fast traffic in each direction. This created a negative feedback loop: with few people on the street motorists could drive quickly, but driving quickly discouraged pedestrians from using the streets.

Unfamiliarity with a place can prompt fear or anxiety. “If one does not use the space, if for example one very rarely goes to the city centre, ‘the mental map’ of the place is filled with indirect descriptions...[which] produce the rhetoric of danger and threat” (Koskela, 1997: 308-309). Feeling afraid adversely affects quality of life and how people use a place, producing “a negative impact on economic livelihoods and

physical and emotional well-being by limiting access to education, work, and leisure, restricting use of public space, and eroding trust of neighbours and strangers” (Whitzman, 2011, p. 2715-2716). Diminished trust inhibits the collective efficacy that Jacobs advocates and upon which British antisocial behavior laws now partially rely.

Newman’s concept of the stigma of exceptional buildings that do not blend in with the surrounding urban fabric also continues to hold sway in certain situations. “If you took the Barbican and repeated it over and over on the outskirts of London,” commented Susie Hamilton of Peabody, “it would feel very different” (Markowitz and Hamilton, 2016). That the town came to be amidst undeveloped marshland enhanced its distinctiveness, but it was serving as the backdrop to the extreme violence of “A Clockwork Orange” that linked South Thamesmead’s appearance with urban decay. Community members and others have been aware of the effect of this association for decades: “The fact that so many unprompted references were made to ‘Clockwork Orange’ when discussing Thamesmead’s reputation in the 90s serves to illustrate the profound effect the film had” (ibid, p.103). A headline in the Evening Standard as recently as May 2016 referred Tavy Bridge as the, “Clockwork Orange estate in Thamesmead” (Micklethwaite, 2016).

Thamesmead’s design also failed to consider the myriad ways in which different residents might inhabit the town and react to their surroundings. The architect MacCormac alluded to this diversity when he described Thamesmead’s buildings as, “sharp and invigorating or tiresome and obtrusive, depending on the weather, or your state of mind” (Wigfall, 1997, p.46). The presence of so much water, for example, thought to have a calming effect, became a liability: the canals and lakes were difficult to clean and maintain, exacerbating the impression of disorder and decay (Spittles, 2016).

Figure 4.9. A man sits on the elevated walkways outside his home in Thamesmead in 1970. Source: Tony Ray-Jones published in Learning Team (2016).



Figure 4.10. Garages at street level Source: Author (2016).



The design's shortcomings were most evident with respect to the raised pedestrian paths. Pedestrians used Thamesmead's walkways, but so did children playing, cycling, or skating. These areas, which were immediately outside of residents' doors and windows, thus became noisy, dirty, and risky. They had no access control and many areas to hide: "If you lived in a maisonette or tower block, anyone could get in to the block and run, shout, play ball, scream, have a row outside your kitchen window" (Wigfall, 1997, p.94). Police officers running after suspected criminals often lost sight of the people they were trying to apprehend or else became disoriented themselves (ibid).

As a result, some pedestrians opted to abandon the walkways altogether in favor of whatever route they deemed best. Residents recalled seeing women struggling to push strollers on the strip of grass next to the road to avoid using the walkways (ibid). "People would rather walk on a traditional pavement, next to a road, close to street lighting than in a grade separated situation on these very winding and wandering pedestrian walkways" (ibid, p.95-96). The elevated walkways thus created forbidden ground at ground level, streets severed from street life, and what pedestrian traffic there was was split between two levels.

Figure 4.11. Construction at Abbey Wood station in preparation for the arrival of Crossrail. Source: Author (2016).



"When people came out of their cars, they were walking into 'no man's land'. Over the years it became a place where people felt uncomfortable where it was dark, where sometimes vandalism occurred" (BBC, 2008).

Worse than the walkways were the garages. Darker and with more places to hide, they "were an open invitation for vandals to gather, to break into and burn cars, sniff glue, or generally make mischief" (Wigfall, 1997, p.96). Cars never took off in Britain like they did in the United States, so people increasingly stopped renting garage space. Those who did have cars believed that it was less risky to park on the street, but in leaving the garages empty they increased the amount of vacant space at ground level immediately outside of their homes (ibid).

Finally, the plans for Thamesmead bent under the weight of politics. "[D]evelopment in the 1980's and 1990's suffered from a more opportunistic approach, and came forward in the absence of a coherent vision for Thamesmead during a period of less stringent housing and design standards" (Peabody and Allies & Morrison, 2015). In 1988 the Thatcher government passed the Housing Act, which eliminated "fair rents" in favor of "assured tenancies," thus allowing landlords and housing associations greater flexibility to evict tenants and raise rents. Lawmakers maintained that the Housing Act would make housing estate properties attractive to banks and building societies (Cross, 2014) and a researcher predicted in 1987 that, "The income generated should keep Thamesmead in the black, and easily pay for leisure facilities and its canal-threaded parks and popular ecology areas" (Hatchett, p.10). But the financial incentives were insufficient to lure new buyers to Thamesmead. The resident-owned nonprofit that managed the town, Trust Thamesmead, went into debt and the area continued spiraling downwards (TT, 2014).

4.3 Remaking (2000s - present)

For a while it seemed that Thamesmead might be left to languish, but several factors pulled it back into the public eye. First was itself: its storied beginnings, its notoriety as the location of the "Clockwork Orange estate," and its periodic appearances in the news because of crime and violence. Second is the dearth of truly affordable housing in London and the limited availability of funds to construct new housing, especially when there is the option to renovate and densify existing buildings (Savills, 2016); Thamesmead is one of the only parts of London where it is still possible to buy a three-bedroom house for under £300,000 (Spittles, 2016). Third is the ongoing regeneration at the nearby Royal Docks. But perhaps more than any other factor, the impending arrival of Crossrail to neighboring Abbey Wood in 2018 is driving renewed interest in Thamesmead. According

Map 4.2. South Thamesmead today. With Tavy Bridge demolished, only three of the four original housing estates still exist, but major changes are planned for them as well. A new town center is under construction to the south-west of Southmere Lake. Source: Author (2016).



to Crossrail’s website, journeys from Abbey Road to central London that currently take between 30 and 60 minutes and require multiple transfers will become direct and take a third of the time.

In controversial birth pangs of renewal, Gallions demolished the Tavy Bridge estate in 2007. In doing so, they eliminated “all the parts of the lakeside area most likely to be instantly listed, were they in NW1 rather than SE28,” according to “militant modernist” Owen Hatherley (2015, p.20). “The result,” he laments, “is a straggling half-demolished mess of crap spec housing, wasteland and forlorn Brutalist fragments” (ibid).

Where Hatherley sees the erasure of “the social ideas and placid, Modernist-natural landscape” (ibid), the South Thamesmead Regeneration Partnership, the organization

tasked with developing the framework for Thamesmead’s regeneration and leading the effort, seeks to follow the advice of Sam Jacob, co-curator of the British pavilion at the 2014 Venice Biennale. The exhibition, called “A Clockwork Jerusalem,” was a celebration of Britain’s controversial postwar modernist architecture, “a hymn to the 20th-century new towns and overspill settlements” (Bevan, 2014). Said Jacob,

“My plea though would be not to normalise Thamesmead...Don't knock off all its rough edges, don't make it like everywhere else. There are trajectories embedded in the original conception and design—really sophisticated, careful and beautiful ideas—that should be used as a springboard into the future Thamesmead is a frontier, a special part of London where a really unique idea of place can evolve.” (Waite, 2014).

Figure 4.12. The playground at the northern end of the Lesnes to Crossness Path with Southmere Lake in the background. Source: Author (2016).



Figure 4.13. Garages repurposed for other uses in Parkview Estate. Source: Author (2016).



Peabody’s Chief Executive, Stephen Howlett, publicly committed to the spirit of Jacob’s vision, affirming that, “We are already investing to innovate and build on Thamesmead’s unique history and character.” Capitalizing on the infusion of funds through South Thamesmead’s designation as a Housing Zone in 2015, Howlett noted that, “There is an

Figure 4.14. A scaled model that Peabody has used in public consultations in Thamesmead. Source: Author (2016).



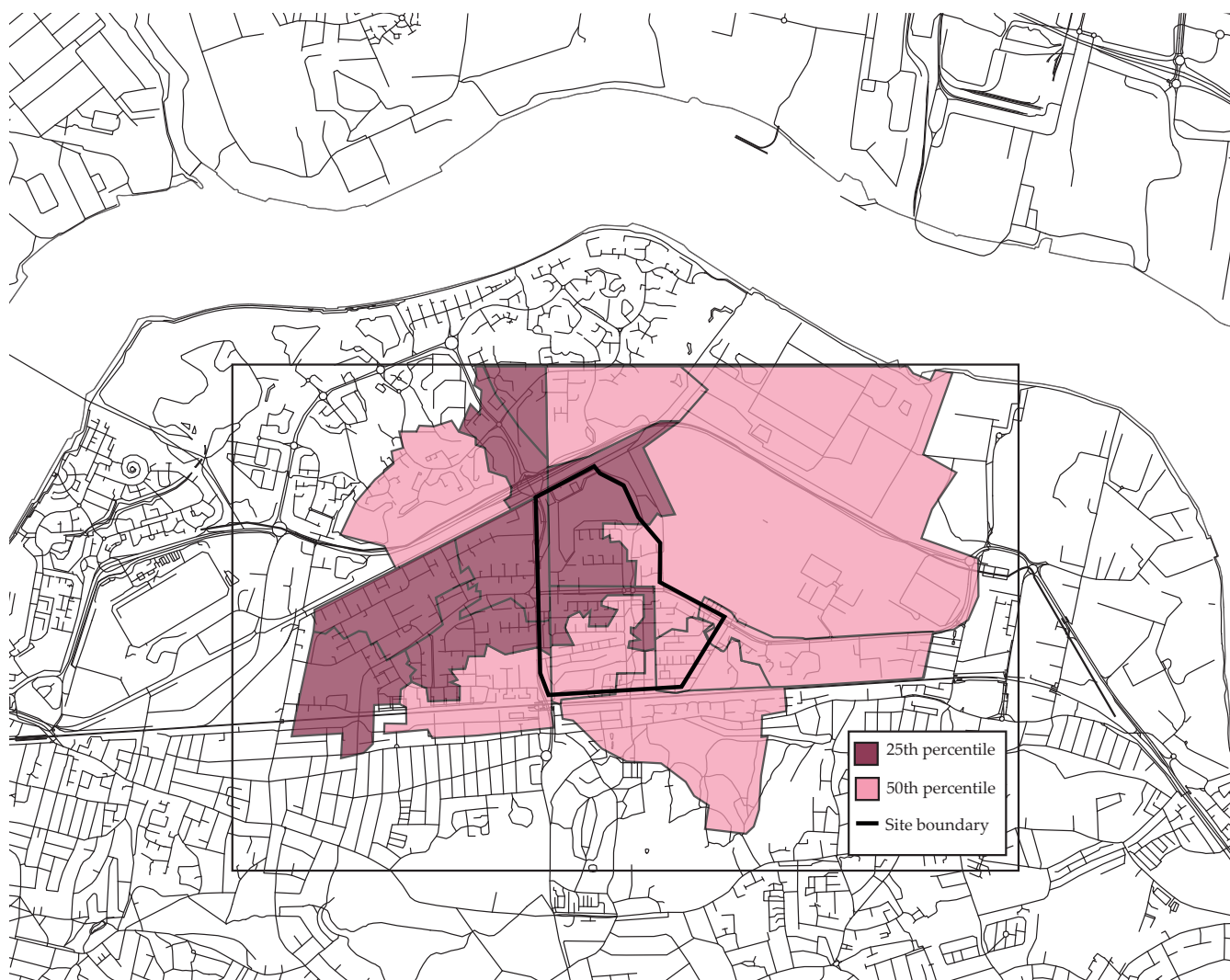
historic opportunity for the area to become synonymous with exemplary urban design" (LBB, 2015). In a reinterpretation of its Victorian Era estates, Peabody is seeking to make Thamesmead "London's major garden suburb" (Cross, 2014). The organization and its partners will be replacing demolished towers with streets and lakeside squares, one with a water clock tower and a shopping area (Spittles, 2016). The 1,500 new homes will range from one-bedroom flats to four-bedroom houses and will be clustered together around raised shared courtyards. This layout, combined with the construction of a new High Street and other town facilities along the waterfront, seeks to build and strengthen community cohesion, providing welcoming public spaces where neighbors can become friends and acquaintances (ibid).

The Partnership aims to avoid the snare that trips up many regeneration projects: a disproportionate "focus on what is lacking rather than what is there," in the words

of Juliet Davis at the Welsh School of Architecture. One area in which Thamesmead excels is in the abundance of greenery and nature: almost every resident of South Thamesmead except for parts of the Parkview neighborhood, lives within 400 meters of green space, and many live within 200 meters (O'Neill, 2012). Of Peabody's five area proposals in South Thamesmead, two of them relate to enhancing green space in the areas between buildings in Southmere and Parkview (Peabody, 2016). Peabody has already completed the Lesnes to Crossness Path, a linear park bordered by the maisonette balconies of Parkview and the terraced houses of Rushdene before winding through trees and wildflowers and ending with a playground above grass-covered stadium steps that go down to Southmere Lake.

There are also echoes of the historical emphasis on ensuring pedestrian mobility. Rather than solely separating vehicles and people, however, the aim now is to activate

Map 4.3 IMD in Thamesmead relative to England as a whole using 2015 data from the Mayor of London and London Assembly. Source: Guillermo Robles (2016).



the streets by bringing vehicular and foot traffic to the same level, and to reduce blind spots and places to hide. Partitions have divided some of the long walkways, reducing the number of front doors per section to five or six and giving residents a better idea of who might be outside their home at any given time (Wigfall, 1997). Discussions are underway to demolish the Yarnton Way wall, a series of elevated paths and security walls outside of the Lesnes and Parkview towers, thereby increasing sidewalk space and creating permeability between homes and streets. Part of the Yarnton Wall along Alsike Road was already demolished, with a resident reporting that, "The removal of the walkways and garages was a great idea and has opened up the area and made it more welcoming and reduced the dumping of rubbish and fires" (ibid). Because Yarnton Way is South Thamesmead's main east-west axis, it provides an important counterpoint to much of the town's re-development so far, which has intensified the area's existing north-south grain.

Another key aspect of Thamesmead's regeneration is that, while it will likely include renovation as well as new architecture, it will have a focus on communities. Thamesmead's residents have taken design concerns into their own hands for decades, primarily through converting unused garages into parts of their homes, offices, galleries, or workshops. Recalling conversations with residents, Susie Hamilton of Peabody said that some residents report living in "seven-bedroom houses" (Markowitz and Hamilton, 2016). Residents are also permitted to install railings or short walls in front of their homes, creating a semi-private buffer between the public and private realms (Wigfall, 1997).

As Peabody seeks to make changes on the neighborhood scale, they have orchestrated several major public consultation processes since arriving in Thamesmead in 2014 (Peabody and Allies & Morrison, 2015). "We need to make sure that they [residents] are participating in that vision, that this is their vision," says Alison Breese of Gallions. "We've learnt from the previous architecture that buildings alone don't necessarily solve social problems" (BBC, 2008). When making a planning decision, Peabody takes into account public opinion, cost, and design (Markowitz and Hamilton, 2016). When asked how Peabody engages residents, Hamilton said first that, "We want to make sure everyone has had the opportunity to have a say." To that end, and in particular for proposals

involving more sensitive issues like home demolition and/or resident relocation, Peabody's representatives knock on doors, ensure that there is a contact number for residents to call, and that someone is always in the office to field questions (ibid).

Furthermore, to encourage and facilitate community-led projects, the Partnership established the Thamesmead Match Fund in 2012. Funding covers the necessary materials, tools, and professional services for neighborhood projects (TT, 2012). In this way, local people have the support they need to implement the projects they want and the Partnership helps build more skills in the area. Mick Hayes, Chief Executive of Trust Thamesmead, said that, "Despite the difficult economic times there is a powerful optimism in Thamesmead, the most hopeful I have ever known" (TT, 2012).

Hayes's optimism notwithstanding, Thamesmead faces an uphill climb. There are plans to improve pedestrian and cycling paths to Abbey Wood station, but the closest river crossing is still miles away: "the biggest barrier they've got [in Thamesmead] is the Thames" (Wigfall, 1997, p.155). Despite recent changes, the study area and its surroundings still rank in the bottom half and often in the bottom 75 per cent of the national Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

In an interview marking Thamesmead's fortieth anniversary, Terry Gooch, who still lives in his home on Coralline Walk, reflected that, "We never ever go out at night and never answer the door at night" (Cooke, 2008). A year later in 2009, the fraud prevention service Third Man Group reported that Thamesmead was the national capital—and perhaps even the European capital—of credit card fraud. According to its director, Andrew Goodwill, "the company identified an entire street in the town where there was evidence of people being involved in fraud at every address" (Kemp, 2009). This type of news can precipitate further decline since an area's association with criminality often attracts more criminals. A former fraudster remembered how Thamesmead's reputation preceded it: "I used to hear people say if you go to Thamesmead anything you want, you will find it" (ibid). As recently as May 2016, a drug raid resulted in the arrests of nine people and the seizure of weapons and drugs, including 1 kilo of Class A drugs and multiple carrier bags of cannabis (Chandler, 2016). Jeff Boothe, Borough Commander for Bexley, described Thamesmead as "blighted" (ibid).

5. Reflecting

Making Thamesmead drew upon the dominant planning regimes of the first half of the twentieth century to create a New Town-style development that would provide 60,000 people with new homes in southeast London after the war. Despite efforts to engineer a high quality of life through innovative design, good connectivity, abundant nature, and clear segregation of motorists and pedestrians, crime rose while living conditions in and public perception of South Thamesmead declined. Officials and the media lamented the area's indefensible space and its fragmented community, but the unmaking of Thamesmead ran deeper than physical space. From the start, policymakers and designers neglected to consider the interplay between space and politics and they erred in treating residents as a homogenous whole rather than individuals with distinct needs and aspirations who would make the neighborhood their own. To paraphrase Robert Burns, even—or perhaps especially—the best-laid plans often go awry.

That said, “Where there is transformation, there is design” (Antonelli and Hunt, 2015, p.10), and the shifts in Thamesmead have created space for remaking. Peabody and its partners seek to be “open enough to adapt to changing circumstances and capitalise on opportunities as they arise” (O’Neill et al, 2012, p.16), enabling them to incorporate proposals from members of the community. Further, the Partnership has been explicit in expressing its intent not to compete with neighboring areas that have also received money for regeneration. Instead, they plan to preserve some of the characteristics that make South Thamesmead distinctive, in particular its lakes, green spaces, and modernist aesthetic (ibid). These features may provide useful starting points for the application of actor-network theory to ongoing efforts to reduce crime in the neighborhood.

In addition, ensuring that Thamesmead remains affordable for current and future residents even as it may become a more desirable place to live will require a commitment by developers not to cater to the highest bidder, a trend that has befallen the nearby Royal Docks and several other London neighborhoods. This is particularly critical given that lower income areas like Thamesmead, and by extension the people who live there, may trigger fear among other segments of the population and residents themselves, creating external and internal stigma that is difficult to dislodge. There are unresolved questions surrounding the physical and

perceptual distinctions between “low-income” and “affordable” and the implications of that for promoting inclusive urbanism and security.

Finally, if the success of the the Partnership’s efforts hinges on the extent to which they can accommodate active producers of space rather than passive “beneficiaries,” a key criterion for evaluation is therefore the dynamism of the community. Effective crime prevention, a precursor to successful regeneration in Thamesmead, requires a stable, committed population. Such a community must be capable of advocacy and composed of members willing to engage with their neighbors to devise innovative and locale-specific ways to combat social exclusion. A Thamesmead resident who Wigfall interviewed for her 1997 social history of Thamesmead expressed a sentiment that remains as relevant now as it was then:

"[H]opefully, when Thamesmead does go about its business again, we will learn from experience. Whether we can break this 'chicken and egg' syndrome and get the people in to make it a balanced community and the facilities to back that up, who knows?."

Figure 5.1. Lakefront towers at Southmere Estate. Source: Author (2016).



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Appendix

Photo credits for Figure 4.2

1946	BBC	1982	Port of London Authority
1953	Ideal Homes	1986	Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre, reference number PCD_960
1957	C.A. Matthew	1989	CNN
1962	Tim Richardson	1994	Royal Arsenal
1963	RIBA Journal	2000	Gallions Housing, Trust Thamesmead, Tilfen Land
1965	Steve Peterson	2007	Julia Hickson
1967	Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre (1967), reference number 38_29	2008	Ariana Markowitz
1968	Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre (1968), reference number 38_41	2010	Peabody
1969	Shavonne Oh	2012	Future of London
1972	A Clockwork Orange	2014	Ariana Markowitz
1976	Urban Strategies Inc	2016	Peabody
		2017	Ariana Markowitz

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