

Walk Elephant Project – information gleaned from guided Walk About, 5 September 2017

Cautionary Note: Several London Living Streets participants were invited to join this Walk About. These informal notes by Robert Molteno, Secretary, London Living Streets, should not be taken as any kind of formal record of what we learned.

Background: Elephant and Castle re-development

The area has long been a traffic nightmare, with its multiple roundabouts and gyratory – impossible easily to navigate; dangerous for cyclists; and utterly alienating for people on foot. Also the area round about Elephant and Castle, which is heavily residential, became run down.

In recent years three things have happened:

1. **Southwark Council decided to encourage major developers to come into the area:** Several massive blocks have been built – mainly residential, but including affordable and social housing. One huge estate (Heygate) was demolished amid much controversy and resentment. At least 3 huge developments are still to be constructed. **And there was some kind of overall vision of economic regeneration and social and environmental transformation** that could provide an umbrella vision for the individual developers' projects.
2. **TfL has completed a makeover of the roads and junctions at Elephant and Castle:** These include much segregated provision for cyclists. Also wide, straight across signalised pedestrian crossings, with distinctive surface treatment, on the numerous arms of the roads leading off from the junctions.
3. **Local residents and community activists have been for some years very active in efforts to make the wider area safer, greener, more conducive to local economic activity, more attractive, and with much improved infrastructure provision to facilitate much more walking.**

Significance of the wider area – at least 4 square miles

It runs north of Elephant and Castle right up to the river near Waterloo and across to London Bridge and a little further eastwards; also a similar block south of the Elephant and Castle. So some 4 square miles in size, falling into large zones – Bankside and Borough towards the river, and East and West Walworth to the south.

In the minds of outsiders, there is little realization of how near to the Thames Path and the riverside generally the whole area is, or the extraordinary contrast between all the prosperous new build, office accommodation and famous locations (Tate Modern, Imperial War Museum, Borough Market etc) along the Thames, compared to the heavily residential and much older build areas to their south.

This geography and the developer interest (and S106 funding) provide opportunities for other kinds of transformative change. E.g. We walked past the large new Leisure Centre at the Elephant and Castle. It has attracted some $\frac{1}{2}$ a million attendances since it was opened a year ago, including offering 100,000 swimming lessons to less well off children in the area. The building itself was

financed by the developers of the huge tower block next door. There is also a small park and protected children's play area next door.

Perhaps 100,000 people live in the area.

Participants – Council, local people, big developers

Another feature of the transformation of the area has been the extent of interaction and positive synergy generated between Southwark Council in taking the lead, some of its officers active on the ground, all sorts of local community groups (residents, Southwark Society, various green groups, Southwark Living Streets, Friends of various particular parks and squares etc etc), and developers who have not only had to engage with the existing community, negotiate constructively with the Council (the new Elephant Park which is currently half completed is one example), but also produce Section 106 funds that can be deployed in the immediate vicinity. Also an awareness of the importance of providing local economic opportunities and additional work space (that has been eroded in quantity) for a variety of smaller-scale initiatives.

What is Walk Elephant?

This is an ambitious project to transform the entire area into a much better connected whole by means of **high quality walking routes**. Some of these will along much of the north-south railway line that bisects the area (socalled Low-Line idea). Other parts of it aim to open up attractive, peaceful, physically safe, and attractive walking routes linking up the large number of small parks, parklets, green spaces – so that people can walk much more pleasantly and safely to bus routes on the Walworth Road and tube and railway stations. And yet another dimension is to make accessing the River much easier and more pleasant an experience on foot. **Mode shift** becomes a key dimension of the whole concept. So does **improved health of local residents** as the changes encourage and facilitate their walking many more short journeys.

There is already the **East Walworth Green Links** project that is, as a result of years of civic commitment, now in existence. Although a lot has been achieved, the project in its full ambition is a long-term one stretching over the next decade and more.

What the walk about showed us:

Impossible to list in detail. But we saw **an attractive and intriguing new green walk way** through a small allotment area; the **possibility of transforming Council-owned parking garages into craft space and cafe** (Castle Yard & Five Court); **railway arches beautifully done up and already operating as local work spaces**; a tiny fenced green area for children to grow things and play in; a couple of micro-enterprises (cycle repair etc); **new parks** – notably St Mary's Churchyard and Elephant Park (half complete already); **5 green areas with several wooden planters that local volunteers have maintained** for several years; **better signage**; a public path to West Square that could be transformed into an attractive walkable route to the Imperial War Museum etc etc.; **innovative and attractively designed public seating in green spaces** (concrete spheres of very varying dimensions; beautifully designed, curved wooden benches (some with backs to lean against etc).

On-line and other sources of further information:

- **Beautiful, largescale maps setting out the Walking Vision:** These took a lot of effort to compile and a few thousand pounds to compile, draw and print.
- **Leaflets:** *East Walworth Green Links.*
- **On-line sources:**
 - The main page about the project, and associated maps, are:
<http://www.southwark.gov.uk/regeneration/elephant-and-castle?chapter=15>
 - The plans for the Hampton St and Steedman St improvements are:
<http://www.southwark.gov.uk/regeneration/elephant-and-castle?chapter=8>
 - There is information about the Castle Place and Lamlash Gardens projects at:
<https://www.spacehive.com/castle-place#/gallery>
and
<http://www.lamlashgarden.co.uk/the-castle-place-project/>
 - The online mapping tool where people can leave comments etc is:
<https://walkelephant.commonplace.is/>

The wider significance for other parts of London:

What amazed and impressed those of us who were not already familiar with *Walk Elephant* or the wider developments in the area, was the example it set for the kinds of improvements that could be made in other parts of London. I took away from it:

- **The importance of the Council having a vision for what could be done in an area, and a commitment to proactive engagement with residents, developers, employers etc.**
- **The inspirational role committed Officers can play** in encouraging residents, finding small sums of seed money, helping overcome apparent obstacles.
- **The positive role big developers can play if led by some vision of the possible.** So not just a question of S106 money. But also the Council helping developers to interact with local people, take ideas on board etc.
- **The catalytic role that committed civic organizations and Community Champions** embedded in the local community **can play** in coming up with ideas, providing practical voluntary labour, organising local residents (e.g. maintenance of lovely wooden planters).
- **Workshops as a way of periodically bringing the various parties to interact with one another and keep up momentum.**