

'London as it could be'

London



**Place**

London, UK

Date

1986

Client

Royal Academy exhibition

Architect

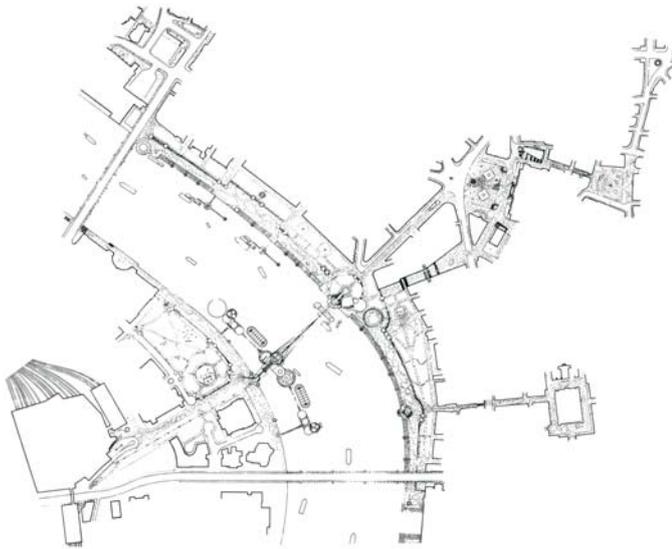
Richard Rogers
Partnership

Structural Engineers

Ove Arup & Partners

Exhibition Design

John Andrews/
Philip Gumuchdjan



The impression the Rogers exhibition left was less of Technological Fantasy than of History Reclaimed ... he presented his vision of architecture on the grandest scale: how to make the city old and new again

Alison Brooks, Chair of the Judges,
RIBA London Awards

The election of a Conservative government in Britain, followed by the greatest property boom of the century, led to massive redevelopment in London. Rogers felt great opportunities to improve the capital were being ignored in favour of a piecemeal approach to planning, led by market forces rather than by any consideration of the wider public interest. 'In Britain', declared Rogers, 'the highest bidder wins', whereas in other European countries urban life was undergoing a renaissance with the encouragement of far-sighted politicians.

The exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1986, featuring the work of Rogers, together with that of Norman Foster and James Stirling, gave the practice the opportunity to put forward a series of visionary, but not impractical, proposals for transforming a large area of central London. The plan revolved on two axes: the Embankment along the Thames from Westminster to Blackfriars and the route across the Thames from Waterloo station (already projected as the terminus of the new Channel Tunnel rail link) to Trafalgar Square, perhaps the best-known public space in London but at that time surrounded by traffic and suffering consequently from noise and pollution.

Rogers proposed, in the spirit of the Embankment's creator, Bazalgette, that the road along the embankment be sunk

in a tunnel, allowing the river-side to become a new linear park. The Charing Cross terminus on the Thames' north bank was relocated to the south bank Waterloo Station, and a new light-weight pedestrian bridge, replacing the bulky Hungerford railway crossing, led directly to the heart of Trafalgar Square.

The proposals aroused a great deal of public interest, but were dismissed as impractical by those in power. Roger's frustration at the state of London and, in particular, at the absence of a central planning authority for the whole city, led to his involvement in the 1992 general election campaign, where he sided with the Labour Party and published a book (with shadow minister Mark Fisher) critical of government policies and suggesting a series of alternatives. This was a brave move, at a time when architects were widely seen as mere facilitators of development, but reflected Rogers' conviction that the practice of architecture cannot be detached from social and political issues.

'London as it could be' represented a radical development of Rogers' urbanist thinking from the days of Coin Street and highlighted his continuing campaign for better cities.