



**The 1999 DUSP Undergraduate
Research Trip to London:
A Report to the Department of
Urban Studies and Planning**

Eric Plosky

April 21, 1999

Background — 1998 and Montreal

In April 1998, recognizing both the growing importance and the growing enrollment of its undergraduate program, MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning sponsored an undergraduate research trip to Montreal. The students who participated were given the unprecedented opportunity to accomplish several goals at once: to observe planning in action, to investigate firsthand the peculiar characteristics that make Montreal unique and particularly worthy of study, and to build spirit and camaraderie among the undergraduate population.

The trip, wholly student-organized, was based on an idea first circulated by Department Head Bish Sanyal to bring the undergraduates together through a group educational experience. With assistance from Professor Lawrence Vale, then head of the undergraduate program, and Rolf Engler, who handled financial matters, the students expanded on Prof. Sanyal's idea, deciding that a trip to a city worthy of study would be both educationally and socially beneficial to the undergraduates. Based on a variety of factors, Montreal was selected over other nearby cities (including New York and Washington, D.C.).

Students handled all aspects of trip administration. Participants were recruited, and information was disseminated, at several meetings arranged through the dupund@mit.edu mailing list (as well as through the list itself). Students determined the itinerary, made arrangements for lodgings and van rental, and communicated with McGill University to request a briefing from the planning faculty upon arrival in Montreal.

The trip, which involved ten students over the Patriot's Day weekend, was a resounding success, as chronicled in the Fall 1998 issue of *DUSP@mit.now* ("Undergrads Tour Montreal: See Planning Principles in Action," by Eric Plosky). The Montreal experience demonstrated the feasibility of a student-organized trip, illustrated the educational and social benefits that could be derived, and paved the way for the inauguration of a regular, annual undergraduate trip as part of the undergraduate curriculum. By sponsoring such an annual event, DUSP would establish itself as a pioneer in planning education.

Prelude to London

Following the successful completion of the Montreal trip, the Department, through Profs. Sanyal and Vale, indicated their willingness to sponsor a second trip the next year. Unlike Montreal, which was viewed as a prototype, the next undergraduate trip was to be larger in scale, and was to incorporate more ambitious educational goals over a longer duration, during IAP 1999.

Consensus developed among the undergraduates early on that the next trip, the first regular, annual undergraduate trip, should be to London, and DUSP administration responded favorably to the idea. London afforded the opportunity to investigate firsthand planning projects, trends and phenomena discussed in the classroom, but from a European perspective. The native language is English, and interviews could be sought with a multiplicity of universities and planning-related organizations and agencies.

Furthermore, in late 1998, London was the site of a great deal of planning activity. The city was preparing for the election of a new mayor, and London was heavily involved in cutting-edge transportation projects, including road pricing, private-public transit partnerships, and a new terminal at Heathrow Airport. London also had a good deal of millennial planning underway, especially the Canary Wharf redevelopment and Millennium Dome in Greenwich.

Increasing its feasibility as a destination was economics; London was believed to represent the best value for time and money in terms of an academic planning trip. For a Boston-based trip of sufficient length to accomplish enough academic objectives to make the journey worthwhile, per-person transportation and lodging cost was envisioned being held beneath \$400 — an extraordinary value.

Besides, London itself, it was felt, is worthy of study, and a visit there should be required during the academic career of all planning students. This view was shared by students and faculty alike, and undoubtedly both the pioneering spirit of the department and the adventurous attitude of the students played a part in making this trip a reality.

Proposal and Organization

Eric Plosky drafted a preliminary proposal for the London trip in November 1998 and presented it to the DUSP Undergraduate Committee. Many of the elements had already been discussed at a more informal level with Prof. Vale, who had encouraged the development of a formal presentation to the Committee.

The proposal specified the dates of the trip and estimated the number of participants using information gathered from a survey conducted of the undergraduates by means of the mailing list *duspund*. A consensus developed among undergraduates that the best dates for the trip over January 1999 were January 6–12; a total of 11 students would be able and willing to participate during that time.

Furthermore, Professor John de Monchaux was planning to be in London between the 6th and 12th. Prof. de Monchaux offered to assist in arranging an itinerary for the trip; his offer was gratefully accepted, and he singlehandedly constructed a detailed schedule for the undergraduates involving meetings with planning consultancies, a tour of the London light-rail system, a day excursion to the New Town of Milton Keynes, and a presentation at University College London. This itinerary formed the basis of the trip; its execution is discussed in detail in the next section.

Based on the preliminary figures, lodging and transportation costs could be estimated. Virgin Atlantic Group Sales provided an unusually low group rate from Boston; inexpensive accommodations for five nights were found at St. Christopher's Inn, a hostel near London Bridge. The total cost to the department was initially put at \$4800 (though in the end the department paid only slightly more than \$4000). DUSP formally authorized funding in early December.

Airline tickets were obtained, hostel reservations were confirmed, and miscellaneous scheduling, cost and logistics issues were all resolved before departure. Each student was briefed on the trip itinerary, which clearly spelled out when free time in London would be available. Students were also advised as to luggage and monetary requirements, and were told to have enough cash on hand in order to facilitate a speedy departure from London Gatwick airport. Information on how to fill free time in London was provided by Professor Robert Fogelson, who generously furnished the undergraduates with a travel guide purchased especially for the occasion.

Mission Statements

Each of the participants was asked to come up with a short objective statement, an academic reason explaining why they wanted to go to London.

Eric Plosky: I hope to reconcile the physical reality of London with the image I have constructed based on my studies. I've always wanted to go to London, to observe the landscape, the transportation, and the culture, and I am looking forward to this wonderful opportunity to do so. As someone with a particular interest in transportation, I eagerly await the chance to ride the Underground, and of course I can't wait to see Milton Keynes as well.

Jonna Anderson: I hope to gain first-hand knowledge of how planning is taught and practiced in a country outside the USA, to form impressions about attitudes towards planning in a country that has actively pursued the development of planned towns, experience some British "epitome districts" and compare them to their American equivalents, and in general compare the "planned" aspects—public transit and public space—of American and British cities.

Xochitl Cruz-Gonzalez: I am especially looking forward to comparing the urban landscape of London to those in the cities that I've seen and learned about in the United States. I also hope to visit and compare a few of London's public housing establishments.

Sara Elice: I've never been to London before, but I've heard many interesting things about how the city was built up and organized on its natural landscape, so I'm excited about seeing firsthand what is there and learning about how it evolved.

Austin Gill: Through the trip to London, I hope to learn a great deal about the difference between American cities and European cities, and also to experience a city which is much older than any other I have ever seen.

Jinevra Howard: I have heard that Boston resembles London and am eager to make comparisons for myself. I am also interested in learning about the issues that planners face in the historical and political environment of Britain and in an old city such as London.

Cherry Liu: I wish to go to London to see redevelopment in action on several areas: transportation, commercial revitalization, and the relationship of London (the city) to surrounding towns. In addition, I want to see how universal characteristics of cities are. Also, I would like to compare my international experiences, including London, with Boston and New York in order to see how other nations keep their cities' strong urban centers and how other nations combat suburban sprawl (or why such problems never emerged).

Farzana Mohamed: The visit to London will give me the opportunity to tie together the theory and practical application of planning in a different political, social, and cultural framework than exists in the United States. Because I am interested in working on an international scale, this experience will be personally and professionally enriching, and will give me a chance to think about how different societies with unique value systems affect the context in which planning is carried out.

Sara Perry: I am most interested in policy implications in two areas: the different implementation of the English system of laws, similar in source to, but isolated from, our own (e.g., *doli incapax* for children under 10), and perceptions of technology.

Peter Siu: The London trip will provide undergraduates an opportunity to explore a city operating under a different culture, a different purpose and a different historical force than those found in North American cities. Travelling to a different continent will challenge some of our American assumptions on the role of planning, the procedure of planning and the goals of planning.

Corissa Thompson: I am interested in seeing how London has integrated those parts which developed before cities were planned with the more recent sections of the city. I am also interested in how a city that was very much established before the advent of the automobile has adapted to accommodate it. I also really want to see Milton Keynes. From what I have read it seems like it would be a very good town, but everyone I have spoken to who has been there abhors it.

Trip Journal

Wednesday, January 6, 1999/Thursday, January 7

We assembled at Boston's Logan airport well ahead of the scheduled Virgin Atlantic overnight flight to Gatwick. There were no problems with the flight, which departed on time and arrived on time (Thursday morning, London time). Baggage recovery and customs processing were completed without incident at Gatwick, and we purchased tickets for the Thameslink train to London Bridge. After arriving at London Bridge, we walked to St. Christopher's Inn, only several blocks away, and checked into our rooms (two six-bed rooms). We left our luggage and set out to explore the city individually, as the remainder of Thursday had been scheduled for sightseeing and orientation, so we could become familiar with the layout and landscape of the city. Several students took a traditional double-decker red tour-bus ride through London; the remainder set out on their own. The time difference soon took its toll on us, and most students turned in early.

Friday, January 8

After a brief overnight scare — the hostel's fire alarm mistakenly activated, prompting a visit from the London Fire Brigade — we were ready for a full day of activity. A small group of students took an early-morning walking trip to the Bermondsey Antiques Market in Southwark.

All 11 students assembled promptly on time, at 10:00, to take the Underground to our first meeting, with *Llewelyn-Davies Planners*, where we rendezvoused with Prof. de Monchaux. At the Llewelyn-Davies office, Nick Banks gave a splendid presentation on London Transport's Jubilee Line extension and spoke about the CrossRail main-line extension project. L-D served us coffee, cookies and sandwiches, and the meeting was quite pleasant indeed; all of us gained a broad understanding of transit issues in London.

We took the Underground to our next meeting, scheduled at 3:00 with *EDAW* consultant planners. (Prof. de Monchaux, who parted company after the L-D meeting, joined us again at EDAW's office.) Lee Shostak directed a presentation given by several planners in the office on the topic of general planning in London.

Following the EDAW meeting, which we left with a newfound perspective on London-area planning projects, several EDAW staffers took us to a local pub (it was, by this time, after 5:30). Afterwards, students split up to explore the city on their own.

Saturday, January 9

The entire day was reserved for individual sightseeing and cultural activities. Students split up into small groups and visited a variety of local museums and cultural attractions, including the Tower of London, the Tate Gallery, the British Museum, the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery and the Imperial War Museum. Students also had the opportunity to sample London nightlife.

Sunday, January 10

All 11 students assembled outside the hostel at 9:00; Prof. de Monchaux and Lee Shostak of EDAW met us in a minivan rented especially for the purpose of transporting us all to *Milton Keynes* for the day. (Prof. de Monchaux made arrangements to rent the van through Rolf Engler in DUSP.) Prof. de Monchaux drove us to Milton Keynes, where we toured the city and met with officials of the Commission for the New Towns. All of us appreciated the opportunity to see in person the town we had studied in our DUSP classes.

Following the trip to Milton Keynes, Lee Shostak left and the rest of us took Prof. de Monchaux to an Indian dinner near Euston. Afterward, students split up; some returned to the hostel for the evening, while others visited Covent Garden and the Institute for Contemporary Arts.

Monday, January 11

Tim Pharoah of Llewelyn-Davies (and Prof. de Monchaux) met all of us at Tower Gateway Station on the *Docklands Light Railway* at 9:00 in order to give us a tour of the system. We rode the DLR to the end; Pharoah distributed material he prepared especially for us and told us about the construction of the DLR and its relationship to the Canary Wharf development. The DLR malfunctioned twice during our tour, stranding us in Canning Town, where we experienced a local working-class lunch establishment.

We then took the DLR to the *Tower Hamlets Borough Government*, where we met with Patricia Holmes, who told us about the borough of Tower Hamlets and the management of the Canary Wharf projects, including the DLR and Canada Tower. She recommended a visit to Canada Tower, which we did visit, briefly, following a presentation by several Tower Hamlets planners.

Following the Tower Hamlets visit, we went to *University College London* to meet with Prof. Michael Edwards of the Bartlett Planning School. Edwards gave a presentation on London planning issues, after which we mingled with UCL students, chatted with Edwards, and snacked on catered food and wine.

Tuesday, January 12

We departed in the morning for Gatwick Airport (via Thameslink train), arriving with plenty of time to check in for our flight. The return trip was entirely uneventful.

The whole trip was carried out precisely according to the itinerary constructed by Prof. de Monchaux. All students attended all meetings; there were no cancellations, latenesses, or problems of any kind. (Prof. de Monchaux admitted to some slight surprise upon successfully rendezvousing with us Friday morning at Llewelyn-Davies.) The balance between meetings and free time meant that everybody was reasonably satisfied with the time they had to explore London on their own, and the schedule was busy but not so intense as to exhaust everyone.

Meetings with the consultant planning firms, Llewelyn-Davies and EDAW, taught us a great deal about general planning issues and projects in and around London. Our meeting with the borough of Tower Hamlets was greatly enlightening as to the Canary Wharf and East London Docklands development, as was our tour of the Docklands Light Railway. Further, Michael Edwards's presentation at University College London provided us with yet another perspective on planning in London.

Riding the Underground individually and together familiarized us all to a great extent with the London Transport transit system, as did our rides on the Thameslink main-line train and the Docklands Light Railway. Most of us also had the chance to use our London Travelcards to ride the municipal buses.

Finally, our day trip to Milton Keynes brought to life before our very eyes a city that most of us had only seen on paper, in our DUSP classes. It was an extremely illuminating experience and all of us appreciated the opportunity to be given a tour by Prof. de Monchaux himself, who was instrumental in the town's design.

Overall, the trip to London, the first regular, annual DUSP undergraduate research trip, was a complete success. All attendees were quite pleased with what they had learned and appreciated the chance to travel to London — an opportunity that would not have come about had DUSP not sponsored the trip. Students got off the plane in Boston convinced that fieldwork such as the London trip is an essential part of their planning education.

Everyone was grateful to DUSP for the pioneering attitude that made possible the trip to London, and all undergraduates are eagerly looking forward to organizing a trip to take place during IAP 2000.

Student Reactions

Eric Plosky: The London trip was a wonderful experience. I finally got the chance to see a city I have always wanted to see — not just as a sightseer, but as a planning student (and as a planner). I found the transportation network particularly interesting, and riding the Underground, Thameslink and Docklands Light Railway trains was an especially enjoyable experience for me. Also, meeting with the various planning firms was a fantastic opportunity to become familiar with London development projects — particularly the Docklands and East London — from a local perspective. The time spent at the Tower Hamlets borough government office was also well-spent, in my opinion, and the visit to University College London was worthwhile if only because we got to meet our British counterparts at the Bartlett School. Also, I enjoyed the visit to Milton Keynes, particularly from an academic point of view; it was an unparalleled opportunity to see in person the city I had heard about since I was a sophomore. Basically, the whole trip brought to life a city I had previously thought of in near-mystical terms, and I will remember it always, as a planner much more so than as a sightseer.

Sara Elice: I really appreciated the opportunity to go to London to further study planning. It was very interesting to observe plans in the works and see how they are affecting a city and why they are needed, etc. I feel like we really got the opportunity to learn hands on the steps and various agencies involved in putting together a major urban project. It was also very exciting to be able to learn these things in a foreign place, where certain things are done differently, and the opportunity is available to compare with what I'm already familiar with.

Austin Gill: I found the trip to London to be very fun and educational. I must say, though, that I was not as impressed by the city as I had thought I would be. Frankly, it seemed too sprawled out. What I pictured before the trip was a dense city, and what I ended up seeing was not what I had pictured. Some of the highlights of the trip for me were visiting “non-tourist” areas in both South London and East London. I found them to be more interesting than the glitzy West End, and all of the major tourist sites. In these neighborhoods, I saw more of the things which I had expected in London: open-air markets and the like. The day trip to Milton Keynes was also quite interesting and educational. To me, it served as a good example of where city planning was 30 years ago, and also as an example of the danger in having one entity design a city and another entity actually build it. The whole trip was a success in my eyes, and was, I believe, well worth the cost it imposed on the department. The undergraduates who participated in the trip all learned a great deal, and the knowledge will contribute greatly to their MIT educations.

Cherry Liu: I would like to thank DUSP for this chance to go to London. I also appreciate Professor de Monchaux's time and guidance in England. Finally, I am grateful for the work done and effort made by Eric Plosky, who not only approached DUSP to sponsor this hands-on experience but also took care of the logistics of the trip. Although we, as his fellow undergrads, failed to show our gratitude, I think we all acknowledge that we would not have spent a week in London without his initiative.

London was an enlightening experience. From the perspective of a soon-to-be graduate student, I am glad that we had a chance to witness presentations made by two different planning firms. They were divisively different in approach and philosophy, and it was good to get a taste of what our future careers may be. They also shared a myriad of fields, from housing developments to transportation, from urban renewal and economic development to planning a new city. I found it interesting to hear from both firms.

From the perspective of a student who has encountered the case of Milton Keynes in class, I really enjoyed the Sunday day-trip to the city north of London. The city is palpably different from London, and while the layout reminded me much of suburbs in the United States, MK is a relatively self-sufficient city with very few commuters. We visited its mall and felt that the downtown of Central MK was another office park, but despite critiques, the city is prospering. I saw how a planner's intention can be misguided when those who plan are not those who execute when I saw how degenerate some of the local community centers were. I think having both Professor de Monchaux, who was one of the designers, and Mr. Lee Shostak of EDAW, who is helping MK in further developments, was one of the best aspects of the trip because we could learn of original thoughts and current opinions. One suggestion for the future is to spend time in MK, enough time to talk to the people living there and to see some of the community centers. Also, there are several styles of housing developments there. Another interesting question to address is how environment, i.e., the house itself, affects the feeling of a neighborhood.

From the perspective of one interested in urban renewal and community power, I found the visit to the Docklands and regarding South London informative. The argument Tim Pharoah touched upon regarding the relationship of transportation and economic development really made me wonder about how Boston's Urban Ring can bring about economic development in select areas where economics have been deteriorating for years. I also found it ironic how England seemed to be in such a rush to replicate American malls when we visited Canary Wharf. In regards to transportation, I'm a little wary of why London transporta-

tion opted for computer-run stations/trains because there were just too many bugs. In general, though, I wish we had spent more time with both the planners and the communities they were affecting.

From the perspective of a DUSP undergrad, I did have plenty of opportunities to not only see London, an organic city in many senses, and contrast it to MK, a planned city, but also to converse and discuss issues of planning with fellow undergrads. We did get to know one another better, and I hope that we can benefit from the ties we made. In addition, I had plenty of chances to advertise and publicize DUSP as an undergrad major to my non-DUSP friends. Many were impressed that DUSP should sponsor such a trip and be a champion of on-hands learning so much as to send the undergrads abroad. I hope to discuss another site next IAP, Curitiba perhaps?

Corissa Thompson: I found the undergraduate trip to London to be a worthwhile academic experience. I was able to experience firsthand planning ventures I had studied and to talk to planners who work within an entirely different system than that with which I am familiar. The two experiences from the trip I believe I will remember most are the trip to Milton Keynes and the tour/discussion of the Docklands. The trip to Milton Keynes was especially exciting for me because when I took 11.123 (Big Plans) I had been fascinated with the plan for designing this new city. My impression from reading the original plan was that, if the city was not perfect, it should be close. After visiting Milton Keynes I was able to understand the criticisms I had heard of the city. The majority of city features that disappointed me were departures from the original plan. I deduced, from talking to the parties charged with the implementation of the plan and from my own observation, that this was almost destined to happen. This is because the people building Milton Keynes were, very realistically, much more concerned with expediency and guaranteeing a good return for their money than with being visionary. I also found the tour and discussion of the Docklands very intriguing. Because I am interested in economic development, I enjoyed learning how the government of the borough of Tower Hamlets is approaching its redevelopment. I would very much like to follow what happens to this area over the next few years to see whether their programs are successful.

The Trip Participants at Milton Keynes, January 10, 1999



(Left to right)

**Farzana Mohamed, Cherry Liu, Sara Perry, Eric Plosky, Jinevra Howard,
Professor John de Monchaux, Austin Gill, Sara Elice, Jonna Anderson,
Corissa Thompson, Xochitl Cruz-Gonzalez, Peter Siu**