

London's Garden Bridge project abandoned at massive cost

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Newly-released transcripts of the review into London's proposed Garden Bridge have revealed further brazen corporate plunder and folly.

The project for a pedestrian bridge planted with gardens finally ground to a halt in August at an estimated cost to the public of £50 million. It has now emerged that then-Mayor of London Boris Johnson discussed Apple having a store in the middle of the bridge in exchange for sponsoring construction, underscoring how private agreements were sought without public scrutiny for the enrichment of companies and individuals.

Transcripts from the review conducted by former Labour MP Margaret Hodge earlier this year reveal that Johnson, his Deputy Mayor for Transport Isabel Dedring and Chief of Staff Sir Edward Lister made a 24-hour secret trade trip to San Francisco in 2013 hoping to persuade Apple to sponsor the bridge. Lister was initially wary of naming Apple, but said the approach was, "We do this, we call it the Apple Bridge and you pay for it, chum."

Apple was interested if they could have a store in the middle of the bridge. This was ruled out, but Lister said the idea of building a store at the Temple station end of the bridge was possible. When this too proved not possible, Apple lost interest.

The transcripts underline how this project was falsely presented as a public amenity and space that would be financed privately. Neither claim was true.

The Garden Bridge Trust, the body for securing private finances, was founded only after Transport for London (TfL) was already committed to publicly funding the project to planning permission stage.

The Trust received private pledges, some without any contractual commitment, but the money that was spent was public.

Nor was the Garden Bridge going to be a fully accessible public space. When Labour-run Lambeth Council gave conditional planning permission for the project's south bank it emerged that the Trust would require "All groups of eight visitors ... to request a formal visit." This was to "assist

visitor management" and "discourage protest groups."

The bridge would be closed once a month for fundraising events, and between midnight and 6am. Cycling would not be permitted. This, the Trust claimed, was to protect "the benefits of the bridge as a green space" by maximising the planted areas. But opponents noted that around 30 trees would need to be felled for the south bank landing podium, a building probably to be used for retail.

This was not Johnson's sole vanity project in London. His "Boris bikes" TfL cycle hire scheme would come at no public cost, he claimed, thanks to a sponsorship deal, initially with Barclays. Details were kept secret for three years before it emerged that the bank could claw back £2 million. Figures in 2013 suggested an annual public expenditure of £11 million on the bikes, compared to a £12 million annual income from a similar scheme in Paris. The taxpayer was effectively paying for corporate sponsorship.

The same held true for the Greenwich to Docklands cable car, which cost £60 million, more than predicted, making it the most expensive urban cable car in the world. Emirates Airline paid over half of the cost, but TfL had paid out £24 million, subsidizing the airline's branding. Fares are expensive and passenger numbers remain low.

Anish Kapoor's ArcelorMittal Orbital Tower in the Olympic Park cost £3.1 million. An extra £3 million was subsequently spent attaching a helter-skelter slide by Belgian artist Carsten Holler in an attempt to raise dwindling visitor numbers. In 2015, it was announced that the tower had lost £520,000 in the previous year. Its business plan had forecast a £1.2 million profit. An adult ticket currently costs £11.50, £16.50 if you want to spend 40 seconds going down the slide.

TfL spent £282.6 million on a fleet of buses designed by Thomas Heatherwick in a nostalgic tribute to the old Routemaster design. The design created high temperatures on board, and they needed new windows. The rear doors, designed for hop-on access, depended on a conductor being on board, so the axing of 300 conductors under Johnson's public transport cuts required keeping those doors closed.

The order for the buses was cancelled by Johnson's successor as Mayor, Labour's Sadiq Khan.

A recent *Guardian* article estimated that mayoral projects inaugurated by Johnson that came to nothing or failed to realise expected income have cost just under £1 billion.

Hodge was forced to admit that Johnson had exploited conditions put in place by Labour when it established the mayoral post in 1999. "Tony Blair and [local government minister] Nick Raynsford ... didn't want it to have the bureaucratic constraints of a local authority," she wrote.

Rather than pursue those responsible for the looting of public assets, Khan said the money squandered was not pursuable because it was handed over under a mayoral direction. When LBC radio's James O'Brien asked him if taxpayers should just "wave goodbye" to the cash, Khan said, "It does look that way, yep, because it's been spent."

Khan initially argued that too much had already been spent to justify cancellation and writing off £37 million. Only Hodge's review, and the overwhelming hostility to the project he encountered at public meetings, led him to terminate the guarantee of public money for the Garden Bridge's maintenance—killing the conditional planning permission and the project. There is still an underwriting liability guaranteed by the government of around £15 million.

The origins of the proposal to build the bridge go back almost two decades. In 1998, the well-connected actress Joanna Lumley—who has campaigned for the Green Party—discussed a planted pedestrian bridge with the engineering company, Arup. In 2004, Lumley revealed that designer Thomas Heatherwick supported it.

River crossing in London is disorganised, but this stretch of the Thames is well served. The proposed bridge, a short walk between Waterloo Bridge and Hungerford footbridge, was unnecessary from an access point of view.

TfL would normally refer such a project to its preferred contractors. Heatherwick was not on their architecture and bridges panel.

TfL instead invited three firms to submit designs for a pedestrian bridge. Two had a proven record of bridge design and construction. Heatherwick Studio had designed just one bridge, but documents obtained by the *Architects' Journal* show TfL scored them higher in "relevant design experience."

The invitation to submit designs was issued one week after Johnson, Lister and Dedring met Heatherwick in San Francisco during a trip soliciting financial support for the project. Johnson said Heatherwick's presence was coincidental.

The tender invitation mentioned "a new footbridge crossing of the river Thames," not a garden bridge. The

scorecard scored Heatherwick ahead on "understanding of brief." Clearly so, since he had designed a garden bridge not even mentioned in the tender invitation.

The companies were rated evenly on value for money, although Heatherwick's bid was nearly £125,000 higher than his closest rival.

As Heatherwick was known to be already involved in the proposal, TfL split the tender so his design adviser contract would avoid EU public procurement scrutiny. The separate technical procurement tender, worth £8.4 million, was won by Arup, with whom Lumley had also been discussing. They subcontracted Heatherwick.

The sole judge of the design tender, TfL's Managing Director of Planning Richard de Cani, formerly worked for Arup. He secured additional public funding for the project early in 2016 while he was working out his notice, before taking a senior job at Arup. Dedring also moved to a position at Arup.

De Cani later dismissed TfL's legal advice as there was now "the opportunity to get the private sector to pay for most of the project."

Estimated costs spiraled from £60 million to over £185 million. From an original proposal to pay only "enabling costs" from public funds, £60 million towards capital cost was committed by Johnson and then Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne. The National Audit Office concluded that Osborne's promise of funding without Department of Transport scrutiny was unorthodox, and would probably have been blocked had it gone through normal channels.

Johnson reversed his statements on limiting public spending on the bridge. Public funds were guaranteed for future operational and maintenance costs if the Trust could not meet them.



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