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Reg Ward obituary

City planner behind the redevelopment of London's docklands

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As leader of the LDDC, Reg Ward, seen here in 1981, helped transform London's skyline. Photograph: Kenneth Saunders

Reg Ward, who has died aged 83, was the first chief executive of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), set up by the Thatcher government to regenerate the area – eight and half square miles in east London – occupied by the capital's defunct docks.

Ward's leadership of this massive enterprise, more than any other part of his career, will ensure him lasting recognition. The LDDC bulldozed sections of the Isle of Dogs, installed basic infrastructure and created the basis for the "Toronto-on-Thames" that stands in and around Canary Wharf today. No other project so perfectly embodied the Thatcherite dream of marbled offices filled with post-industrial workers staring at screens and making money.

Ward had held chief executive posts in local government and, significantly, in Irvine New Town Development Corporation – a government-appointed body to extend and improve the Scottish town. The difference between a quango's freedom to act and a council's more restricted powers would have been very clear to a man who had held senior positions in both organisations. The possibilities for immediate and direct impact, untrammelled by local democracy, were important elements in the creation and operation of the LDDC.

The demise of the London docks had occurred shockingly quickly. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, more than 150,000 jobs were lost. By 1980, half of the docks' land area was derelict. In 1974, the Greater London council (GLC) and the local boroughs had created a Docklands Joint Committee, which produced a plan to redevelop the docklands area, including public sector reinvestment in traditional activities such as warehousing, ship repairs and engineering. Private sector investment was not seen as an important element in the solution to the area's economic problems.

Thatcher's government, disenchanted with local government and soon to abolish the GLC, set up the LDDC in 1981 as a no-nonsense solution to the problems of London Docklands. A business-led board was appointed, with Ward as its chief executive. The LDDC was given powers, notably over planning, that overrode those of the boroughs. Community activists, council politicians and Ken Livingstone's GLC were bitterly opposed to the creation and approach of the LDDC. This was part of the plan: the Thatcher government saw the locals as an outdated impediment to economic progress.

Ward led the LDDC in such a way that there was little room for compromise with community or council interests. James Bentley, in *East of the City* (1997), quotes Ward as saying of those who wanted to curb his approach: "One listened, debated and then went ahead."

Backed by his board, he started the process of building new infrastructure, notably a red-brick road into the Isle of Dogs and the first, vaguely toy-town, section of the Docklands Light Railway (DLR). Ward chartered a helicopter to fly the environment secretary, Michael Heseltine, along the proposed line of the DLR. He also championed the construction of London City Airport and convinced house builders to attempt speculative developments in unpromising parts of docklands.

An American developer, G Ware Travelstead, supported by the bankers Credit Suisse First Boston, developed plans for the Isle of Dogs that proposed a new financial district east of the City of London. Travelstead could not, in the end, raise sufficient funds to undertake the development, though the Canadian Reichmann brothers, of the property development firm Olympia and York, took over the project towards the end of Ward's tenure as chief executive and developed Canary Wharf. Ironically, the Reichmanns not only imposed a detailed planning regime on their estate within the "planning-lite" docklands, but also convinced Margaret Thatcher to spend large sums of public money on the Jubilee Line extension and a major new road at Limehouse.

Reg Ward was born in Lydbrook in the Forest of Dean, the son of a miner. He attended East Dean grammar school, Cinderford, Gloucestershire, and Manchester University, where he studied medieval history, then fine art and architecture.

He then joined the Inland Revenue before taking a number of local government posts, becoming chief executive in 1974 of the London borough of Hammersmith (later Hammersmith and Fulham) and then of Hereford and Worcester county council from 1976. It was after this long stint in local authorities that he stepped into the controversial role at LDDC. On leaving the corporation in 1987, he set up his own consultancy, working with cities overseas, notably Sydney and Barcelona.

The force and dynamism shown by Ward was probably necessary to drive through the early process of overriding local opposition to the London Docklands project. Posters erected by the development corporation proclaiming messages such as "Canary Wharf. It will feel like Venice and work like New York" were hardly designed to appeal to the East End's close-knit, working-class communities. Canary Wharf in 2011 really does have elements of both these cities – though, as was argued by opponents in the early LDDC days, it has provided far more highly paid jobs for people from outside east London than for those living in the neighbourhood. Ward's successors as chief executive of LDDC, Michael Honey and Eric Sorensen, purposefully tried to heal the wounds left by the corporation's early, scratchy relationship with the locals.

Despite the criticisms, Canary Wharf's towers are so much a part of the London skyline that television news uses them as a backdrop to stories about global banking. Ward's political management skills paved the way for an intervention in the British capital's urban form that is recognised worldwide.

Ward's wife of over 50 years, Betty, died in 2010. He is survived by his son John and daughter Sarah.

• Albert Joseph Reginald Ward, local government officer and city planner, born 5 October 1927; died 6 January 2011