The Blitz of September 1940 had a shattering impact on London and its inhabitants. On just the first night of the attacks, 7th September, over 400 civilians lost their lives and 1600 people were severely injured. The scale of destruction was unparalleled [1].

Out of this destruction emerged the idea of reconstruction. Straight away innumerable newspaper articles, pamphlets, books, exhibitions and films called for the British Government to begin to prepare for when the conflict would be over. Whilst British forces were fighting throughout Europe, Africa and other parts of the world, exhibitions such as Rebuilding Britain in July 1943 began to set out a new agenda for architects and those concerned with the built environment.

At the time, Patrick Abercrombie was one of the most authoritative figures on modern town planning. As a result, he was asked by several borough councils to draw up plans for their towns’ redevelopment after the conflict was over. The best known study that Abercrombie and his team of researchers completed was for London. After two years of research, he published The County of London Plan in 1943. Significantly, it recommended the establishment of several new towns on the outskirts of London, relieving congestion in the city’s central areas and to stop suburban sprawl.

This plan is one of many contained in the book. Its bright red indicates the areas of London that contained industry at this point in 1943. As you can see, there is a significant amount of red concentrated around the Thames just east of the Isle of Dogs – before the war there was still much heavy industry concentrated around the East End.

The map was regarded as key to the argument for reconstruction. In 1945, it appeared in a smaller book written by the architect Ernö Goldfinger and Edward J. Carter (the head librarian of the RIBA) which tried to explain Abercrombie’s plans in a simpler way so that non-specialists could understand it.

References

RIBA Trust's International Dialogue series brings together leading commentators to debate climate change.