

Ian Ritchie's Opinion piece from
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Ian Ritchie: 'The Garden Bridge's backers live in an alternate reality defined by privilege'

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There must be a reckoning on the Garden Bridge and it must not happen again, *writes Ian Ritchie*

Margaret Hodge's report, in spite of **attempts to discount its damning conclusions**, addresses the major factual issues: the procurement process was grossly opaque and flawed; there was no business plan and when it belatedly appeared it didn't make sense; claims the Garden Bridge would be an oasis of calm *and* a tourist attraction *and* a commuter route are mutually exclusive; and there's not a hope that the maintenance costs for the next 50 to 100 years would not end up being paid for by the public.

Joanna Lumley's oddly solipsistic assertion that she felt responsible when the Garden Bridge was rejected because it was her idea, and the claim that this deeply flawed piece of design is needed to affirm London's status as a world-class city, are more evidence, as if it were needed, that those responsible live in an alternate reality defined by privilege (the Latin roots of which mean 'private law').

It's no surprise that the peculiar combination of deluded arrogance and hubris exhibited by the powerful and well-connected people involved in this project has prevented them from quitting while they were still ahead, even after exposure of the way Transport for London (TfL) rigged the procurement system to ensure Heatherwick's design was chosen.

It *is* surprising that there should be such blindness in trying to resuscitate this corpse at a time when for many reasons, and in the wake of the Grenfell Tower disaster, the political temperature of the times has clearly shifted.

This is one reason why it was a surprise and a disappointment to see Richard Rogers' name associated with a recent *Evening Standard* article ('**Richard Rogers: The Garden Bridge can help this city retain its global status**'). The Garden Bridge is neither a new concept nor a beautiful piece of design – it sits uncomfortably at this bend in the river and is poorly designed where it meets the river banks. It is most certainly not simple and elegant. Attempts to make it appear that rejecting the Garden Bridge represents a failure of nerve and imagination on the part of its critics are specious.

London is a world-class city for many reasons, including the vibrant mix of its population, its creative hubs and its current position as an English-speaking financial centre. It doesn't need the Lumley/Heatherwick Garden Bridge to prove it, regardless of what the future may bring.

And it is vital that in London, as everywhere, the rules for public procurement are revised, made clear and defended rigorously. It is encouraging that under the Khan mayoralty moves are being made in that direction, as **Will Hurst's recent article explores**. There is no reason at all why TfL should become risk-averse because of the well-deserved criticism it received over the way this project was handled. TfL has nothing to fear as long as complete transparency is both the rule and the reality in every project. It's not complicated; in the realm of public procurement, at least, 'if you've done nothing wrong you have nothing to fear'.

There are already other bridges – some even truly privately funded – which are beautifully designed and will benefit all Londoners, and which are far worthier of our support.

And let's learn how to play the urban silences that are vital for the future wellbeing of our city and which such stretches of the river represent.