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STRATEGIES FOR THE POST-SPECULATIVE CITY. REDRESSING THE BALANCE IN FAVOUR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

Every cloud has a silver lining. The ghost quarters[1] on the fringes of Spanish cities - ruins before their time due to frenetic property speculation - are shied by people. They want to live in urban environments where they have access to jobs and urban life, which is more crucial than ever during the economic crisis. Alternative 'shelter' is unsavoury though, as evidenced in the slums of the southern outskirts of Madrid, or in overcrowded garages and sheds around Heathrow airport and in the East End of London.

This raises the question of whether it is possible to revitalise the speculative quarters in the middle of nowhere into liveable environments and to harness unused spaces within the city by turning them into liveable places. They offer designers a great opportunity to rethink urban regeneration according to 'nested' sustainable principles encompassing the environment, the economy and social wellbeing.[2]

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
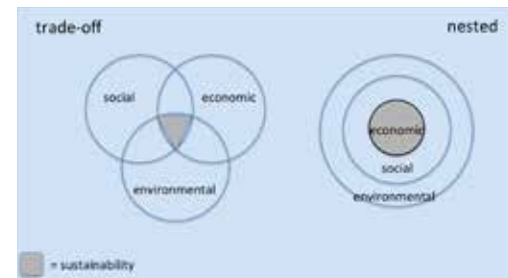
1. Bio-regional concept: trade-off vs nested sustainability
Source: One Planet Communities (redrawn by author)

What is sustainable development? A contradiction in terms? Or a compatible compromise between the forces which shape urban change? And what role, if any, has the urban designer in this process? On whose behalf? Those who govern or those who are governed or,

controversially, the development industry? And who is evaluating the sustainability of such developments?

Definitions

The sustainability concept was introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Report) in 1987.[3] It adopted a dynamic approach to environment-related human uses, but added ethic and moral responsibilities to human interventions, constraining them by the rights of future generations.

However, sustainability is an ambiguous concept. It is interpreted widely by different interest groups. There are disagreements between economists and designers, for example, about the notion of development and growth. The former are seeing quantitative growth as a necessity of 'progress', the latter are claiming that development does not necessarily mean growth. For them, development can improve quality of life through alternative ways of producing, consuming and living in cities without quantitative growth and its unsustainable effects on their ecological footprint. Just as the Brundtland Report has extended its definition to include time, sustainability of the built environment needs to encompass the wider context of urban change, instead of confining it to project boundaries. Experience shows that sustainability does not lend itself to simple scaling and is shaped by multiple factors.

SUSTAINABILITY: POLICY AND TECHNOLOGY

Two aspects of urban sustainability are addressed here: policy and technology. The discussion of sustainable urban policy focuses on regeneration and the nature of its links with gentrification; the one on concrete projects resorts to means of assessing their degree of sustainability. Yet, sustainable urban policies and implementation technologies are interdependent. For designers and planners they are converging in the urban regeneration process and its repercussions on existing cities where their interventions take place.

CONTRADICTIONS

Cities contain inherent contradictions between sustainability principles and economic growth; man-made environments and nature; city competitiveness and inclusive citizenry; openness and gated communities. These contradictions are at the heart of urban policy debates and regeneration processes. Economic growth tends to dominate every development objective and, in times of recession, sustainability and social justice tend to lose importance. The distinction between trade-off and nested sustainability illustrates that.[4] In physical-spatial terms, this shift affects the balance between the man-made environment and nature; the city and the countryside; built up areas and open

2. Urban sprawl, picture taken at City exhibition
Tate Modern 2007

spaces within cities. During expansive periods, urban sprawl is invading the countryside, while austerity periods may favour a more sustainable and intense use of existing urban resources. Sustainable development approaches may have to apply to both types of environments, the wasteful green field invasions as well as derelict urban spaces.

REGENERATION AND GENTRIFICATION

Just as points of view differ about sustainability and development, they diverge regarding the understanding of regeneration and gentrification and the relationship between them.[5]

Interpretations of regeneration

In planning terms, urban regeneration has displaced urban renewal and is practised alongside rejuvenation and refurbishment. It indicates a softer approach in contrast to blanket "bulldozing" undertaken after the second world war in the UK and elsewhere, when arguably more urban fabric has been demolished than during the war.

There are many definitions of urban regeneration.[6] BURA, the British Urban Regeneration Association[7] defines it as: "Urban regeneration is a comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area." In his handbook on urban regeneration, Roberts uses a similar definition.. Alternatively, an investor, the Igloo Regeneration Fund sees it as "Urban regeneration is concerted social, economic and physical action to help people in neighbourhoods experiencing multiple deprivationto reverse decline and create sustainable communities…" "…[regeneration] requires public sector financial support which is only given to benefit deprived communities…" as opposed to "…property development [which] happens through market forces…". These

3. Compact inner city, Dublin, consolidated with infill
photo: Judith Ryser

definitions differs slightly form the official UK government definition: "Regeneration is the holistic process of reversing economic, social and physical decay in areas where it has reached a stage when market forces alone will not suffice".[8]

What all these definitions of urban regeneration have in common is some recognition that it has to encompass some component of public policy, as well as the interests of the development industry. Note that these definitions also include the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainability. Where they may diverge from reality is whether they recognise the need to improve conditions of existing communities.

4b. Aviles Spain historic centre, private sector urban regeneration with public sector infrastructure
photo: Judith Ryser

4a. Bilbao Spain riverfront, public sector urban regeneration, vision and implementation
photo: Judith Ryser

Interpretations of gentrification

Similar, possibly contradictory elements are incorporated in the definition of gentrification. Ruth Glass coined the term 'gentrification' in 1964 to describe the influx of middle-class people who displaced lower class worker residents in urban neighbourhoods; her examples were working-class districts such a Islington in London.[9] These invasions and displacements disadvantage the local community, but they bring macro-economic benefits to these parts of the city and are thus welcome by local authorities and central government.

5a. London UK, before gentrification, indeterminate space colonised by transient activities
photo: Judith Ryser

5b. London East End Hoxton Square, when gentrification has taken hold
photo: Judith Ryser

Glass's concept has been examined further by many researchers and activists since then, also in the USA.[10] Loretta Lees and her colleagues define gentrification as "the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city to a middle class residential and/or commercial use".[11] Paul Watt discusses the various reasons for displacement and resistance which accompany gentrification in connection with the 2012 Olympic games.[12] He sees it as a top down activity by the corporate sector with the support of the central and the local state, leading to increased land values, a better tax base, and less social pressures on local services, while destroying local communities and businesses according to those who are being pushed out due to an increasing

rent gap and abandonment of the Keynesian welfare state. Others put the reasons to deindustrialisation and professionalisation,[13] and others still to continuous class struggle. For example, David Harvey argues that antagonistic class relations become interlinked with processes of urban spatial restructuring through the process of "accumulation by dispossession".[14] Similarly Neil Smith is relating gentrification to class struggle and the see-saw approach of capitalists to investment and disinvestment over time and space.[15]

What happens in both top-down and 'sideways' processes of gentrification is a transformation of low-value to high value neighbourhoods, more recently accelerated by the 'return to the city' movement. Not only does this deprive the lower income groups living there of their right to the city, but in cases when transient occupiers are initiating the process of gentrification, they too are eventually displaced through 'unintended economic eviction', without being able to reap any benefits from the 'value added' they have contributed to the area.

Urban regeneration under neo-liberalism

Urban regeneration claims to remedy the most pressing urban deficiencies. However, the question of winners and losers remains critical, in particular whose living conditions are improving and whose are declining in the process of urban regeneration - before, during, and after it, as well as in the long term. In a socially responsible political system the purpose of sustainable urban regeneration is to redress social and spatial injustice. This may no longer be the case in a neo-liberal environment, and it is questionable whether the purpose of partnerships between the public and the private sectors are willing and/or able to deliver sustainable, or more appropriately 'low (adverse) impact' development.

At the time when the planning system was firmly rooted in the public sector, it was controlled by elected representatives who were supposed to uphold the common good. This changed in 1980 in the UK when the Thatcher government passed the Local Government, Planning and Land Act. It created agencies[16] able to substitute for planning authorities and take over large scale urban regeneration projects with high political profiles.[17] The London Docklands Development Corporation was the first example of apparent abdication of public sector domination to the market.[18] In reality, this shift constituted a stronger but less accountable role of central government. Not only did it finance these non elected development corporations which are only loosely accountable to ministers rather than to parliament, but it endowed them with compulsory purchasing powers, including for land owned by local authorities which nevertheless remained responsible for providing local services, albeit without any say in the development process.

Such "quangos" are not subjected to appropriate scrutiny and are rarely accompanied by an independent and transparent monitoring process, especially one which evaluates not only narrow, 'value for money' but broader impacts on existing populations and businesses, as well as quality of space and quality of life in these new urban environments. The outcome is that urban regeneration are totally dominated by economics, or profit.

Gentrification, unintended consequence of urban regeneration?

Although officially often targeting areas of deprivation,in reality urban regeneration policies tend not to ameliorate the life chances of the most disadvantaged. Regeneration is claimed to improve the quality of life of citizens overall, but its effects tend to be distributed very unevenly and there is little evidence of a trickling down effect, not least because regeneration provokes a shift of population.[19]

Studies by Marcuse[20], Paul Watt[21] and many others[22] demonstrate that local communities

6a. Replace: public sector supported neo-liberal gentrification, Olympic Games 2012 site, Westfield shopping centre as gateway to Olympic park photo: Judith Ryser

6b. Neo liberal gentrification: Canary Wharf London, second financial centre photo: Judith Ryser

confronted with gentrification - be it top-down or sideways - are not homogeneous. Faced with an increasingly unsafe and precarious environment, they accept buy-outs and resettlements no matter under what conditions. These behavioural choices become a part of the planning process and once abandonment has reached critical mass take-overs become easier.

Gentrification emphasises contradictions in the urban fabric between social and spatial (in-) justice, open or gated spaces, man-made environment or nature, the city or its citizens. Its impacts are ambiguous and it is not clear whether it is inherently adverse, or whether its divisive effects can be attenuated.[23] Undoubtedly, gentrification makes a positive contribution to the urban fabric. Individuals release energy and investment and spend their time and money on improving derelict premises and often help improve the broader neighbourhood into which they move, even temporarily, as a further step in their housing 'career' or to set up a businesses.

7a. step by step gentrification inner city Madrid Lavapies, public planning, pump priming, for later private investment
photo: Judith Ryser

7b. Transient gentrification, occupation of derelict warehouses on fringe of Olympic site London by footholders who will be driven out by private sector developers
photo: Judith Ryser

Gentrification constitutes a social as well as a physical intervention in cities. Apparent in the shape of gated spaces and whole gated communities, it makes also less visible divisive and exclusive infractions into the 'commons'. The benefits of gentrification need to be balanced with its adverse effects on localities and existing communities.

Is the gentrification process path dependent?

It could be argued that gentrification can be both a contribution to, and an outcome of urban regeneration, thus path-dependency can work both ways. A path-dependent process of gentrification may begin with footloose artists, activists, homeless or marginal people colonising derelict buildings and abandoned sites. The process may start with temporary events, one-off festivals, exhibitions, jumble sales organised as part of transient urban life which enriches the city. Gradually, artists and social entrepreneurs who occupy these premises improve them and develop some informal local economy by harnessing their innovative creativity. When the place starts to show success, the erstwhile owners of the sites or the public authorities lay claim to them, evict the colonisers who have no title to land or premises, sell the sites on to private developers, often at very favourable terms, who may also recover the costs of decontamination from the public purse. This is the start of regeneration. After lengthy conflicts, the foot-holders are forced to move on without benefiting from the value added which they have generated on such sites by increasing their desirability and economic worth. In this case, the path dependency consists of gentrification, regeneration, resistance and displacement. A whole literature is honing these foot-holders[24] mostly though without addressing their moral or pecuniary claims.

The reverse process starts with the public sector or more likely its agents claiming land or premises and evicting those using it. In this case, urban regeneration precedes gentrification, and resistance and displacement precedes both. This raises the issue of what happens to the notion of the "commons", of land in public ownership, notwithstanding rights of way when they are contracted out, sold off, or privatised.

THE ROLE OF PLANNING IN IMPROVING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF DEVELOPMENT

The process of ultimate betterment of cities leaves a host of questions for planning, urban regeneration and urban design. It is important to clarify the role of planners and urban designers in this balancing act between private property and public realm, especially in the light of the changing role of the state under neo-liberalism.[25] Moreover, the professionals of the built environment need to know how they are to incorporate the extra tasks emanating from the adverse effects of development on climate change which remains on the political agenda. Commonly agreed criteria, methods of measurement and evaluation become of the essence to obtain support from governance. They are discussed in the technical paper towards EUSS13, "Methods of Measuring and Assessing the Sustainability of Urban Developments". This still leaves planners to wonder how they will be able to make their development proposals

sustainable when the dynamic of urban change leaves so much outside their control.

Planning sustainability at the level of urban living

Sustainability is a very broad concept and goes way beyond the rescue of the planet. In its broadest sense it implies an equitably shared urban environment. Residents (citizens, voters), the working population, visitors, transient people, etc. all form part of urban life, but there are tensions within cities between the diverse needs and wants of those who use them, compounded by subjective perception. Is there a system of government which can relate equitably to all city users and improve social and spatial justice? Who are the custodians of the collective good, of the public interest? Who holds decision makers to account, guarantees citizens a say through public participation, shares out finite public assets equitably between all stakeholders? Who preserves sustainable urbanity by keeping the city open to all, and what role does physical urban regeneration play in all this?

The contradictions between the state, the development industry and the design profession may contribute to making the physical fabric transient without lasting identity. This may exacerbate uncertainty and alienation of urban dwellers, besides reducing their public realm, an important part of a sustainable environment.[26] The design professionals are implicated in this process, as they are increasingly working for the private sector and are prone to subjecting themselves to its value systems, often in contradiction with the meaning, if not the letter of public planning principles. Tools to assess and evaluate sustainable development may constitute a means to reach a modus vivendi for the cooperation between the diverse protagonists in producing a more sustainable urban environment. Yet, they cannot replace creative design.

8a. Housing still part occupied by social tenants on Carpenter Estate in East London
photo: Judith Ryser

8b. Carpenter Estate residents protesting against UCL take over of their estate in East London
photo: Judith Ryser

9b. Borough Market, London, gentrification when resistance is succumbing to its own success
photo: Judith Ryser

9b. Marseille, Belle de Mai, derelict site and buildings near main railway station taken over by artists who avoid gentrification through early protective contract with land owner
photo: Judith Ryser

1.   e.g. Sesena, near Madrid, Spain: Source http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2102074/Spain-haunted-ghost-towns-built-boom-years-unemployment-tops-5million.html

2.   See 'trade-off vs nested organization of sustainability. Fig 2 p 13 In: Poor Desai. 2010. One Planet Communities. Wiley

3.   In 1987, the 'Brundtland Report' stated that 'humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

4.   One Planet Communities.op.cit.

5.   See for example the 10 ways how building industry protagonists define regeneration in published in 'Building' on 17 February 2006 (RegenerateLive).

6.   http://www.building.co.uk/10-ways-to-define-regeneration/3062794.article

7.   www.bura.org.uk

8.   ODPM 2003, A156.

9.   Ruth Glass. 1964. London: aspects of change. MacGibbon&Kee

10. Peter Marcuse. 1986. Abandonment, Gentrification and Displacement: the Linkages in New York City. In: N Smith & P Williams. 1986. Gentrification and the City. Unwin Hyman.

11. Lees, Loretta, Tom Slater, and Elvin K. Wyly.Gentrification. 2008. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

12. Paul Watt. 2013. It's not for us. In: City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action. 17:1, 99-118, DOI.Routledge

13. e.g. Butler T &Hamnett Chris. 2009. Walking backwards to the future- waking up to class and gentrification in London. In: Urban Policy & Research 27 (3): 217-118.

14. David Harvey. 2008. The Right to the City. In: New Left Review 53: 32-40.

15. Neil Smith is considered one of the most influential scholars on 'gentrification which he attributes to the rent gap. Neil Smith. 1996. The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City. Routledge.

16. Known as 'quangos' quasi governmental organisations

17. 'Corporate quangos' were made possible in the 1980 Local Government, Planning and Land Act. They produce a report to Parliament once a year. The Enterprise Zones, newly established in Docklands, are more extreme forms of government outsourcing to, and subsidising the development industry.

18. For critiques of the effect of the LDDC on the local communities, see Sue Brownhill. 1992. Developing London's Docklands: another Great Disastere? Paul Chapman Publishing; Bob Colenutt. 1988. Local Democracy and Inner City Regeneration. Loal Economy 3 (2) pp 119-125; Bob Colenutt. 1998. Joined up Thinking Needs Joined up Practice, Urban Environment Today, 1/10/98.

19. For a more detailed discussion, see Judith Ryser & Teresa Franchini. 2011. Towards an Understanding of Quality of Urban Space. EUSS11

20. Peter Marcuse. 1985. Gentrification, Abandonment and Displacement, Connections, Causes and Policy Responses in New York City. In" Urban Law Annual; Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law, Volume 28 pp 195-240, http://digitalcommons.law.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1396&context=urbanlaw

21. It's Not For Us.pdf - Games Monitor

22. e.g. Peter Marshall on the evictions from the Carpenter Estate in East London. http://www.demotix.com/news/1347789/shame-newham-council-carpenters-estate-london#media-1347754

23. Peter Marcuse's view about that is "…the large question is not whether abandonment can be avoided, gentrification controlled, displacement eliminated, or even how these things can be done, but rather whether thereis the desire to do them. That is a question that can only be answered in the political arena." (p.175, op.cit)

24. e.g. Richard Florida, 2002, The Rise of the Creative Class, and how it is transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life, Basic Books

25. e.g. Mike Raco. 'State-led Privatisation and the Demise of the Democratic State: Welfare Reform and Localism in an Era of Regulatory Capitalism'. Paper given at the "City and Space" Seminar, UEL, 6 March 2913.

26. See for example, Anna Minton, 2012, Ground Control - Fear and happiness in the 21st century city, Penguin Books.