

## Ambiguity in an urban development Master Plan. Deception or miscalculation?

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Urban renewal in London is a major issue, particularly in the East End. There is an interest in developing previously undeveloped *greenfield* sites, but of even greater importance, however, are the *brownfield* sites. This refers to any land or premises which have already been used or developed and are not currently in full use, even if partially occupied. The object of regeneration is economic, social, political and cultural renewal. However, there is a discrepancy between the official pronouncements and what happens on the ground. Not infrequently, a redevelopment including a public arts programme is heralded as a 'cultural success', but is often experienced by the local people as a waste of financial resources and a cause of displacement. A constantly variable component of regeneration schemes is the involvement of culture. In this context, the Arts function not in isolation, but as part of urban discourse in general. The variability depends on the relationship between the government focus on 'sustainability', 'preservation' and 'excellence' and the perceived place of the Arts and culture in society. Of paramount importance are the issues of social exclusion and corporate expansion.

*New Labour* is a policy innovation pursued by the Labour government of the U.K. elected in 1997. One of its strategies has been to place the promotion of the Arts and culture in the foreground of its rhetoric. In a move away from the previous emphasis on heritage the *Department of National Heritage* was renamed the *Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)*. Its aim is to bring culture to a wider audience and to promote its role in the economy. The *DCMS* also maintains that the inclusion of public arts programmes in regeneration schemes is a vital aid in the improvement of deprived neighbourhoods. Examples of such an approach include Battery City Park in New York, Canary Wharf in London and the preparation of Barcelona for the 1992 Olympic Games. However, underneath the government's official patronage of culture lies a desire to boost the country's economy, to attract foreign investors and tourists. The predominant themes are, therefore, tourism and urban development, and culture has a tendency to be considered only under these narratives. There are other bodies within the government working with similar agendas, for example, the London Assembly's *Culture, Media and Tourism Committee*, which can result in the evasion of issues and even their misrepresentation.

One of the major new developments within the *New Labour* has been the restructuring of the City's municipal hierarchy in 2000. The *Greater London Authority (GLA)*, uniting the thirty-two London boroughs and the Corporation of London, was established. It comprises an elected Mayor, Ken Livingstone, and a separately elected assembly. The Mayor is responsible for strategic planning in the city. Livingstone's contribution is to produce the *London Plan* (a spatial development strategy for London). It is the first London wide plan since the *Greater London Plan* was put together in 1976, and a first attempt at a unified development plan since the dismantling of an elected government for London, the *Greater London Council (GLC)* in 1986. A section within the current *Plan*, 'Development and Promotion of Arts and Culture', focuses on the development of 'cultural quarters'. These are designated in areas perceived as 'deprived' and should aim to rejuvenate and enhance the area, through the provision of cultural facilities or the renovation of vacant industrial buildings. They should be supported by other redevelopment initiatives. The *Plan* provides general design and planning guidance, replacing the regional planning guidance that each borough has previously devised for its area. There is thus an overall plan for the city being put in effect, which local boroughs must comply with. Its validity is a matter for debate, as is the view that the Arts offer a major contribution to neighbourhood renewal. There are also problems with identifying certain areas as 'deprived' and with the development of so-called 'cultural quarters'.

One of the major initiatives of the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990) was a shift in emphasis from the old social welfare planning politics to property-led regeneration schemes. Spending on the Arts was reduced and the *Greater London Council (GLC)*, successor in 1964 to the *London County Council*, which played a significant role in promoting the Arts, was dismantled. Some critics argue that this resulted in a major setback in urban aesthetic planning. The forthcoming *London Plan* hopes to address this situation but it is doubtful whether it will result in an eclectic growth of the Arts. Following in the footsteps of his forerunners, Livingstone, paradoxically for a lifelong Socialist, is relying heavily on property developers and market forces for redevelopment.

The government has put a significant amount of effort into heralding the 'creative industries' as the main source of economic expansion. However, there are issues surrounding the government's promotion of the 'creative industries', particularly the notion that the Arts will only be able to gain support if they bring in money to the wider economy or are tied to a property-led regeneration scheme. The marketing of leisure and affluence is passed off as culture. In the face of urban development residents, local arts venues and organizations and the governmental bodies can be confronted with several conflicting issues. The Lux Cinema in Hoxton Square in London, an area recently heavily redeveloped and gentrified, is one example of where conflicting interests finally resulted in its closure, much to the

surprise of its visitors. The role of the artist, in particular with regards to the process of gentrification is contested. Artists move into rougher areas, making them 'liveable' and attracting the influx of the middle class, thereby raising the prices and forcing out local residents.

Furthermore, there generally has been a reduction in the boroughs' arts investment due to cuts in budgets. The responsibility to invest on the Arts has been placed more and more in the private sector since the demise of the GLC. Important artist collectives such as *SPACE* (Space, Provision, Artistic, Cultural and Educational) and *ACME* were established in the late sixties and although the GLC aided in allocating property, these collectives struggled against local authorities. In 1972, the large artist collective at St. Katherine's Docks was forced to give way for a hotel complex redevelopment. More recently, artist studios have been forced by the Cross-Channel Rail development in Stratford. It may be suggested that the government's proposal that all boroughs should produce Creative Strategies is not a panacea. Likewise, its insistence that the Arts in society should both contribute to neighbourhood renewal, and be accessible to as many people as possible. Recently, the *Arts Council of England (ACE)* and the Regional Arts Boards merged, forming a single funding body. It published a report highlighting the possibilities and difficulties for the Arts today. Of major concern in the light of the government's proposal, was that the Arts had been made accountable to government criteria. Measuring the Arts in terms of accountability, access and excellence is problematic. It also raises the question of what kind of art is most likely to receive subsidy and whether that art is subversive and critical or accepting of the predominant ideology.

East London has been selected to illustrate the integral problems of the promotion of culture within the framework of urban redevelopment as it is currently undergoing major redevelopment. Of consideration is the connection between the public arts programmes involved and the renewal of the neighbourhood. Current urban regeneration schemes are examined within the context of previous city planning and urban design guidance, from the post-war reconstruction of the bombed city through to the introduction of property-led regeneration schemes by Margaret Thatcher during the early eighties. Examples are taken from other key areas of redevelopment, such as Centenary Square in Birmingham, and Barcelona.

The East End is an area of London immediately to the East of the historic City, governed by the Corporation of London, with a long history of artist communities and a high proportion of immigrants and artisan trade activities. The *London Plan* refers to the East End as 'deprived' and as a priority area for new development. One of the key factors involved in the rejuvenation of rundown neighbourhoods is the establishing of 'cultural quarters'. Examples of these are Bankside, including the new Tate Britain, and the localities surrounding the Town Hall Square in Hackney Central, including the Ocean music venue and the Empire Theatre. In Hackney these ventures have been supported by the *Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)* scheme. This is a funding system whereby local authorities and their partners bid for funds according to criteria set by the government. Today, it is through the *SRB* that most cultural projects receive funds. However, it is difficult to ascertain how much money is actually allocated to cultural enterprises.

Due to the government's insistence on the importance of the Arts, there is a tendency to assume that any investment in cultural projects is for the 'public good' or for the better of the neighbourhood. However it is worth considering who benefits from public arts programmes and regeneration schemes, and who is responsible for them. Who is considered to be the public? How is one public decided over another? If the artwork is commissioned by a city council, then who is responsible for it, the artist or the council? Or, for that matter, should it become the possession of the public, an audience who might not like the work or understand it. A work in public risks vandalism and controversy. A current example of a clash of interests is Wembley redevelopment (North-West London). The main underground station is a partial ruin, albeit adorned by a sculpture by American jeweller Danny Lane, which is apparently vandal-proof. Wembley funds were allocated elsewhere to pay for access to the *Millenium Dome*, a project rife with controversy and with its future still not determined. The historic football stadium with its iconic twin domes has been demolished and instead a Norman Foster scheme, without a precise sporting function or confirmed financing, has been accepted.

The social aspects of public arts programmes are inseparable from the discourse of urban planning. It is not possible to discuss arts and culture as unrelated to the mechanisms of a wider society. The design of a city and the arts it chooses to incorporate can be used as political propaganda or as a way of rebuking the dominant ideologies. However, if the state openly sponsors culture, the downside could be that all culture is used to maintain the dominant ideologies. Issues of displacement, conformist culture and the loss of local vibrancy are raised. The official jargon of protecting cultural enclaves becomes dubious in the face of the destruction of the very culture it claims to protect.