

From urban regeneration to social engineering?

Today's generation of architects lack ambition, fear failure and don't want to build new cities, says Dan Lewis.



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"Urban reGeneration" is sometimes described as a movement in planning. In earlier times, UG used to inspire grand visions of modern dynamic business districts and super functional neighbourhoods. Today, there's another view. UG is social engineering by self-important profligate quangos and statist politicians, riding roughshod over existing poor but vibrant communities with vast dollops of public money. spiked www.spiked-online.com/, a controversial and highly successful online magazine, organised a public seminar on the myths of Urban Regeneration. At an event sponsored by Clarke Mulder Purdie, three experts were assembled to launch a full frontal assault on the UG consensus.

James Woudhuysen, a Professor of Forecasting and Innovation and co-author of *Why is construction so backward?* kicked off the event in robust form. "The problem with commercial UG is that it helps to create the 'Bull**** Economy'". This he defines as government, financial services and quangos. Quoting Churchill, "We make our buildings, thereafter they make us", Woudhuysen believes that urban regeneration and all the bureaucratic quangocracy will do absolutely nothing for the productivity revolution the country so desperately needs. This could only be made out of motivated workers, not bricks and mortar.

Moreover, housebuilders had been starved of all their creative juices by government. It was absurd that housebuilders who are commercial entities, have become agents of government social policy. Today for housebuilders, it's all about taxes, Section 106 agreements and REITS. Lord Rogers meanwhile had become alienated from our species in his quest for greater urban density. It was just

plain wrong to assume that living next to someone cheers you up.

William Mann, Director of Witherford Watson Mann Architects came next with a dispassionate analysis of the long history of urban regeneration. It's much older than most of us might think. Mann dated it back to Booth's poverty map of London from 1889, which colour-coded the city. Black shaded areas were the lowest class, vicious and semi-criminal and gold coloured regions were upper middle/upper class and very wealthy. This formed the impetus for improving working class habits and tastes by the launching of new social housing. Yet the working class turned out to be "unimprovable" and didn't want to live in these new homes.

Mann continues that the next wave of UG took place in Bethnal Green. Thanks to the Luftwaffe much of the City was damaged beyond repair. Prior to the war, most of the working class lived in two story worker cottages. The sanitation was awful. Yet these homes were extremely popular and did create the famed sociability of London's East End. As most of them were demolished after the war and replaced by five-storey blocks, the population of Tower Hamlets alone dropped from more than 500,000 to under 200,000.

Urban regeneration was rediscovered and rebranded for the London Docklands and Canary Wharf in the 1980s. This time, wealth and entrepreneurialism would conquer all. Two booms and one Underground line later, it has not quite worked. Many of the pre-existing barriers; roads, dockwalls, etc. have been retained and reinforced. If anything, these are more like self-contained units without the shared use of local services.

The next wave of London's regeneration follies continues with

the Thames Gateway, forecast to house an extra 700,000 people by 2016. Its scale says Mann, is overwhelming and puzzling.

Finally, Vicky Richardson, Editor of *Blueprint*, says that UG had become a turn-off. Despite all the courses at university and all the policy wonks, there were absolutely no big utopian ideas coming out of the urban regeneration movement. Richard Rogers set the unambitious tone with two reports: *Towards an urban renaissance*, and *Towards a strong urban renaissance*.

That the second report had virtually the same name, said it all. Architects had lost their nerve and their capacity to experiment in the cities. No one wants to destroy historic building or communities any more. In fact, perhaps the only place in the world where anyone was experimenting and thinking big was China. Lord Rogers' idealisation of Barcelona and its urban density was actually the problem. Today's generation of architects lack ambition, fear failure and don't want to build new cities.

So now it's high time to ponder the three unquestionables:

- accommodating growing car ownership, which is here to stay
- the value of building on greenfield sites
- challenging the received prejudice against growth

This was a highly entertaining and thought-provoking event. As *Planning in London* readers are well aware, Britain was largely a planning free zone until the 20th Century and the grand buildings and communities that came out of the free 19th Century were a lot stronger for it.

The last 60 years of government intervention in property markets for social or economic gains has clearly been a net failure. Now all we need do is persuade the politicians.