

INTERNATIONAL REFLECTIONS ON MANAGING DECLINE/CHANGE

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The Housing and the Regions Working Group hosted two events last year to encourage debate over English housing issues drawing on experience from other European countries. The first seminar at UCL (31st May) focused broadly on the issue of housing growth, whilst the second, in Manchester on 11th October, turned to the contentious issue of housing market failure in northern English regions as well as parts of Germany.

Whilst much recent debate has focused on the well-publicised issues of low demand, empty homes and declining neighbourhoods, the real shape of market change in northern regions is more complex and nuanced than it might first appear. These markets' fortunes have been mixed, with areas of boom and failure sometimes existing side by side. There have been a great many differ-

ent trajectories of change in northern England, posing complex challenges to academics and policy-makers.

The changing policy agenda

The seminar began with two scene-setting presentations from Alan Murie and Peter Roberts. Alan Murie's talk took us on a historic journey through a quarter century of changing policies for public sector housing and the wider housing market. Drawing upon European and American material, he suggested that despite important national differences, both have experienced common problems associated with a 'spiral of decline'.

He also had strong reservation over the use of a 'revanchist' perspective (see box 2) to view urban policy as the word

'revanchist' is often used in a rather crude and cavalier manner. He noted that this 'spiral of decline' thesis can be too introverted ignoring wider contexts shaping failing or successful areas' fortunes.

He pointed out distinctive emerging approaches with regard to the importance of integration, partnerships, participation and social mix and explained the factors that underpin the different approaches adopted in different European regions. He concluded that countries most associated with intervention through housing demolition and refurbishment have the strongest public/private partnership and are also most likely to have integrated approaches involving residents in redevelopment processes.

Peter Robert's presentation focused on the role of housing in the creation or regeneration of broad communities

A revanchist landscape in Newcastle-Gateshead (photo appears courtesy of Marcel van Lochem)



and the need for appropriate quantities of affordable housing. He suggested that managing decline is better regarded as the management of transition; this may involve making choices about the spatial destination of investment and reordering of priorities. There is thus a crucial need to ensure that housing is made accessible to employment, leisure and other facilities.

The management of housing stock has increasingly been influenced by the requirements of sustainable communities and regeneration policies. The policy agenda has increasingly moved towards a neighbourhood management approach by authorities, delivering better services for tenants and other residents, including non-housing services and facilities.

Shrinking cities: the German experience

The UK experience was then contrasted with that of our German counterparts. Thilo Lang argued that the management of decline has been a long term issue in East Germany. The one-million-plus empty flats in East Germany are one symptom of the wider processes of urban transformation, part of the longer term integration of the East's former planned economy into the western German economic model. The government has introduced an integrated (social, economic, physical and environmental) urban development concept to urban regeneration to deal with this massive problem, alongside reducing over-supply through subsidised demolition.

Despite some successes in restructuring the urban fabric, intervention has failed to halt the trend of declining demand. In the face of these serious challenges, German planners have come to accept that managed decline is a legitimate planning policy objective and some cities are simply 'too big'. They have also accepted that they should devise long-term visions and tools for managing the shrinkage process to promote and develop 'lean' cities.

Sebastian Mueller furthered the debate by highlighting the difference between the German and British housing markets. German rent levels have declined over the last decade, excepting some growth poles like Munich, Cologne and Hamburg. In the Ruhr Area or the Eastern provinces, empty apartments are found on every street, and may sometimes stay empty for many years.

International investment companies have purchased 800,000 units of public/ semi-public housing at Berlin, Frankfurt and in the Ruhr Area five years ago. These estates are in three classes: pre-war workers' housing estates and settlements considered to be poor and with special renewal needs for renewal; 1950s workers housing estates with a high percentage of migrants, welfare recipients and elderly unemployed; modern, well-maintained 1960s/ 1970s housing schemes with younger populations alongside social problems. Speculative investment from the international finance industry is fragmenting formerly public housing markets, infringing upon the social welfare of affected tenants through eviction and housing demolition programmes.

Managing housing market change: the evidence-base

Three presentations focused on the conceptualisation and analysis of key issues concerning housing market change. Brian Robson explained that housing markets generally operate at a spatial scale far greater than that of administrative areas, with household mobility across this broader area driven by career and life-cycle developments.

However, within deprived neighbourhoods, the normal patterns of residential movement may less readily apply. Many households may effectively be trapped by static or falling house values or by rental tenures. Conversely, some neighbourhoods may have abnormally high levels of mobility associated with their role as short-term transit areas, perhaps for students or for first-generation migrant households. In understanding the challenges of regen-

erating such neighbourhoods, there may be merit in developing typologies based on the socio-economic characteristics of their residents and the scale of residential churn of their households (see box 1).

In relation to Bryan Robson's presentation, Stephen Hincks and Cecilia Wong continued the discussion over the importance of examining the interaction between housing and labour markets in managing the process of housing market change. This has been driven by a number of trends, including employment and residential decentralisation from urban to non-urban locations, and the corollary of that, spatial disintegration of residential and employment locations.

This means that commuting patterns have become increasingly complex: the traditional patterns of travelling from suburban residential locations to urban centres have been overlain with a highly complex web of commuting *between* suburbs, alongside a third trend of commuting from urban residential locations to non-urban workplaces.

The speakers discussed empirically the process of housing and labour market interaction in the form of commuting at the sub-regional level in the North West of England. Traditional commuting to the central business district (CBD) remains important for urban and suburban residents, though it is no longer the dominant workplace location for commuters. There is also extensive cross-commuting between different types of residential and workplace locations in the region.

The speakers noted the interesting phenomenon of urban-urban commuters, who live within the CBD, and commute to workplaces in other urban locations. Reverse commuting

Box 1 Classifying housing districts based on their dynamism

Bryan Robson introduced the idea of a four-fold classification of household districts in his presentation, based on their overall dynamics. Districts were classified on two axes, 'high or low' *residential churn* as against 'improve or no change/worse' *level of deprivation*. This gives a fourfold classification of neighbourhoods:

- Gentrification neighbourhood now becomes part of a 'normal' market;
- Transit areas (ethnic or refugee in-migration, student areas, low-cost housing);
- Re-established stable working-class community; and
- Poor entrapped community with ageing households and low demand housing.

This provides a basis for understanding the different needs of communities, and the different types of 'stickiness' of investments, in order to maximise the sustainability of the inflow of resources into these districts. Different instruments can therefore be targeted at different kinds of communities according to their needs.

from urban and suburban locations to village and dispersed and town and fringe locations is relatively low. Based on this analysis of the diversity of housing and labour market interaction at the sub-regional scale, they argued for an integrated policy framework linking employment production and housing supply.

Finally, Stuart Cameron and Jon Coaffee offered a stimulating discussion over the use of Neil Smith's 'revanchism' thesis in assessing housing and renewal policies (see box 2). They argued that the current housing renewal policies involve the appropriation of urban space for the advantaged combined with aggressive and oppressive policies of exclusion and control of low-income and marginalised groups. This seems to hint quite strongly that there is a case to answer that contemporary market renewal policies in England (within and outside the Pathfinders) are 'revanchist'.

To explore this question, their presentation focused on the possible combination of gentrification and displacement with the use of measures to combat antisocial behaviour now available to local authorities and social landlords, ostensibly designed to 'civilise' neighbourhoods. They argued that this policy has carried the processes of gentrification from the central city 'urban renaissance' transformations into the heart of many low-income residential neighbourhoods where it directly impacts on existing residents.

Community protests against revanchism in San Francisco



Box 2: 'Revanchism' in urban policy

The term 'revanchism' came to prominence with the rise of European nationalist movements in the 19th century. 'Revanchist' policies were those which sought to reclaim 'lost' lands, to which a particular nation had some kind of ancient cultural claim. The argument followed that those lands, usually lost through military defeat, should be returned to the original parent state in the interests of sustaining the vitality of the nation. The roots of the word in the French word for revenge hint at the rather negative connotations associated with the concept, and the rise of revanchism in the late 19th century can be seen as one cause of the Great War in Europe.

It is this negative connotation of 'reclaiming for revenge' which has led to the term being coined by Professor Neil Smith, a renowned urban geographer, to describe particular gentrification movements, which seek to reclaim the city in the interests of promoting greater economic vitality. Revanchist urban policies are those which seek to 'reclaim' particular city quarters from 'control' by undesirable elements, in particular those which are deemed by those in power as being undesirable and the source of urban problems. In practise, this can mean removing those who are not politically or economically strong enough to resist removal.

Smith's use of the word has a further connotation, in that it refers to the discipline and control of the weakest elements of society as part of an increasing privatisation and control of city space by what can be regarded as the forces of capitalism. The term highlights the way that the social injustice of population removals becomes hidden behind a positive façade of physical investment, rising house prices and the disappearance of urban problems from these localities.

Stuart Cameron and Jon Coaffee's presentation offered an example of this 'revanchism in practise' using an example from Newcastle-Gateshead. They found that the English Housing Market Renewal initiatives exhibit the manifestations of revanchist urbanism against the three tests:

- (1) gentrification with displacement of the poor,
- (2) civilising measures to encourage middle classes colonisation; and
- (3) the political agenda of removal of council housing.

Taking the debate forward

A lively concluding debate ensued and there was found to be much commonality between the UK and German experiences. However, the discussions that punctuated the day raised many questions and highlighted areas of continued debate. It was suggested, for example, that government's community's plan is being rolled out without any consideration of the changing nature of communities in particular places. It was also suggested that understanding market failure using a 'spiral of decline' thesis tends to be too inward looking, and paying too much attention to the physical fabric of failing areas, without understanding these areas in their wider context.

At a similarly conceptual level, there was much debate about the use of the 'revanchist' thesis in interpreting urban policy, with Alan Murie questioning the extent to which current urban initiatives can be thought of as 'revenge' against working class communities.

The day also revealed a great deal of common ground. It was agreed that the dichotomy of growth and decline at a supra-regional level can obscure the reality of market complexity. England's northern regions are in a transitional phase, as is eastern Germany, and are adjusting the economic and political upheavals of recent decades. There is much still to be learned from international comparison, undoubtedly a fertile ground for future events.

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