

BIRMINGHAM: HEADS AND TAILS OF AN URBAN TRANSFORMATION

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In early 2008 *Regenerate! Birmingham* conference took place in the English city, with the aim of presenting the Masterplan vision for the next 30 years by its author Michael Parkinson. A good chance to look back and take stock.

The urban regeneration process undertaken in Birmingham from the late 80s, in the line of pioneers like Boston or Baltimore across the Atlantic, was a milestone and a role model for many local leaders of the time. However, this model, despite its relative success in terms of generating economic activity and employment, has not been exempt during the entire process of certain critics who warned (and alert) of the social spending cuts or increased inequalities. Here, it is a valuable experience, essential, from my point of view, to understand the past, present and future regeneration strategies not only in Birmingham but in many other cities that have undertaken or are undertaking similar processes.

Birmingham (Ref.1) suffered between 70 and 80 a very strong economic and social crisis, the worst crisis since the start of large-scale urbanization in the mid-nineteenth century (2). However, when dealing with this crisis through new urban regeneration strategies, Birmingham was highly conditioned. Conditioned by the arrival of the New Right to power in the hands of Margaret Thatcher (3) and the need to adopt policies and criteria (4) that were established from Downing Street to access finance on the one hand, and, secondly, by the close relationship with the U.S. and the strong influence of urban regeneration models tested there with "apparent success" according to some experts, in cities like Boston, Baltimore, New York, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia (5). This context is key to understand "the path" chosen by Birmingham and after that, most British and European cities to launch regenerative processes of their cities.

Thus, following the guidelines set out from London, Birmingham City Council opted for promoting the city as an international center of business tourism, culture and entertainment, setting in motion for that purpose, large-scale projects, called "prestige" or "flagship projects", with the aim of boosting development of the whole city (6). Actions related to the so-called "city marketing" (7) were also part of the same model seeking to "repair the poor image of the city nationally and internationally."

This process however has known supporters and detractors, generating considerable tension within their own municipal government (8), mainly arising from the very significant funding cuts for areas such as education, housing or social services in order to cover the costs of launching "prestige projects".

The result

The development of so-called prestige projects in Birmingham was promoted on a threefold argument: First, these initiatives would generate substantial economic benefits for the whole city; second, the generation of wealth would benefit all citizens; and third, the cost of this strategy would be minimized through the public-private partnerships and the arrival of European Union funds.

At this point, Birmingham has experienced a sustained economic growth during the last 15 years. However, it is not clear whether that should be attributed to "flagship projects" or just to the general economic growth experienced in Europe as a whole. Moreover, one of the most common criticisms of this strategy suggests that the positive impact, the expected benefits of the strategy, are yet to come to the humbler classes. Indeed, there is evidence that massive investment in

prestige projects and downtown revitalization has supposed, in the particular case of Birmingham, a decrease of available funds in the social and basic services in a context of aid cuts by the Central Government (9), in addition to deepening the social exclusion of certain groups (10). Therefore, Birmingham is seen also as an example of the heads and tails of many processes of "regeneration". A concept that in the following, I would prefer to replace by "transformation", due to the long discussion that might cause the use of that term (regeneration) to refer to projects that would not be enough evidence that has been able to share in its benefits to a significant part of society.

A closer look to other European cities

I could end this article on Birmingham without pleasing to those who might miss some reference to cities in other parts of Europe who have tried to follow the footsteps of Birmingham and implement "prestige projects" with similar characteristics and objectives. In this sense, could fall within this typology, cases such as Bilbao with the Guggenheim Museum or Valencia with the City of Arts and Sciences as one of the most important initiatives.

For those who have already made the relevant parallels between Birmingham and Bilbao and Valencia, I would say that, as there is no recipe for success for each and every one of the cities, we can not conclude that any project with inspiration from those driven in Birmingham, automatically, assume a cutback in investment in social spending or an increase in rates of exclusion of sectors of lower class. Urge therefore, rigorous analysis case by case.

However, what is evident is that these projects in most cases, involve very large sums of public money, both for its construction or implementation and subsequent maintenance, making inevitable reflection in terms of opportunity cost. Clearly, I have no evidence to assess these aspects in the particular case of Bilbao or Valencia, but it can make a call to transparency and the necessary social debate.

Only then we will have the keys to a rigorous and objective assessment on actual results (outcomes) of initiatives such as the Guggenheim and the City of Arts and Sciences, without whose contribution today's Bilbao or Valencia could not be understood. Projects that, under this or other name will continue to "transform" our cities in the years to come.

NOTES

(1) Birmingham is at the heart of the region Westmidlands, a path between the prosperous South-West and North regions. This is the second English city by population (about one million inhabitants).

(2) During the decades of the '70s and '80s, the city suffered a monumental collapse produced mainly from a serious industrial crisis. I could be enough to say that the city lost the not inconsiderable figure of 191,000 jobs between 1971 and 1987, equivalent to 29% of total employment. The main beaten was the manufacturing sector with 149,000 jobs in the same period, 46% of the total.

(3) This period coincided throughout the UK with a radical transformation of urban policies derived from the rise to power in 1979 of the New Right and the breaking of the consensus around the Welfare State. The new policies pose a replacement, also locally, the role of public administration by private initiative, considered more efficient and effective. The new role of municipalities passed from mere management of resources from the state and its collectivization that characterized the earlier period (urban managerialism) to the so-called "urban entrepreneurship" (urban entrepreneurialism) characterized by reduced funding from the State and fierce competition among cities for public resources to urban regeneration in a time not forget, of general crisis.

(4) Among those criteria are "demonstrated ability to use public money on the way that was seen as appropriate by the central government "or "use those resources in areas with development potential, in many cases and at the discretion of Downing Street, the downtown or center of the

city.

(5) References: Parkinson, Foley, and Judd (1988), Parkinson (1993), Hambleton and Taylor (1993).

(6) Examples of such projects for the first time are the International Convention Center, National Indoor Arena, Hyatt Hotel or the development of Brindleyplace. During the period 1986/7-1991/2 Birmingham invested 331.1 million £ (GBP) or 470 million of Euros in "prestige projects in the downtown area.

(7) Part of such initiatives are failed nominations for the 1992 Olympics and 1996 or the now defunct Formula 2 race "Birmingham Grand Prix.

(8) In 1993, as a result of disagreements, Theresa Stewart's election as a candidate and then new lord of the city represented a significant reversal to the initial strategy. According to some experts, during their four years of management "was conducted in a transparent debate within local authorities and the media about the high financial costs and the impact of so-called prestige projects. The change of policies supposed to place areas such as education, housing and social services in the heart of the regeneration strategy, in what was called "back to basics", although without completely abandoning the strategy launched by the previous administration.

Mayor's leadership, however, was again challenged in 1999, after which Albert Bore (Chief Architect of an earlier era) was elected as new leader and led a return to the initial approaches, perhaps in this case with a larger consensus, promoting projects such as Eastside Regeneration Initiative, Millennium Point, new shopping malls as the large Bull Ring Development Project or the development of new housing of high standing in the downtown of the city.

(9) Both of these factors, during the period between 1986 / 7 and 1991 / 2 reached an average of 123 million pounds (about 180 million) less invested in housing, relative to the average expenditure of the different councils throughout England, which has meant dragging a need for investment in capital, according to estimates of 3 billion £ (4.5 billion Euros). The same trend of "disinvestment" was recognized in relation to educational services, with a fall in capital investment of 60% during construction of so-called prestige projects (Loftman and Nevin, 1998).

(10) The reference to social exclusion would be due to, on the one hand, the high prices of access to new leisure and entertainment infrastructures (Middleton, 1990) and, secondly, displacement of small to medium business after the boom in the commercial sector, with the help of macro-projects like the mall "Bull Ring development", giving way to large chains and franchises such as Starbucks, Café Nero or Borders.

There are no comments yet.