

CITY REGENERATION POLICIES NEED A CHANGE

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During the last 30 years neoliberal inspiration city regeneration policies have shaped many of European and US cities. It was back in the 1980's when there was a general consensus on the role of a particular type of projects as the right way for regeneration of many cities of the time. The aims were:

- Join the run for competitiveness and the New Economy.
- Engage with global economy and attract international investment and capital flows.
- Bring new tourist and enhance service economy (culture, financial services...) as an alternative to the loss of jobs in industry and manufacturing.
- Spread/socialise new neoliberal values: Aestheticism, competitiveness, flexibility...

Once tested in the US and the UK in cities such as Baltimore and Pittsburgh or Newcastle, London and Birmingham, those initiatives were broadly considered successful so they were copied by many others across Europe and even, to some extent, by cities around the rest of the world. Meanwhile, the core strategy in many cities had some of the following ingredients:

- Big Urban (identikit) Projects, involving huge amount of public investment.
- Culture (and more recently creative industries) as a tool for local economic recovery.
- The use of star architects and iconic buildings.
- Building new spaces for the service economy (technology parks, creative districts...)
- New high quality streets and public spaces.
- Refurbished or brand-new commercial districts and malls with increasing presence and market share of global chains and franchises.
- New governance tools that would use housing market capital gains to finance spatial planning strategies.
- City marketing strategies as a way of attracting tourists and investors.

After thirty years, those strategies are supposed to have brought plenty of success. Economic growth, jobs, improved image, the rise of a new service economy or better living standards and environment are just some of the positive impacts that, broadly speaking, such initiatives seem to have created. However, critics still continue to raise relevant questions about those processes undertaken:

- Has public space been privatised?
- Have those policies reduce social inequalities in our cities? What kinds of jobs have been created?
- Are creative and innovative districts what they were supposed to be? Have world-class cultural facilities really succeeded in terms of increasing the cultural production or rising interest on art?
- Has "regeneration" also meant gentrification, leaving high streets for big corporations, and reducing grassroots social, educational and cultural expenditures?
- Have those strategies being effective on the fight against growing regional inequalities?

It is not easy to respond to those questions and even less if we are thinking on making general statements considering "all cities" in general. However, what seems to be true is that after 30 years of promises, some old other new, challenges continue to be out there:

- ['Credit Crunch'](#) has put at risk many City Council budgets and the way of financing strategic spatial plans through a booming housing market.
- Increasing regional polarisation. The 'brain drain' and the rout of people and even businesses

from medium-sized cities to capital cities or abroad.

- Gentrification and the lack of urban life due too high housing and retail units' costs, the [struggle for historic preservation](#) versus modernity in many cities,...
- The Knowledge Society. How do we raise grassroots cultural and educational standards in order to meet innovation and creativity challenges?
- The need of "more and better jobs". The financial crisis has ended up involving the whole economy and has raised unemployment to levels of early 1990's.
- Growing social inequalities and the gap between the rich and the poor.
- Ageing.

Some of those are familiar others have raised in the last 10 years due to, for example, globalization or the rise of the knowledge economy. The question here then is quite clear: Are 1980's and 1990's neoliberal policies addressing those issues or do we need to reform them? From my personal point of view, the response to the second question is ["Yes, we do"](#). First, because the world we have got in 2010 is very different to the one that we had in 1980's. Second, because those policies have already being launched in almost every city, so we have too many cities offering the same and what is worse, it has not prove useful enough to tackle the biggest challenges of today.

There are no comments yet.