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Vers une renaissance anglaise ? Dix ans de politique travailliste de la ville

David Fée & Sylvie Nail (eds.)

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Reviewed by Timothy WHITTON

Sylvie Nail and David Fée have both written extensively on urban anthropology and housing policy in Great Britain. In their introduction to this book, they offer us a collection of eight hand picked articles - four in English and four in French - which describe in detail the challenges that New Labour has had to face in its attempts to breathe new life into England's urban landscape.[1] A biography of each author can be found at the end of the book and each chapter is rounded off with a detailed bibliography. When appropriate, photos and diagrams illustrate the dynamics involved in "urban renaissance". This term was chosen by New Labour in an attempt to fully merge housing policy with its "third way" approach to politics: given that it considered towns as the economic force of the nation, redesigning urban England was to reach out far beyond just "bricks and mortar" to incorporate a plethora of measures aimed at connecting up the various strands of urban society in order to provide people with a sense of community.

Despite the fact that their election manifesto only mentioned urban regeneration in passing, following the victory of New Labour in 1997 an "Urban Task Force" was appointed by Tony Blair. This distinctive military sounding title underlined the fact that New Labour wanted to give urban regeneration a strong sense of direction. Also, by asking the well known architect Richard Rogers to chair this "force", New Labour showed that its housing policy was going to incorporate an important element of "design" hitherto considered to be a relatively marginal consideration. Individuals and local communities were going to be placed at the heart of the debate rather than government or the State. The time had come to show that reviving urban communities had suffered from the priority given by successive conservative governments to the management of the economy.

Rogers original remit was to draw up plans to integrate brownfield sites into New Labour's urban renaissance project. According to New Labour, regenerating this kind of urban environment is an essential ingredient of urban renaissance given that it can alleviate pressure on greenfield sites and help create high density mixed use development. At the same time, recycling old buildings - as opposed to merely building new ones – can contribute to fostering a sustainable and more environmentally friendly future where the past is linked to a dynamic present. But despite these policy constraints, Rogers was vociferous in pointing out just how useful regeneration and high quality design could be from a social standpoint. According to his work which is constantly quoted in this book, protecting the environment, promoting diversity and maintaining a high quality public service infrastructure are inextricably linked to urban life and the aim should be to keep people in towns rather than drive them away in search of better living conditions. In this way investment in public services becomes not only more viable but also self evident since these services contribute to the cohesion that forms the heart of any community. Roger's ultimate advice was that short term benefits for business should be replaced by long term goals for communities, and that it is quite possible to influence people's behaviour by impacting on their surroundings. If England is considered to be a country where town planning is a respected tradition, urban design is supposed to have taken this a stage further by incorporating sustainable development and the creation of "multiactivity" holistic entities as opposed to dispersed elements created *ad hoc*.

This forms the theoretical backdrop to New Labour's "vision" of urban renaissance and to the community values it has been so keen to promote. To give substance to these ideas, New Labour's "Community Plans" highlighted its interest in sustainable communities and desire for long term interest and investment in housing while joining these policies up with other services and acknowledging market differences nationwide. Not only were local residents encouraged to play a greater role in their communities but also to promote culture as being part of the cement considered to be vital in improving neighbourhoods. This form of participative democracy characterises New Labour's brand of

[1] The focus is on England rather than on Great Britain given the transfer of power that took place from Westminster to Scotland, Northern Island, Wales and to a certain extent to the Greater London Authority.

urban renaissance since it can supposedly give people a sense of local identity. Until now, mainly professionals had benefited from investment in culture with specific needs being met unlike the holistic approach adopted via urban renaissance. However, the close involvement of residents in renovation has often meant that change has been tailored to existing structures rather than to overall policy resulting in the outright gentrification of certain neighbourhoods.

This corresponds to one of the leitmotifs of this book in that despite the marketing, New Labour's neo-liberal ethos has constantly played a predominant role in defining regeneration policies. The contribution of the historic environment in England to New Labour's urban renaissance is a case in point since ten years on, once renovated, a majority of these buildings are still reserved for an elite minority. Not only does this fly in the face of the community spirit New Labour has been so keen to foster but also undermines the credibility of supposedly "non-exclusionary" third way politics whereby social welfare and the market supposedly coexist in peace. But above all, the renovation of historic buildings – and all the more so when partnerships have been used – has not been undertaken so much for the cultural or community value of the architecture as for its potential to lever private investment into town centres. The "creative industries"[2] have by and large played the same role insofar as they too have been considered primarily as an economic resource, a marketable commodity that can attract private investment into urban areas. What is more, because everything has to be forward looking for New Labour, urban renaissance firmly anchors culture and history in the future rather than in the past.

Empirical evidence is constantly provided by the different authors and particular attention is paid to the market towns which are used to illustrate New Labour's political investment in urban regeneration. The market towns are perfect examples of how rural and urban areas have merged to provide ideal test areas for sustainable development all the more so that local authorities have supposedly been given more power to deal with local issues. To this end, the Market Town Initiative (MTI) was supposed to reinforce the necessary infrastructure to encourage urban renaissance by creating new and rekindling older projects. But once again, the economic performance–and especially job creation-of MTIs has been closely monitored by government keen on stimulating a sense of community but also on generating profit. The outcome is that MTIs have become the expression of New Labour's overall economic policy rather than a vector of its desire to improve urban England. MTIs promote equality rather than fight inequalities and in this light have the potential to embrace well established local people rather than populations generally excluded from mainstream society. This is all the more obvious given the fact that through the MTI scheme, local authorities have become essentially enablers operating within a framework of partnerships and this environment smacks of central government's ideology to the detriment of regional priorities.

The recent evolution of Birmingham is discussed at length to describe the successes and failures of New Labour's urban renaissance policies. The government's ambition was to change the perception people had of their towns and what better way to do this than concentrate on the highly visible town centre? The contrast between this part of Birmingham and the surrounding urban areas is striking and although work began on the town centre well before New Labour came to power, this has not stopped the government from claiming credit for the improvements. Elsewhere, New Labour has continued the thatcherite policy of bolstering the homeowners' market by selling off as much publicly owned housing as possible. This is in tune with its overall policy of refusing somewhat dogmatically to make choices that might upset the national economy but has resulted in higher house prices and tensions between the regions which have not all benefited from concomitant growth and renewal strategies. Yet this would have been more logical and contributed substantially to reducing the North-South divide as far as housing is concerned.

New Labour's record as far as urban renaissance is concerned is not only conveyed by empirical evidence in this book. In the theoretical discussion about the quantitative indicators used by government to assess performance, the suggestion is that New Labour has constantly sought to increase central control. In this respect, the delegation of power to local and regional agencies has been accompanied by a clear reinforcement of centralised funding and performance assessment even though it has been difficult to define appropriate indicators for all aspects of urban regeneration. At the same time, the market mechanisms established by the successive governments of Mrs Thatcher to replace the socialist welfare state have by and large been maintained by New Labour. Despite the rhetoric about questioning inherited ways and means, the short term result culture has meant that

[2] New Labour's buzz word for "culture".

fundamental theoretical and methodological analysis has been sidelined. This has thwarted inventiveness in the field of housing just like the performance culture which is designed for economics rather than innovation.

It cannot be denied that some parts of this book need specialist knowledge to be fully appreciated but generally speaking, the novice is able to glean a clear picture of the way in which urban renaissance has evolved over the last decade. The overall impression that the eight authors give is that the "joined-up" approach New Labour has been so keen to promote has been very disappointing. This is because market forces have been obeyed rather than any long term project as put forward by visionaries such as Richard Rogers. The English historic environment and the creative industries have been integrated into urban renaissance more as marketable commodities than as long term values of British heritage. The market towns, supposed laboratories of third way urban renaissance infrastructure have highlighted the fact that short term financial necessities cannot foster the long term vision that urban renaissance requires. In Birmingham, while the town centre is admired by all, the surrounding urban areas are still in a state of severe decline and fail to encourage people to stay within the city's boundaries. But above all it is young people who continue to suffer disproportionately from the failings of urban renaissance. The variety of remedies that New Labour has conjured up to deal with multiple deprivation are part and parcel of the "joined-up" approach but once more, communication based on buzz words such as "task forces" and "special units" has taken precedence over substance.

Proper urban renaissance takes years, even generations to mature and is incompatible with market led policies aiming at a quick return on investment. The property-led approach defined by developers, lenders and investors and adopted by contemporary governments has undoubtedly increased overall inequality in England especially given that as from 1997, housing policy and the housing market were divorced from one another. Despite this, it would be churlish to suggest that urban renaissance has been nothing but a damp squib since the growing desire to identify urban need has generated increased interest in statistical information and thus the attention of policy makers. But by adopting the line of "least resistance" rather than reshaping the market more fundamentally New Labour has revealed its limits. The very latest crises have shown that at some stage, market based systems require increased intervention by the State to keep the market working.