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THE NEW URBAN VISIONS OF LONDON: IS SAFETY IN
PUBLIC SPACE THE MAJOR ISSUE?
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THE NEW URBAN VISIONS OF LONDON: IS SAFETY IN PUBLIC SPACE THE MAJOR ISSUE?

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Reflection Papers

The Urban Age reflection papers summarise the city-specific investigation within each core knowledge area by merging the preliminary research with the debates at each regional conference. They are written for a general audience from a variety of backgrounds and need to inform both urban scholars and practitioners. It is part of the project's mission to provide a high level of interdisciplinary accessibility and practical relevance to all thematic areas while also complying with the rigour of each professional or academic discipline. Each locality is highlighted not to evaluate existing urban practice but to rather learn from both its successes and failures; to put forward a consensus on city development and to identify areas of disagreement. Reflection papers guarantee the continuity of outputs that will ultimately lead to a more general publication as the project's final product.

Abstract

Cities are vulnerable yet they are also resilient. This paper discusses issues of security and long-term social trust that need to be considered in cities that are redeveloping rapidly as it is the case of London. The focus is on Elephant and Castle, an existing inner-city neighbourhood with a through plan of revitalization, and on the proposed Olympic Village planned in vacant land in the Lower Lea Valley. The paper argues that security needs to be conceived as thick public good that requires the participation of both the state and various sectors of civil society, managing social conflicts and the new roles that city play as an intersection of local and global dynamics.

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Introduction

Cities are vulnerable, but they are also resilient; they can adapt to very rapid change as in the case of Shanghai, and they can recover from tragedy as in the case of New York City and other cities have been the recent target of terrorist attacks. In all parts of the world, it was known a day after July 7, 2005 how Londoners had chosen to resume their daily routines, to move on and ride buses and trains, as many residents had already chosen to do in New York after 9/11, 2001 and in Madrid after March 11th, 2004 – the ridership there dropped for just two months, as psychologist A. Lopez-Rousseau discovered. However, the very next day after the bombing, train travel was four times higher than normal as Spaniards attended huge anti-terrorism demonstrations (Rosenthal, 2005:2). Lynn Eden, the author of *Whole World on Fire*, an analysis of military bombing and damage predictions, suggests that this collective optimism of action, widely praised and commented upon, reveals that a city does not stop functioning after a massive attack, except perhaps in extreme cases such as Dresden, Nagasaki or Hiroshima. But a question remains: how does a city act when further attacks are to be anticipated?

1. Are cities then so resourceful and sound that they can just absorb any blow?

Are people adaptable enough to go on with their life under almost any threat? Or can certain threats deeply unsettle populations? (Carey, 2002:2) These are some of the questions that planners need to keep in mind when they envision future spaces for a city such as London, a city which moreover will welcome the Olympic Games and millions of visitors in 2012. People make sense of bombs and of suicide-bombers; they are aware of what violence can do and why certain targets are chosen. "People can handle their fears", Y. Rubenstein, a researcher at Tel Aviv University wrote in a recent paper. "They do so by acquiring the necessary skills" (Rosenthal, 2005). They choose to be scared by certain

risks even if the odds of being targeted are almost none – as when a SARS epidemic broke out in Asia or in rapport to the transportation of toxic wastes – and to ignore others. This allows them to go on and to exert some control over their destiny. The historical example of the blitz hitting the city during World War Two with a toll of 60 000 deaths is a case in point. James Thompson, a senior lecturer in psychology at University College in London says that each morning, he passes sites of a couple of Irish Republican Army terrorist bombings as he walks to the Tube, which puts things in a slightly different perspective. Yet planners cannot discard the fact that if insecurity persists for months, then communities end up turning on themselves. Neighbours start distrusting each other and making scapegoats out of 'dangerous others' who are easy to find in multicultural cities. Investors and tourists, in the meantime, choose to go elsewhere. In brief, social corrosion breaks the thin threads of the social fabric cities are made of, slowly here, rapidly there.

2. In a metropolis like London, how can residents be helped acquire a sense of security and of resilience out of public space? How can feelings of inclusiveness, trust and empowerment be generated?

More civic participation in cohesive public spaces is one answer. "City-centres represent possibly the last significant concentrations of universally accessible, urban public space where people of different classes, races and cultures can meet" (Tiesdell & Oc, 1998). Long-term studies show that patient, modest, almost invisible processes of mediation among residents and planners and among diverse old and new class-differentiated residents have proven efficient. To invite people into designing and then occupying the new or renewed spaces with their children is one option. But risks taken in boosting civic participation and in "assembling human fragments" in projects which are still in the making in renewed zones should not be

minimised. Expert alchemists are needed – no one can be certain that the "big lumps of kit" imagined by designers and planners will fully materialise into viable and vibrant neighbourhoods, and that communities will bond locally as they will also bridge with other communities across the metropolis. On the other hand, studies also show that when people do not know who their neighbours are, the city as a whole becomes more vulnerable (Powers 2005).

An option to these preventive measures would obviously deal with more law enforcement. Security, planned and elaborated at the top by professional law enforcers, is intended to trickle down to the streets and other public spaces. According to the annual MORI poll, 60% of Londoners say that the fear of crime adversely affects the quality of life, over 50% say the same about unease over safety and these concerns are particularly strong among older people and women. After housing, addressing safety and crime is the second most important priority for improving London as a place to live. It is even the highest priority in many parts of London, including those with lower housing prices. The concern for security links multicultural populations, of all ages, different genders and social classes. It is more expressed by older people, lone parents and single-person households, but there are surprisingly few differences between ethnic groups and between the deprived and the affluent, except for tenants in social housing who voice more discontent.

A victimisation survey from 2004 revealed that crime (25 acts of violence against the person per 1000 residents- homicides excepted) is higher than for New York (6 per 1000) (Upso and al, 2004). Crime rates are one third higher in the inner-city of London, especially those concerning mugging (243 incidents per 10,000 adults in London). Fear of mugging, burglary and teenagers hanging around are the main reasons for feeling unsafe, along with the lack of a police presence coming forth. In the MORI poll, over 60% of the respondents said that more police on foot would help improve safety levels.

London anti-crime policies are solidly enforced in the police districts of the 32 boroughs. The Mayor and the Greater London Authority are responsible for the policing strategy which is supervised by the Home Secretary and enforced by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. The preference for crime prevention is expressed by the Close Circuit Television cameras – which are more numerous in London than anywhere else in Europe; and by checkpoints and concrete barriers

transforming neighbourhoods into defensible spaces. There are about 30 000 police officers in London which is better policed than the rest of the country. Every 1.3 seconds, an Anti-Social Behaviour Order is enforced, according to the Home Office (2003). Law enforcers have also been given new tools to tackle terrorism and bring perpetrators to courts and yet, despite the 75% increase in counter-terrorism operations since the attacks (*The Guardian*, December 20, 2005), the fortress is far from impregnable. "We have to be lucky all the time, they have to be lucky only once", a police officer remarks (*The Economist*, July 9 2005:27).

3. The case of Elephant and Castle

Elephant and Castle is a disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhood of 56 000 residents with a high concentration of ethnic groups and immigrants. The largest African community of London dwells at Elephant and Castle (18.3% of the population vs. 5.3% in London and 9.1% in England) where 90 dialects are spoken (the population is 41.7% minorities vs. 28.8% in London and 9.1% in England). The area is located south of the River Thames just ten minutes away from the Tate Modern; based on the untapped potentials of this central location, the local council of Southwark now has ambitious plans for its redevelopment and bright visions for the future shape of its public space.

One key issue to consider in this process and the current and future identity of the area is the intersection of social disadvantage, security, and the liveliness and attractiveness of public places in cities. Elephant and Castle has indeed a reputation for crime, drugs and anti-social behaviour. According to Ian Thomas, the local chief superintendent of police, muggings and phone snatching are frequent on poorly lit streets of this residential area that also functions as a transport node connecting the suburbs in South London to the employment concentrations of Central London. Public space in Elephant and Castle is also currently defined by a series of roundabouts dominated by car traffic and with sterile cores surrounded by equally unappealing built structures, the large market in the area was once named London's ugliest building. The bad reputation of the neighbourhood in London also relates to the presence of very large estates of socially rented accommodation that are in a condition of disrepair and by the visible physical and social decay of its streets.

It is obvious that to reach its multiple goals of physical renewal, benefits for the existing population, and the attraction of private investment, Elephant and Castle has to provide a sense of safety for all its different users,

current and potential. It needs to connect and integrate its diverse existing communities in order to provide a comprehensive public grid. Tensions may arise between, broadly speaking, two very different social types of residents. The estates concentrate socially disadvantaged families: 60% of Southwark wards fall in the category of England's most deprived areas (10% of all wards nationally). But there are also fashionable riverside flats and refurbished Victorian terrace houses opening up new opportunities for a different type of residents. But can first entry immigrant families easily mix with the *bobos* (bohemian/bourgeois) and other upwardly mobile categories? Obviously, immigrant families who pay low rent in this neighbourhood want to stay and fear demolitions and possible steep rent increases that would follow the renovation of the local housing stock. For some groups, it is better to be poor in a central city location, close to jobs and support sources than at the periphery – in Shanghai, a very different city from London but also one whose centre is being revalorized and rapidly developed, residents of dilapidated housing struggle to stay rather than move to modern apartments in the outskirts.

However, for *bobos* who are also attracted to the proximity to the centre and by the accessibility provided by public transport, crime, the presence of gangs, and potential racial conflicts lead them to perceive the public space and the streets as unsafe, particularly during night time. These groups and their consumption patterns may also increase the local demand for specialized shops and expensive products, therefore initiating new neighbourhood development dynamics, claims for more clearly safe public space and conflicts with less advantaged old timers.

The social question is embodied in struggles for place, in atomised side by side forms of mobilisations claiming exclusive use of space and the privilege to coin the identity of that space as their own reflection. As elsewhere, the demolition of social housing meant to yield space for the affluent categories is controversial, even if the local council promises that no displacement will occur and that the levels of social housing will be maintained. To receive support for their cause, various categories of poor people compete with each other over the definition of deprivation and over immediate and recognisable needs. Can the city accommodate a wide diversity of population in a space as restricted as Elephant and Castle, where people do not know who their neighbours are, where each wave of newcomers disrupt already fragile constructions made of social threads woven by time? Who has control over the

processes? The police exert a mission of crime prevention, according to Ian Thomas. The area's innovative approach to community safety has been awarded Beacon status. Policemen outreach in public schools and explain what law is to young students; they organise meetings with churches and form partnerships; they launch forums and work on populations' fear of crime and de-dramatise issues. Any event dramatically covered and blown up by the media and exploited by politicians can indeed defeat months of efforts to install trust and collective well-being, despite the poverty of the area. The mission of the police is to get "the territory back" from gangs, prostitutes and criminals. It is in their interest to act on a sense of inclusiveness via safety and have people stay rather than leave the neighbourhood. It ensures that a more secure yet diverse population can then bridge in with other parts of the city.

4. The case of the Olympic Project in the Lower Lea Valley, East London

The questions raised in an existing neighbourhood such as Elephant and Castle assume a different complexity when there is "no there there". The Olympic project intends to have a £250 million, 80 000 seat sports stadium, a £650 million Olympic village and all kinds of sports facilities constructed in the derelict area of the Lower Lea Valley where the regeneration site is located. But what is of interest here is the building of sustainable homes for 20 000 residents along with schools and parks at a cost of £800 million, and the programme launched to help local job seekers get access to the projected 12 000 permanent jobs, not to mention temporary jobs. Can then Olympic Park become a vibrant and lively neighbourhood like any other? How much can it catalyse a regeneration of the surrounding derelict environment? Will a community form or will it remain a token of the fact that the Games took place in 2012? What will its identity be? Will it be entirely conceived out of design? The question on the transformation of architectural planning into a fine-grained and subtle community is what the challenge is about.

The park is intended for future city users who will be more ethnically diverse than is the case now and who will be looking for an affordable and accessible environment. Yet planners as well as politicians have tourists and visitors in mind when they envision the profit which can be made out of the area. After 2007, the Eurostar will bring visitors from Paris via high-speed trains to Stratford City in two hours and half. How will they be welcome and feel at ease? If the balance is not right, they will skip Stratford and take instead a low-cost plane to come to London. If the balance is too much in

their favour, residents will experience disenfranchisement and withdraw from the public space which they will no longer consider as their own. A clear design distributing space and amenities for visitors and those for residents can solve some of the contradictions at first but then it must contribute to social mixing in the streets, the parks, the public transport shared by various users.

Will these spaces have the same density? Planning policy should keep in mind that if sports facilities are deserted except for specific moments of day or night when events take place, and if there is not enough pedestrian concentration, such areas may engender fear. The example of North Michigan Avenue in Chicago shows that this challenge can be met. North Michigan Avenue used to be an unsafe area in the 1970s, but changes in planning policy a decade later favouring mixed uses, brought 20 000 new residents into the area which turned into a 24-hour zone occupied by residents, tourists in hotels, shoppers, diners as well as office workers becoming one of the safest neighbourhoods in the city (Oc, Tiesdell, 1999). "The City that never sleeps" concept is a useful mechanism to consider neighbourhoods in a more positive and expansive manner (Body-Gendrot, 2005; O'Brien and alii., 2006). Activities taking places in functional buildings such as courts of justice or multi-service public schools percolate through and infuse vibrancy in the streets where they are located. For instance, instead of letting the City plan a police academy as a high-rise tower, the residents of Melrose in the Bronx suggested an horizontal facility which would require police trainees to move from one building to another to go to the cafeteria or to the sports facility. These moves gave action to the street and established a relationship between the police trainees and the street passers-by (Body-Gendrot, 1995). Establishing an open market place or leisure activities may serve a similar function of interaction, provided the environment is safe and attractive for a wide range of people. Only then can a re-appropriation of space by the people and a reinterpretation of its use in an inventive, unexpected manner occur. As observed by Saskia Sassen, "the intersection of differences produces something new"..."a structuring sort of logic, a dash of anarchy, inefficiency, disorder (and) because in that possibility lies this making, such intersections can be productive" (2005).

Security will remain a major concern both for planners and for public officials in charge of the Olympic Park which will gradually become part of London. A budget of £225 million has been set aside for that purpose (less than half the amount spent by Athens) but the costs

could be pushed up, according to the Secretary of Culture (*The Guardian*, July 16, 2005; *Daily Mail*, July 27, 2005).

Conclusion

"Perceptions and feelings of personal safety are prerequisites for a vital and viable city centre. If a city centre is not perceived to be safe, those with choice will choose not to use it, making it less safe for those with fewer choices. Hence, there is an important social justice dimension to efforts towards making city centre safer" (Oc and Tiesden, 1999). In the Olympic Park, obviously a target for future terrorist attacks which are inevitable, according to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Authority, Ian Blair and to a poll for the *Economist* after the attacks (July 30, 2005: 23), a visible police presence is required by all the users. Not only must there be signals that security in the public space is taken care of (yet not excessively, which could be counter-productive and fear-generating) but clear identifications of who is in charge – one of the 2,000 private security officers, one of the guards attached to a semi-public building, one of the 1, 500 Police Community Support Officer - should be visibly notified to the public. As much as possible, safety should remain a public good. When privatised, surveillance generates feelings of exclusion among some who feel not welcome or intimidated in such and such public space (Lyon, 2003). Too often new urban spaces betray the democratic appeal of the city *raison d'être*.

Explanations regarding fireproofing, better security cameras and more safety glass in the design of the Olympic buildings, especially high rise buildings should be circulated, but no more than necessary in order to avoid moral panic. The design of exits and passageways for safe and efficient evacuations, the use of steel columns, for example, necessitates colossal budgets. No need to remember that very few Games have ever made a profit (the bill for Athens Olympics comes in at about £6 billion, more than double the original budget).

Obviously, well-intentioned but marginally effective efforts to create barriers are not the first method to reduce the sense of vulnerability towers inspire. Ideally, civic participation (the "eyes and ears of citizens" Jane Jacobs is talking about rather than formal teams of Neighbourhood watches (1961:45)) should be consensual, establishing norms out of the promotion of a sense of proprietorship and ownership of the place. It would create links between various populations sharing the same concerns. It would lead to governance

partnerships between users and public and private agents –bus drivers, street cleaners, car park attendants, caretakers, street-level bureaucrats, etc. who already contribute to produce a sense of safety by their very presence. As such, it should be a lesson which could be drawn from the London experience. But this issue may also be conflict-ridden if it is not carefully elaborated and mediated, in which case, top-down law enforcement will prevail to have rules enforced and freedoms restricted before, hopefully, compromises are worked out, according to time and space use. "The key issue is the extent to which people might trade certain rights of citizenship for greater feelings of safety" (Oc and Tiesden, 1999).

In brief, if successful, the new urban projects of London, including the 500 acre Olympic Park, will be an international showcase for the city's culture and creativity as well as a magnet for investments, tourism and business. The effects of London 2012 will be felt long after the Olympic flame has left the capital. But after the terrorist attacks of July 2005, uncertainties concerning the future cannot be dismissed lightly. The Secretary of Culture, Jessa Jowell, has stated that there will be no threshold for the security costs and that the experience of Atlanta is simply not acceptable.

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