

TERRITORIO DELLA RICERCA  
SU INSEDIAMENTI E AMBIENTE  
RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE  
DI CULTURA URBANISTICA

10

che "genere"  
di città  
per il futuro



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Fig.1 London, Canary Wharf

## Urban regeneration and market-led planning during the Thatcher years

**Antonio ACIERNO**

*Margaret Thatcher was the only woman to have held the office of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990, years in which the urban regeneration of inner cities occurred in UK becoming an example in all countries of Europe. She emphasised deregulation and privatisation influencing urban development and creating a new market-led planning. This is not a paper on Margaret Thatcher but on urban regeneration in the 1980s, which has some similarities with nowadays urban context characterized by economic crisis.*

### 1. Different approaches to the concept of development

The term “urban development”, in English language, is wide and may be represented by the construction of new towns, regeneration of inner cities or disused land, conservation of historic places, modernization of ancient buildings and so on, until to encompass every action in the built environment.

The object of this analysis is restricted to a particular activity which is exactly described by Adams<sup>1</sup> (1994):

*«...continuous change has always characterized the urban environment. Existing buildings are adapted to new uses. Obsolete buildings fall vacant and may be demolished. New buildings are constructed on sites where demolition has taken place and on land not previously in urban use. Whether change occurs slowly and is almost unnoticed, or happens rapidly and is highly disruptive, a production process is creating a finished product: the built environment. This form of production is known as the land & property development process».*

So I'm referring to a kind of development of urban sites generally defined as “regeneration”, particularly occurred in the 1980s. To talk about regeneration in the 1980s is not simple for the wide range of interventions and policies which were adopted and sometimes with much difference in typology, size and process.

Usually the word “regeneration” was used in the 1970s only for the inner cities problems or disused lands derived by deindustrialization process. At the end of decade, different policy measures were adopted to tackle the increasing decline of these areas. Furthermore the term was used for the first time in the USA to describe a particular kind of city revitalization based on physical regeneration of localities, investments in buildings and infrastructure<sup>2</sup>. Later on, it became a word meaning a rebuilding of the urban city through a property-led approach.

In 1990s, after the experiences and the failures of part of urban policies, intellectuals and planners have been exploring the concept of regeneration to understand the whole nature of this urban activity. It became so common in those years that the word “development” is used to refer only to the “regeneration” and nothing else.

As Lichfield noted<sup>3</sup> the word “urban regeneration” is able to conjure up a lot of various images and every actor involved in a development has likely an own view of that. The definition given in the *Bidding Guidance for the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)* was « ... *regeneration is used as a shorthand term for sustainable regeneration, economic development and industrial competitiveness*» and in such a manner it is addressed to reverse decline of disused or derelict areas. Therefore it is clear that the definition of regeneration is linked to the concepts of “decline” and “poverty”. Usually we define them as low quality properties in physical and economic terms. Lichfield sought to analyse these features in order to trace a diagram of *poverty balance*.

It is composed of three main groups of factors which are in charge of this process: *external factors* depending on international economy and national policies; *intrinsic factors* subdivided into personal ones concerning education, enterprise and willingness to change of local people and buildings concerning the physical conditions of the area; *local organisation and management* in terms of education, community services, traffic and so on.

The poverty balance is based on two essential elements: person which are not able to pay and buildings with low standards of layout, maintenance, etc. When this balance is disturbed by external factors the subsequent problems can belong to the first branch, such as homeless people, difficulty of accommodating business or to the second one like, for example, waste and derelict areas. In these areas it is possible to find social functions which, if they are sustained, could promote a positive improvement of the bad conditions. However, what happens more frequently is the trigger to decline process. The loss of confidence in people produces an increasing lack of initiative and investment through a waste of human and economic resources until the end point of alienation, crime and more generally human suffering.

The strategy of regeneration should be formulated on the basis of the analysis of poverty balance in order to achieve the following goals: first of all, the purpose of regeneration aimed to solve human suffering problem, thus buildings, which represent the physical aspect of poverty, must be taken in account only as cause of that; secondly, it is important identify the social groups affected by the decline and regeneration process; thirdly, detailed survey of the real state of the area could suggest the main actions of



*Fig.2 Margaret Thatcher (Grantham, 1925 – London, 2013), the Iron Lady, was the only woman to have held the office of Prime Minister of the UK from 1979 to 1990*

the strategy. If we accept this approach, then, the concept of regeneration will be seen as a development process aiming the reverse of a previous state of social poverty and of derelict site through stimulating of market forces by external agents (private and public sectors). As a result the development is recognised as a self-regeneration process where planning plays the significant role to define strategy and to control its implementation.

Another interesting approach to cycle of decline is given by the work of Adams et al.<sup>4</sup>, albeit in strictly economic terms. Starting from Myrdal's analysis on the spread and backwash effects it investigates the industrial property markets in inner cities putting in evidence particular characteristics of regeneration areas. Myrdal's analysis shows the spread benefits for public and private sectors depending on the investments attracted into an area which will contribute to the decline of other areas, generally already depressed (backwash effect). Doing so, the latter will be improved, in physical terms, by a growing economic process (spread effect). By contrast this positive development will quickly enter a cycle of decline.

In the industrial field this process is hard to reverse because the industrialist's demand for expanding own activities does not meet a suitable supply in the inner cities. So the industries prefer to move out of the area towards sites in which development is already carrying out. This tendency produces a passive behaviour of many owners of disused buildings and vacant land, who wait for the others in undertaking the development. That represents a strong obstacle to regeneration.

This last statement determines two main observations :

- a) the regeneration is a complex process depending on many interests and actors involved
- b) the focal point of urban policy in the 1980s was focused on eliminating the obstacles trying to attract private investments into areas to promote "regeneration" in physical and economic terms.

## 2. Agency and structure in the development process

In a development process a variety of activities take place before, through and after its implementation. Many actors contribute to the preparation, evaluation and implementation in different stages and performing several functions.

Many attempts to explain these concepts have been made to achieve a comprehensive model of development. For instance, Healey<sup>5</sup> (1991) identified four types of model : *equilibrium model* based directly on neo-classical economics; *event-sequence model* describing the actors and the stages of management of development process; *agency-model* focusing on actors and their relationships; *structure model* identifying the forces that determine and drive the dynamics of the development.

Other examples may be added but the Healey's classification could be considered almost exhaustive of the different approaches. For the description of the development process she adopted a model based essentially on its main functions<sup>6</sup>.

The main functions in development process are:

- *finance* performed by several agents such as banks, insurance companies, pension funds, building society which are involved in all of the stages of process from the previous use, through the mediation and development until the new use;
- *promotion* of development including many sub-functions undertaken by different agents such as landowners, industrial firms, financial institutions or pure promoters which like the finance could be involved in all of the stages of process;
- *production* is the central activity of whole development standing between the previous use and the subsequent new use, therefore it occupies only a stage and is performed by builders;
- *consumption* which could assume different kinds of use like owner-occupation or rental system divided in a range of sub-sectors.

At the end of the cycle we find a further stage corresponding to land vacancy which represents a transient stage of built environment. Next step, moving out of vacancy, is a critical point of regeneration where planning can be active to promote public and private interventions.

The model described above shows the probable actors involved and the main functions of development but that is not enough to understand the entire process. As Adams argues, it is necessary to complete the description referring to the nature of the social and economic background in which the process is carried out. Adams calls it “*structure*”, that is “*the organisation of economic and political activity and the prevailing values that frame individual decision-making*”. The interpretation of the structure and the subsequent patterns of decision-making depend on the particular approach to the subject.

The *neo-classical economics*, based on free market, sees the development as a free activity in the market which gives signals, through demand of development, to the actors to begin the process. However this ideal model does not explore the presence of some elements able to impede the process, such as planning constraints or particular landowners’ behaviour.

The *marxist economics*, instead, investigates the development within the accumulation of capital process where the finance plays an important role in searching constantly new opportunities to achieve the highest rate of profit. The capital moves into favoured location only for short terms determining a flowing activity in the market which produces the unevenness and volatility in the development process. Therefore the land & property development process experiences short economic booms followed by long period of slump determining uneven economic cycles.

From the last point the *institutionalism* analysis starts stating the development process is not influenced merely by market and resources flows but also by rules and culture of society. The development framework and, in particular the decision making-process, is composed of three main elements:

- *resources*, both private under the form of finance capital and both public like central and local authorities’ expenditure;



Fig.3 London, Canary Wharf

- *politico-juridical rules* which try to control the development to safeguard the environmental quality reconciling with social facilities and economic opportunities;

- *cultural ideas and values* coming from a wide social debate. This framework is not fixed but continually affected by challenge producing a constant interaction between economic, political and social factors and therefore it is very difficult to set a secure urban policy to tackle the development process.

The role of planning in development has become much more complex because of the volatility of market, the large number of actors involved and the long sequence of stages. As Adams<sup>7</sup> points out

*“the planner is only one actor, and by no means the most powerful, and planning permission is only one event, and by no means the most significant”.*

The role of planning in the 1980s has been less powerful than in the previous period. Since the early years after the second world war the development had focused mainly on the reconstruction and later on expansion of the cities. In the 1960s and 1970s the deindustrialization process changed the aim of planning converting it from a driven expansion role to a more restrictive one. In the 1980s, when the “regeneration” became the main aspect of development, planning was not able to achieve a renewal role in driving the process.

In the 1990s, after the experience of the urban politics in the Thatcher years, planning system was searching an appropriate role in development process, recognising its place in a market economy and seeking to regulate the unevenness and volatility created by economic cycles.

### 3. Politics & Practices of development in 1980s.

The large amount of reconstructed areas in Britain all over the 1980s certainly made this period one of the most significant in the post-war period. Particularly the developments carried out in the inner cities or on disused lands represent the majority of the construction activity, in comparison with operations in new settlements.

However, the intense activity has occurred during the planning crisis of the late 1970s, thereby expanding the problems involved in regeneration<sup>8</sup>. During the decade, as Brindley argues, planning lost its confidence towards public opinion and its capability to answer the current needs of society, derived by the deindustrialization and renovation of production process in 1960s and 1970s. Planning had failed to achieve the modernisation of the built environment which was, instead, scattered with unfinished projects of infrastructure, uncompleted city centres redevelopment and with a large number of

derelicts areas. Moreover planning was not able to prevent undesirable developments such as destruction of historic sites and decline in the inner cities.

Planning had revealed scarce efficiency to solve these problems and its strong subordination to direct political control. Furthermore it had shown its dependence on economic growth when the economic crisis of early 1970s occurred pushing the private sector in the recession without planning could do anything to control it. Planning system was essentially based on state regulation of private sector and deeply dependent on it. As a result planning was led out of the concrete participation to the market process which became the real guidance of development.

That change produced a wide fragmentation of planning activity in the 1980s, usually known as *led-market planning*. Brindley identified several typologies of planning styles each of them derived by analysis of particular projects. Some refer to standard process ruled by current laws and procedures and others represent exceptional cases dependent on extraordinary measures.

Since the early 1980s with Conservative Thatcher government policy had brought forward several initiatives to cope the increasing problems of inner cities, such as *Business in Community*, *Task Forces*, *City Grants*, *Enterprise Zones*, *Urban Development Corporations*, *Simplified Planning Zones* until the *City Challenge* and *Urban Development Agency* at early 1990s. Yet, despite of these special measures many other projects followed the normal procedures fixed essentially by *Town and Country Acts* and represent even interesting cases of urban regeneration.

I'll try to describe the different politics of the two approaches: standard and extraordinary. Development process under standard planning system is based on Development Plans (Structure Plan & Local Plan) and Development Control.

Local authorities have two main functions: first, they draw up plans for future development and land use; second, they have power to grant or refuse planning permission for redevelopment schemes. Through these powers planning should be able to guide the development to achieve public goals. However, as *New Left*<sup>9</sup> has argued in the 1980s, planning system has shown a weakness since it seems more follow rather than direct the market. As a result the market forces, which lead the development, have produced sometimes uneven outcomes, inequity and waste of resources.

Diverse criticism has been given by *New Right* which sees the planning rules extremely restrictive and constrained for the private sector. Therefore it re-emphasised the self regulation of market and claimed major freedom for investors and developers.

The developments carried out by extraordinary measures can be explained essentially referring to two main models which represent the core of Conservative Thatcher policy



Fig.4 London, Canary Wharf

in the 1980s: *Enterprise Zones* and *Urban Development Corporations*.

Indeed, other special procedures have not received the same level of funding from private sector and the same high level of public expenditure and political support. So we could say that they represented the British solution to “urban regeneration” in the 1980s. The central issue of these procedure consists in the use of public sector finance to stimulate a weak market in order to achieve an higher dynamics in private sector investment. Actually this approach was not a new one in urban politics because the partnership between public and private sector has been largely used in the past but it was surely emphasised in the Thatcher years.

*Enterprise Zones*<sup>10</sup> were established in 1980 on the proposal of Sir Geoffrey Howe who adopted an idea stated some years before by Professor Peter Hall. Indeed P. Hall suggested to apply the free market growth strategy, such as those in Hong Kong, Malaysia and South Korea, in Great Britain in order to promote economic development, private investment, new employment and, finally, the regeneration in the inner cities<sup>11</sup>. The means of this scientific experiment were the abolition of taxation and regulatory bureaucracy in relation to the protection of employment rights.

Howe picked up this “ideal project” for his proposal of Enterprise Zones whose rational was quite different from Peter Hall’s<sup>12</sup>. Indeed Howe believed the failure of British economy was caused by interventionism so he proposed the application of tax abatement and planning deregulation to establish the prosperity in the country. EZs were designed, above all, to achieve this goal which is more political than technical.

The designation of an area as *Enterprise Zone* means exemption from rates, abolishment of development land tax and industrial training levies. Moreover the firms involved in specific projects received strong subsidies through the *Urban Development Grant*. Other indirect subsidies by local authority had granted through the reclamation of the land to make it suitable for development without costs for private developers.

At the beginning of 1990s, after ten years of application of this policy, however, many criticisms developed around its economic effects. Enterprise Zones have been seen as a failure in theory and policy. The Howe’s thesis on the suffering British economy, produced by excessive taxation and regulation, was not revealed as true. EZs have not seemed to be a powerful instrument of this policy. Firstly, many of them have not been located in the inner cities; secondly the incentives promoted by Government have favoured essentially the property and not the medium firms like the law would; thirdly the major impact of EZs has been mainly physical development and not economic.

A focal point in this mechanism has been the tax exemption, however, as Talbot argued, it was also used in other countries to attract bank investment in derelict areas to promote the regeneration, but it does not represent the only factor to encourage economic growth. In fact it seems, a tax concession works when all other factors are equal<sup>13</sup>. Talbot suggested to use it in a positive way, for example, to renovate particular buildings which have been empty for many years and with high costs of eventual restoration. In this case a relax tax regime could effectively stimulate developers to undertake a process of regeneration. Furthermore, EZs represent a fundamental paradox. Promoted

by a conservative government which claimed the abatement of state intervention in the urban politics to animate market's forces, EZs have represented, on the contrary, the flagship of "interventionism". Behind the emphasis of the role of the private sector, in practice government's managing and funding have been indispensable in this kind of development. A large amount of public money has been spent in these areas and, what is worst, without achieving the real economic development and the growth of employment.

At the same aim of EZs, Urban Development Corporations were established in 1980 "*... to secure the regeneration of its area by bringing land and buildings into effective use, encouraging the development of existing and new industry and commerce, creating an attractive environment and ensuring that housing and social facilities are available to encourage people to live and work in the area*"<sup>14</sup>.

They became, more than EZs, the central institution of urban policy in the 1980s. UDCs represent the attempt of minimisation of local state agencies which are substituted by particular agencies armed with powerful means of control. Although the UDCs differ each from the others, they have generally the following common features:

- a) planning control powers to give development permission and to operate outside of their own boundaries if it is necessary and beneficial for the regeneration;
- b) the key elements of the UDCs's organisation are controlled by central government;
- c) the funds depends on three different kinds of resources, first, an annual budget from central government; second, finance borrowed from the national loan fund; third, receipts from land sales;
- d) power to purchase land by agreement or compulsorily

Through these powers UDCs are able to by-pass some typical planning constraints, can assemble land parcels, develop infrastructure and attract private investment in the area in order to achieve local economic growth. Like the EZs, the controversial point in the UDCs policy is the financing. The enormous expenditure of money has been directed mainly to acquisition of land, reclamation and infrastructure. By the early 1990s, when the boom clearly finished, the new asset of property markets produced the collapse of many agencies which were not able to dispose of own land and were forced to drop a lot of development projects. Moreover the experience of *London's Docklands*, in which the local authorities were totally excluded by regeneration process, has demonstrated how important it is for the success of development the participation of local communities and their collaboration with the UDC agency. Indeed the local authority represents the needs of existing people who constitute the real object of a regeneration process.

In conclusion, we can sum up the principal failures of this policy:

- a) the uncorrected use of tax abatement and other incentives favoured mainly the property and not the development of medium firms;
- b) the principal effect of UDCs and EZs was physical and not economic growth;
- c) the enormous expenditure of public money represents a paradox in the policy in the non-interventionism policy of conservative government;
- d) the exclusion of local authority was an obstacle to the development process.

Fig.5 Satellite view of London Docklands



#### 4. Conclusion: market-led planning in the 1990s and the lesson for current years

Urban policy over the second post war period has shown different approaches to the urban problems. The objectives in the 1950s were mainly physical, trying to stimulate the reconstruction after the disasters of the war and to drive the new expansion. During the 1960s the aims became more social, indeed the ‘rediscovery of poverty’ suggested to solve the increasing conditions of deprivation through the state intervention. It meant additional resources, such as Urban Programme or General Improvement Areas, for defined small areas.

This kind of policy was carried on in 1970s but many criticisms arose against this limited applications to a few small experiment areas. Then, in the 1980s, the urban policy totally changed the objectives from the social ones of the previous decade to the new economic ones. The regeneration of the inner cities was undertaken by partnerships of central and local authorities and later it became an evident policy of support from the state to the private business. The prevailing strategy in the 1980s was based essentially on the property-led process to achieve regeneration. As Solesbury<sup>15</sup> (1990) argued, the national urban regeneration policy was composed of three key elements: “ ... *economic focus, concentrating on supply-side measures, with the leading role for private sector*”.

The *economic focus* is seen as the central point of regeneration, while in the past it was singled out in physical and social ones. All the problems of derelict areas, such as difficulty to adjust to the structural shifts in economy, skills not matched to jobs, vacancy of land, disused industrial buildings, low incomes and so on, were recognized as only dependent on economic changes. Therefore the solution was economic to stimulate the economy which would have improved the physical environment as well.

The *supply-side approach* through the improvement of supply of land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship, sought to achieve the economic growth without exploring and



Fig. 6 London, the Isle of Dogs

managing the real needs of demand.

In this policy the *private sector* was seen not as a simple actor but as the leader of regeneration and the public money as the funding source in the process.

Furthermore the regeneration of the 1980s expanded the typical development's objectives from the usual commercial, industrial and housing schemes to new patterns such as reclamation of land, renovation of hospitals, schools, theatres, improvement of infrastructure, greening and cleaning of urban environment. We can observe as regeneration in the 1980s had enlarged its goals and consequently the risks for developers who, fortunately, were supported by the strong economic boom of mid-80s and encouraged to undertake a great number of projects. After the economic crush of 1989 and the recession of the subsequent years the property-led urban regeneration did not seem anymore an appropriate policy and innovative forms, essentially based on public-private partnership, took place.

City Challenge and Urban Development Agency were two initiatives proposed in order

to correct the “failure” of the approach of the 1980s<sup>16</sup>. The UDCs were based on investments in places whose control was under the guidance of private agencies, appointed by only central authority without local authority’s participation. Instead, City Challenge represented a break point of this traditional policy. The areas invited to bid for City Challenge funds had to take in account a wide range of problems and to demonstrate how they could use the opportunities for regeneration. Moreover they did not invest primarily in physical infrastructure and building but, on the contrary, in human resources, particularly in training for employment. The structure of the areas had to be based on a partnerships and finally the market mechanism was seen more in the competitive way than before.

The approach to the regeneration in the 1980s was an interesting lesson for urban planning, as a particular solution to the economic crisis of 1970s. Nowadays, in a comparable economic context, in terms of deep European crisis in labour and property market, the policy of Margaret Thatcher, the only Prime Minister woman in the story of UK, recently died, the errors of the market-led planning which was still applied for the subsequent decades, could stimulate a reflection and a deep analysis of current urban problems.

#### FOOTNOTES

1 See Adams, D. (1994), *Urban Planning and the Development Process*, pag. 38.

2 See Imrie, R. & Thomas, H. (1993), *British urban policy and Urban Development Corporations*, pag. 6.

3 The reference is to the documents of Workshop of 8 July 1994 Bidding for the single regeneration budget

4 See Rydin, Y. (1993), *The british planning system* ch. 15

5 Healey, P. (1991) *Models of development process: a review* in *Journal of property research* n.5 quoted in Adams, D., op. cit. pag. 45.

6 This scheme refers to the research by Topalov, Harvey, Ball, Chambert and participants in the Battlett International Summer School on the production of built environment.

7 Adams, D. (1994), op. cit., pag. 68.

8 See on this subject Brinckley, T. et al. (1989) *Remaking planning. The politics of urban change in the Thatcher years*

9 See Brinckley et al., op. cit., pag. 14.

10 This explanation refers mainly to Imrie, R. & Thomas, H. (1993) *British urban policy and Urban Development Corporation*

11 For a complete explanation of the proposal see Hall, P. (1982) *Enterprise Zones, a justification* in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* n. 3

12 Interesting analysis of EZs policy are in Talbot, J. (1988) *Enterprise Zones. Are there no lessons for inner city policy?* in *The Planner* n. 2 ; Paloscia, R. (1991) *L’esperienza delle enterprise zones in Gran Bretagna*

13 In Talbot, J. (1988) op. cit.

14 Section 136 of *Local Government, Planning and Land Act (1980)* quoted in Imrie & Thomas (1993), op. cit. pag. 4.

15 See Solesbury, W. (1990) *Property development and urban regeneration* in Healey, P. & Nabarro, R., *Land and property development in a changing context*

16 on this analysis see Burton, P. & O’Toole, M. (1993) *Urban development opportunities: post-fordism in action or post-fordism retrenchment?* in Imrie & Thomas, op. cit. ch. 12.

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**IMAGES SOURCES**

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