

CHANGING CONDITIONS – CHANGING OUR ROLE

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After briefly discussing the changing context of urban planning, the article focusses on our experiences in Bromley-by-Bow. During the summer school we had an in-depth visit to this East London neighbourhood. Our colourful experiences are then put in a manifesto, which can help young urban planners understand their jobs. To arms!

TODAY'S CONTEXT FOR YOUNG URBAN PLANNERS

Times are changing fast. The economic crisis points out the risks and the limits of our current planning system. In times of scarcity it becomes inadequate for, let's say, three reasons.

First, traditional planning is characterized by a strong hierarchical structure, with a promoter that coordinates the actions of different urban players. This model needs a high availability of scarce public resources (financial, human resources and knowledge) and lacks the needed transparency and democracy in today's multi-actor society.

Second, traditional zoning as a tool to regulate land use is not able to manage the emerging dynamics of the transformation of the territory. Its 'catch 22' between the necessary flexibility for new win-win situations on the one hand and the stringent framework to guarantee spatial quality on the other hand leads to stagnation.

Third, the complexity of society is growing. A growing diversity and social inequality puts society under pressure. Space and spatial planning interact in this process by putting socio-spatial incongruence in focus and by making social structures spatially permanent.

EXPERIENCING BROMLEY-BY-BOW

What does this changing context mean for towns, cities and neighbourhoods? Can we actually see the changes? How does it affect people?

The summer school lead us to Bromley-by-Bow in East London. Within the wondrous world of statistics, Bromley-by-Bow is known as the most deprived area in the UK. It is primarily known for its ethnic diversity (although the Bangladeshi majority does not really imply diversity), low incomes and high unemployment rate. Within the dwellings, which are mainly 'social', living standards are low. And this makes Bromley-by-Bow a perfect place for young planning professionals who want to change the world positively.

The changing context affects this neighbourhood too. Being a focal point of social housing, the quality of life is driven by a few influential companies: the housing company Poplar HARCA, the municipality and a few private investors. To improve quality of life, these actors mainly refurbish

or build new homes. Strengthening the local economy is not perceived as key policy. Result of this focus is that Bromley-by-Bow becomes a dull residential area. And that isn't necessarily a bad thing, but we believe Bromley-by-Bow has more potential.

The Olympic Park (and its planned legacy) is just a stone's throw away. Within the London context of speculative private investments, Bromley-by-Bow also undergoes gentrification. Instead of spontaneous gentrification (in which alternative lifestyles attract investments), there seems to be rather a kind of intended gentrification (planting gated middle-class apartments on strategic spots). These developments make social inequality more visible.

We were surprised that Bromley-by-Bow is the most deprived area in the UK. While walking around, we could hardly find any confirmation of that statement. I mean, it was not that bad! True, the grey buildings and the shops were depressing, but there was energy in the streets where people meet. There must be worse neighbourhoods in this country known for the gap between the rich and the poor. This brought us in an awkward situation: we couldn't confirm or deny its problematic status and therefore it was hard to find solutions.

Confronted with this lack, Bromley-by-Bow made us think differently. Instead of finding physical interventions, the problem identification behind the so-called 'problematic' status of the neighbourhood took our first attention. What are the mechanisms behind the actual community in Bromley-by-Bow? Through observation and participation we started looking at valid and possible carriers for new urban solutions. Our main focus was on new forms of decision-making, social networks, alternative production methods and new concepts of scale and progressive urban development.

We understood that, while creating spatial synergies, our task as (future) urban planners is to actively intervene in community-building. Such new ways of planning and design demand reformulating our role as urban planners. If we want to reclaim the possibility of making we have to define our role in the given socio-spatial context. Our role is to do acupuncture interventions that catalyse other interventions within the framework of the existing community, qualities and possibilities. Instead of focussing on spatial dynamics on a bigger scale (e.g. East London, Olympic legacy, gentrification), our primary goal is to strengthen existing social networks and spatial opportunities in Bromley-by-Bow. To make this role clearer we started to write a Manifesto.

MANIFESTO FOR YOUNG URBAN PLANNERS

There I am, sitting in a bar with two friends and fellow urban planners. They are discussing their jobs, their projects and their doubts. While I roll a cigarette they unveil the issue of 'the role of the young urban planner today'. While silently sipping at another beer I think there is no other job that is more questioned by its practitioners than the urban planners' job. If you are a plumber, your task is understandable. The same goes for a postman, a poet, a psychologist, a prisoner, a pet nurse. But the planners' task remains discussed. Why?

Our world has been manufactured and all we got to do is reinvent it. Our forefathers have brought us wealth, yes, but a lot of shit as well. Look at the cities we are living in! Money is scarce, new ideas are lacking, social issues are still unresolved, cities are evolving rapidly and worse, projects must be sustainable but in fact they are not, sustainability is hollow or dead. Moreover we, planners, are expected to solve global economic, social, ecological, spatial, political, philosophical problems. We ought to answer every issue, we are asked to be ambiguous but we don't have a clue where to start. Tell me, baby, why you've been gone so long. Can't you see the signs that we are heading towards new Middle Ages?

Our cities are getting dark, introvert, goalless, pointless, stupid. Ethics dissolve, barricades are being built, there is intellectual famine and philosophical incest. Today cities are not progressing or forwarding, but declining and rewinding. And indeed, we are running in circles. We must redo things. In eras of doubt, people tend to write manifestos in order to structure their thoughts and to mobilize others.

So, for what it is worth...