

3 Urban Theory and Urban Policy

Broad intellectual processes can contribute to conceptual alterations and shifts which are often the major agents of policy innovation in subsequent decades (Banting, 1979). Urban policy making therefore is the product of a continuous interaction of intellectual process and institutional response. From this it can be argued that urban policy in the UK (and North America) has been driven by successive sets of powerful, and relatively consistent, value judgements which have had a profound influence on how urban problems are defined, and on the policies derived to deal with those problems.

This chapter examines briefly the three recent main theories of urban or inner city decline, which have underpinned urban policy in the UK. It is important to keep in mind these various hypotheses because at one time each has proved influential both in terms of urban problem definition and policy response. When policies based on one perspective failed to cure urban ills, allegiance shifted to another.

One reason theories go in and out of fashion is probably that there is no one right answer to the urban dilemma; we must therefore continually pick and choose among options which appear to work. For this reason, in considering the potential for area-based neighbourhood renewal, it is important to understand the advantages and constraints of areal approaches as compared with other ways to tackle urban renewal.

There is evidence that in the face of what seem intractable urban problems we have come through some full policy circle. For example, the Local Government and Housing Act institutionalises new 'renewal areas', thus reworking, and reaffirming, an area-based approach which was the principal theory of urban intervention in the 1960s. But, as Morphet (1989) wonders:

After ten years of working towards the reduction of vacant land and buildings, and the use of gentrification to refurbish existing housing stock, the core issue still remains - what can be done in terms of policy for people who remain in

poverty with few life chances? In many respects this is a return to 1968, and the establishment of the urban programme.

Three schools of thought, or paradigms, appear to have been paramount in post-war British and American urban policy: environmental determinism, the cycles of disadvantage thesis, and structural analysis. Each began as a vibrant and convincing intellectual notion, and each had its fruition in policy one or more decades later.

Environmental determinism

The intellectual origins of environmental determinism are found in Victorian social reform movements, in the influential garden cities movement in town planning, and in the modernist movement in architecture. Its basic premise is that control and manipulation of the physical environment had a direct and determinate effect on social behaviour. In the words of Broady (1968) 'it implied a one way process in which the physical environment is the independent, and human behaviour the dependent variable'. The manifestations of environmental determinism are obvious: widespread clearance of run down neighbourhoods, their replacement by large areas of system-built council estates or the decanting of residents to large peripheral estates.

The criticisms of environmental determinism, particularly the destruction of communities by clearance, are legion. However its legacy as a guide to action remains with us to a surprising extent. For example, Coleman, in *Utopia on Trial*, argues that anti-social behaviour on council estates is directly related to design deficiencies such as deck access or overhead walkways, and can therefore be put right by redesign. Coleman (1985, p.177) argues:

... the design-disadvantage research has led to a more general understanding of the way human behaviour tends to deteriorate under the stress of inappropriate habitats. As each design variable worsens, there is an increasing probability that more families will fail, in more ways, to develop their children's capacity for adjusting to civilised life.

This argument currently being put to the test by estate redesign in Westminster and elsewhere. Hillier (cited in Law and Sawyers, 1988) on the other hand, argues that many housing estate problems really relate to circulation patterns in a so-called 'space syntax' which is deficient on council estates but sufficient in terraced housing.

Both views, although divergent in detail, focus on the physical environment as a major determinant of social patterns.

These approaches contain important truths, but if overstated they are deficient as a whole explanation of interrelated housing and poverty problems. They also fail to account for the preferences of different social groups, or even the obvious importance of good management and maintenance in housing. For example the successful recycling of 'failed' post-war tower blocks and inter-war four storey walk-ups to mixes of new and old tenants in new mixed tenure arrangements, as at Rochester in Newcastle or Surrey Docks in London, both described later, indicate that design factors alone are insufficient as a guide to appropriate policy or architecture in a complex urban environment. An insight that quality of life on estates was related as much to the dynamic process of management and maintenance, as to original design, was given as early as 1972, in a DoE survey of women residents on new council estates published as *The Estate Outside the Dwelling*. This reported:

Surprisingly, satisfaction with the estate was not determined by such factors as density, building form, living on or off the ground and problems with children's play, but was closely related to the appearance of the estate and the way it was looked after ... The general conclusion seems to be that it is preferable for families with young children to live on the ground, but that most of the other households can live satisfactorily in a variety of building forms. No one building form - houses, medium or high-rise block - appeared more satisfactory than any other.

Similarly a recent survey of tenants carried out for the North Housing Association highlights the importance of the social and physical condition of the neighbourhoods to the satisfaction and quality of life of households (MacLennan, 1989). The fact is, as Law and Sawyers (1988, p.50) argue:

For some people, a proper house is one standing in a street with houses facing each other ... though for others again, the idea of a proper house would have to be a new flat in a purpose-built block. There are, in fact, as many different sorts of 'proper houses' as there are different social groups. Failure to acknowledge this is the weakness of both Hillier's and Coleman's theses.

Although partially discredited as a theory of social action, the attraction of environmentally-determined solutions to urban problems remains strong because they are simple and appear to offer direct solutions to complex problems. For example, the recent Local Government and Housing Act (1989) may sanction a new round of clearance based on the premise that houses which reach the end of their 'economic life' must be cleared. But many of these houses are owned by residents from ethnic minorities who prefer low-cost owner occupation. Their neighbourhoods represent complex

patterns of extended family and social interactions which may also be related to social patterns in their culture of origin. Some clearance may be appropriate, but only as a result of a broader understanding of the problems and potential of the existing neighbourhood, and of its social role. Of course, if a problem is a physical problem like derelict land, physical solutions may well be appropriate. But most residential, as opposed to industrial, neighbourhoods are complex social entities, best understood by those who live there. Experience of past urban policy tells us it pays to wary of simplistic solutions.

Cycles of disadvantage and spatial concentration of the urban poor

The failure of direct, massive environmental intervention, for example in inner city and peripheral council estates, to resolve basic problems of poverty and social disadvantage gave impetus to a more complex understanding of human, urban problems in terms of recurring cycles of socio-economic disadvantage, into which families were seen as locked.

This thesis had its intellectual origins in America in the social area analysis of particularly the Chicago school of sociologists Park and Burgess, extended by the work of Shevky and Bell (1955). The basic premise is that physical, economic and social handicaps reinforce one another to ensure life-cycle and inter-generational multiple deprivation on the part of the urban poor, who are spatially concentrated and can be identified as so. At an extreme interpretation there is an implicit assumption that the origins (or 'culture') of poverty can be found in the inadequacy of individuals and families who live in these deprived environments.

Later the work of Oscar Lewis (1966) was the impetus for extensive policy efforts based on this thesis, and in the 1960s, as Donnison (1980) puts it, 'social policy goes spatial'. In the USA this perspective resulted in Community Action Programs, the influential Model Cities Program and the setting up of the Office of Economic Opportunity. In the UK this thesis was first implemented with the Local Government Act of 1966 which provided additional staff in local authorities with high concentrations of ethnic minorities. Other similar policy efforts included the Educational Priority Neighbourhoods, General Improvement Areas (GIAs), Housing Action Areas (HAAs), and Community Development Projects (CDPs), all of which involved the identification of 'deprived' urban neighbourhoods suitable for fiscal intervention, advice giving and advocacy planning. Wholehearted adherence to the thesis of inter-generational concentrations of poverty in specific locations has waned in the face of considerable practical and statistical

critique, but its policy influence remains strong, as for example, HAAs and GIAs have given way to the new Renewal Areas of the current Local Government and Housing Act.

These spatial priority area approaches have received criticism of three sorts. The first, which might be called the delineation criticism, relates to the inability of the social indicators used to define deprived areas to demonstrate that deprivation of a certain magnitude exists within some defined areal unit. For example, a study of the designation of an HAA (which gave local authorities certain powers related to housing improvements) cast doubt on the ability of a set of nationally determined indicators to describe a particular neighbourhood's reality (Dennis, 1978). This raised questions as to the usefulness of such an approach.

The second criticism is a statistical and ethical argument which points out that however one uses indicators to define socially deprived areas, unless one half of urban Britain is designated, more poor will be outside the areas than in them. Also, within any priority area, there is a great likelihood that the majority of residents will not be deprived and thus resources may be misdirected. Such debate over the use of social indicators to measure spatially fixed social deprivation is almost endemic to urban policy processes, for example, the continuing disagreement over the DoE's use of indicators of urban deprivation to allocate grant-related expenditure.

Finally, there have been a number of criticisms of this thesis on structural grounds. These arguments are based on the belief that social pathologies are basically linked to the workings of national or international economic systems, and that no local, spatial approach can have any substantial effect. Some final reports of the CDPs, for example, took the stance that the diversity of deprived situations identified by the use of social indicators provided a case, not for isolated local initiatives, but for broad policies to deal with the national processes of urban and industrial change.

Structural adjustment: the neighbourhood in the world economy

Efforts to break cycles of disadvantage at the local level seemed to give poor results in the face of international and national economic and demographic forces. In Coventry for example, the Community Development Project team found themselves increasingly aware of the extent to which the fortunes of their local priority area were influenced by forces outside local control. This community, then the home of Chrysler UK (now Citroën-owned), was far more influenced by decisions taken in Detroit, London and Paris than any made locally. No local positive discrimination programme could counteract

the effect of Chrysler's fortunes in the international auto market. The final report of the Coventry CDP, entitled 'Gilding the Ghetto', expressed clearly a structuralist view of locally based, positive discrimination programmes.

The Coventry CDP, attempting social change at a neighbourhood level, found themselves caught up in an array of international and national forces: economic turbulence, the operations of multinational corporations, competition between deprived regions in developed countries and underdeveloped countries, and between levels of government, all greatly exacerbated by the oil crisis of 1973 and by the series of recessions which have given rise to new conditions of international trade. For example, big businesses are now centralising into what *The Economist* calls global corporations, completely detached from concerns of localities or even nation states. A related factor with implications for local planning has been the phenomenon of deindustrialisation and industrial shift. The latter serves as a kind of structural framework within which the fortunes of inner city neighbourhoods may depend.

Industrial shift describes a readjustment of productive activities at an international level, particularly the transfer of certain sectors, for example textiles, the car industry, electrical industries, and shipbuilding from the industrialised countries like the UK to certain developing countries (in southeast Asia, South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, etc.) based on shifts in comparative advantage (Madeuf and Michalet, 1981, pp. 356-367; Schydrowsky, 1984). This north-south shift is particularly pronounced in older, labour-intensive industries, producing standardised goods, which characterise the industrial structure of Britain's northern cities. The main agents of industrial shift are the global corporations. For example, the European electronics giant Philips recently announced its first 'global company strategy' for the 1990s, by which it would transfer production from its European bases to Asia and Mexico. The company's President announced that it no longer saw itself as a European-based, but rather a global company whose product development, production and marketing strategy was linked to a 'single-world concept'.

In analysing the basis of local industrial economies, structural theorists point out correctly that for the first time the industrial production of advanced capitalist economies does not take place solely or even mainly in their own territory. Capital in the form of factories and whole branches of industry can be shifted from place to place. Entire regions, formerly prosperous, may suffer progressive de-industrialisation and become the 'new peripheries' (the UK Midlands, the 'rust belt' in the USA). Devalued fixed capital in declining

regions becomes a tax advantage in reinvestment strategies that take capital and jobs abroad, or to more inviting domestic regions like the South East of England. Shifts in production are made easier by the globalisation of access points to finance capital, the development of world-wide securities markets, and the availability of sophisticated computer-linked telecommunication facilities. The result are what Harvey (1982) calls 'switching crises' involving both geographic and sectoral shifts. Investment not only abandons regions but also moves into new product lines in which previous workers would have no skills were they able to migrate with capital (Walton, 1981, p. 379).

Within the structuralist perspective, the effects of this trend have been reinforced by government industrial policies since 1979. These have been characterised by a de-emphasis of regional policy as a mode of state intervention in the economy, and a policy shift towards the maintenance of high levels of aggregate national economic performance, but at the expense of considerable unemployment and regional disparity. One result of industrial shift combined with this decline of regional policy has been an escalating and competitive syndrome of local promotion as, in the absence of any regional or national co-ordinative policies, cities great and small vie for inward investment of any sort. This is done with a combination of promotion, provision of industrial infrastructure, emphasis on the tractability of the local labour force, and financial subsidies and other incentives.

Although this kind of structural analysis may seem removed from the day-to-day reality of neighbourhood renewal, there is no doubt that factors like deindustrialisation, industrial shift, unemployment and regional disparity are related to the need for neighbourhood renewal. For example, the reports of the Sheffield Partnership demonstrate convincingly their understanding of the influences of such factors in Sheffield neighbourhoods (United Kingdom Housing Trust, 1988).

Conclusion

Six points arise from this theoretical overview in terms of neighbourhood renewal.

Firstly, structural analysts are right. Neighbourhoods are part of world systems; urban problems and prospects are inextricably linked with broad social, economic and demographic movements; and action at the neighbourhood level cannot change the nature of the world capitalist, industrial system.

Secondly, however, change at the local level is possible and desirable. Indeed the neighbourhood is a good level of social interaction and change,

and neighbourhoods (like cities) may be able to shift themselves from the economic and social periphery back towards the mainstream of capitalist culture. The cycles of disadvantage thesis is right in that multiple deprivation is self-reinforcing, but it ignores or underestimates the extent that cycles of disadvantage are often reinforced by institutional arrangements, like the use of 'sink-estates' and poor educational and other facilities, which heighten the isolation and stigmatisation of poor neighbourhoods. The culture of poverty extension of this thesis is wrong insofar as it assumes that families are themselves mainly to blame for being trapped in cycles of disadvantage.

Thirdly, environmental determinists are right to stress that the environment does matter. No one, however poor, enjoys living in the squalor of run-down council estates and neighbourhoods. Design is important too, and design which takes into account the needs and preferences of different socio-economic groups can work, and can reinforce positive social change. But the process of urban living is complex and interactive, and good housing design represents only one part of the complex equation which describes high quality, balanced neighbourhoods.

If all three theories are partly right, partly wrong, and generally over-simplified, where does this leave urban policy? One result of changing paradigms or intellectual orthodoxies an approach where new policies arise in dialectical opposition to preceding policy sets (often of previous governments of different political persuasion) and useful aspects of previous policy approaches are jettisoned along with those bits which are arguably useless. This a failure of policy integration prevents us from grasping what has been called the wicked nature of urban problems, where the problem is exceedingly complex, and therefore beyond the boundaries of our available knowledge and comprehension. The problem is compounded by the fact that government departments which make policy, like the social sciences themselves, are subdivided into discrete specialisations (housing, transport, employment), while the life experience of people in cities in poverty is holistic. This suggests three further important points.

Fourthly then, it is necessary to make is necessary to make multi-disciplinary assessments of urban poverty and policy, in an attempt to overcome the failure of integration. Fifthly, no single agency can be competent to deal with the many aspects of people's lives which are called in total 'the urban problem' or with implementing its solution. A multi-agency approach – or partnerships – which includes the community, is essential. Sixthly, it also suggests that a joint public service orientation in both central

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and local government is preferable to endless rounds of political posturing based on simplistic or out-dated ideologies.

Having established that neighbourhood renewal, while not a panacea for dislocations caused by the workings of the world capitalist system, is probably a useful and effective approach to urban problems, we return to the challenge of neighbourhood renewal, examining the current partnership response to that challenge.