

Down Towns

'New cities for old' describes a year of phenomenal renewal in our urban infrastructure. But, asks David Harvey, what lies behind the building boom?

The renewal of Britain's largely derelict and depressed inner cities has become big business.

The recipe is pretty standard. Take a run-down segment of the inner city and depopulate it of unwanted characters. Blend an enclosed and secure space for retailing (preferably post-modern in design and populated with Laura Ashleys, Bennettons and a few up-market stores) with highly functional office space (preferably masked also with post-modern facades). Mix in either some imitation Italian piazzas, fishing wharves, medieval-looking squares lined with fake Georgian or Tudor shops and housing, or, appropriate the traditional spaces of working-class living (terraced houses) and working (wharves, warehouses and factories) and rehabilitate them to bourgeois taste. Top it all off with entertainment and cultural facilities galore and designate the whole space as an historic monument, worthy of entry into the catalogues of contemporary heritage culture.

The mix varies a bit from place to place, depending on what local circumstances will bear and who gets to head it up. And there are several optional extras - a convention centre, a garden festival (Liverpool and Glasgow), a spectacular event (the Youth Olympics to Sheffield), or a palace of culture.

The formula is hard to reject outright because some of it works as both popular entertainment and as proof that urban living can be fun as well as profitable for those who invest in it. Particular aspects are open to attack - the undemocratic and authoritarian ways of the Urban Development Corporations (UDCs), the crass commercialism of some projects, the destruction of traditional communities

(however seedy they may look), or the social ills of displacement through gentrification.

The deeper problem is to understand where such a standard format for inner-city regeneration has come from. Cities as diverse as Liverpool, Wigan, Leith, Bradford, Swansea and Coventry all seem to head in a direction that bears an uncanny likeness to innumerable other projects for urban redevelopment throughout the Western world, from Boston and Baltimore to Edmonton and Helsinki. Furthermore, different paths taken by Labour councils (Sheffield and Glasgow), UDCs or one of the new breed of urban entrepreneurs (John Hall of Gateshead Metrocentre fame or John Ernest who renovated Dean Clough Mills in Halifax) seem to produce broadly similar results.

The aggregate effects are clear enough. First, the serial reproduction of the same solution generates monotony in the name of diversity. Secondly, the formula does not attack basic ills but, in conformity to Engels' rule as to how the bourgeoisie always approaches problems of this kind, it simply moves them around. But moving the inner city around takes money, imagination, and a lot of political will.

Much of the imagination derived from the 1960s' spirit of cultural revolt against bureaucratic authority and the blandness of mass consumption. Cultural liberation became a powerful popular movement and an integral aspect of the socialist project. The new social movements demanded diversity of force and of lifestyle.

The 1970s saw the gradual co-option and commercialisation of that cultural imagination. Developers found profitable ways to cater to the demand for distinctive and liveable communi-

ties. They looked to sell 'community' as a product, whether there was a popular demand for it or not. Increasingly, in the 1980s, multinational finance capital began to dictate the overall terms of urban regeneration.

The rush of capital into urban redevelopment throughout much of the advanced capitalist world has to be seen as one more way in which the chronic capital surpluses that have piled up since the first postwar recession in 1973-75 are being absorbed. Third World loans (another major outlet), had all sorts of negative consequences for the people living there and left the bankers with the headache of uncollectable debt. The parallel with the present wave of

the new projects offer. In either case, vast sums of public and private money get absorbed in highly speculative ventures, because surplus capital seems to have no more productive place to go.

But there are already abundant signs (particularly in the United States) of many such urban projects going sour. And there is no magic formula for success. While Los Angeles made a vast profit out of the Olympic Games, Montreal is still paying off its debts (Sheffield and Barcelona beware).

Set in the context of unemployment and increasing homelessness, of disempowerment and despair, of crime and social decay, and of discrimination, the



Liverpool Docks: A social and political diversion?

urban re-investment exact. For fiscally-strapped and depressed cities there is no other choice except to like or leave the package on offer. A lot of political will and not a few concessions are required to attract developer capital and to capture some benefits for the disempowered and impoverished.

The conditions for sustained capital accumulation through urban redevelopment are highly specific. Either there is public subsidy to guarantee profits (as in the case of the UDCs) or a debt-fuelled consumer boom (highly vulnerable to interest-rate shifts) gets channelled into the fashionable forms of consumption which

whole inner-city venture appears as an appalling social and political diversion. If a project generates employment it is almost certainly not for those already living there, if it brings in money it almost certainly flows straight out again, and if it brightens the urban scene then it does so in the vein of a carnival mask that diverts and entertains, leaving the social problems that lie behind the mask unseen and uncared for. The formula smacks of a constructed fetishism, in which every aesthetic power of illusion and image is mobilised to mask the intensifying class, racial and ethnic polarisations going on underneath. •