

Urban renewal

Urban renewal or the war between cities

Urban rehabilitation, renovation, renewal: the vocabulary may well change, but are we really witnessing a radical change in urban policies on a European level? The approach in the past focused on the buildings themselves: ensuring that they complied with hard-to-contest health and hygiene safety standards. Those excluded from the renovated neighborhood suffered for the general well being. Their lifestyle was discredited; however, this could be seen as benefiting the common good. With urban renewal, we enter into a period of war between cities, with a backdrop of triumphant neo-liberalism. The examples shown in the pages of this chapter shine a satirical light on the single European market, where the merchandise for sale is the city itself. May the best city win; there is no room for all the major cities between London, Paris, Barcelona and Istanbul. The working classes pay the price for this merciless war. They have to leave to make room for a modern city that is profitable for businesses and attractive to their executives.

The social mix: a pseudo-consensual principle

If, in the past, the gentrification of inner cities was already based on the displacement of the poorest, their role was nevertheless not denied. Urban renewal has introduced a new injunction: the social mix. It allows the demolition or conversion of old buildings not in compliance with standards as well as public housing areas where the poor were displaced by earlier programmes.

It is no longer necessary to establish the correlation between price and benefit of demolition/reconstruction campaigns as the objective is a moral order, falsely consensual, called the social mix, based on “the necessary diversity of the social composition of each neighborhood”.

When new social classes move into a working class community, we either see a disappearance of a collective sociability, which is supplanted by interpersonal networks, leading to social isolation, or a reinforcement of alterity, accentuating the differences between individuals and exacerbating tensions.

The concept of the social mix is thus becoming a useful technique in displacing the most dominated groups: low-paid workers, unemployed, unqualified young people, ethnic groups subject to discrimination, single mothers, etc. None of these groups are permitted to live in the urban space. They are only accepted as isolated individuals that society has to take care of. They have to be integrated through their contact with other groups who may contribute to their climb up the social ladder, but mostly to making them invisible as a dangerous class, on the one hand, and as a failure of egalitarian development on the other. The concept of social mix owes its considerable success to goal of making the lower classes invisible. This goal necessarily finds favour with the authorities — the poor are expensive and have a bad reputation — lessors — the image projected by a fraction

of the property stock impacts the entire stock — and neighboring property owners — the decline of the environment, either real or perceived, affects the value of the property.

(...), the urban renewal process at work in the big European cities delegitimizes, divides, and even eliminates the working classes living in the neighborhoods that have to be reconquered in order to win the metropolis-building race. Once they have left, nothing else really matters.

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