

# REFLECTION

Photo: Mattia Marinolli, 2013



## Colophon

Justice and liveability in social housing regeneration: Learning lessons for London

Master Thesis Reflection  
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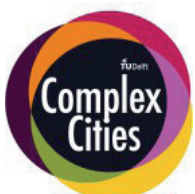
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# GENERAL REFLECTION

## Reflection on the initial objectives and outcomes

The subject of this graduation project originated from the desire to learn more about the driving forces behind London's urban development. Having lived in London myself, I experienced the effects of the housing crisis – horrendous rents, congested public transport, etc. – as well as ongoing over-gentrification processes in which lively districts are consumed by market-oriented real estate development. The effects on lower income groups, however, became clearer during the initial research and motivated me to further investigate the topic of social housing. The regeneration of council estates then emerged as one topic of pressing relevance. While particularly in London's heated market environment, council estates are crucial to retain access to housing for lower income groups in central areas, current regeneration practice causes a net loss of affordable housing (London Assembly, 2015). This often goes along with the dispersion of the original population. Estate regeneration, as this research has shown, is increasingly driven by densification and asset management strategies that might have little to do with an improvement of the living conditions of current residents.

The aim of this research was therefore to contribute to the search of methods to achieve more socially balanced development within these regeneration processes – in particular, to explore the role planning and design can play to ensure that the needs of lower income groups are met. To investigate approaches taken in other cities can provide valuable lessons. Therefore, social housing regeneration in Amsterdam and Vienna - two cities well-known for housing and justice (Fainstain, 2010 and Förster, 2000) - is studied in addition to London.

Originally, the envisioned end product consisted of policy and design recommendations for London. In order to be able to propose changes, it was essential to me to understand the reasons and motives behind the current practice, and see where - and why - existing policies and planning tools are working or failing. This analysis has shown that there currently are policies in place to protect lower income groups, but the issue rather lies with the capacity or willingness of the actors to implement them. This can however vary largely among the different local authorities, as the cases in Islington and Southwark have illustrated. Also in Vienna and Amsterdam, regeneration schemes are, naturally, facilitated by funding mechanisms, but are also shaped by the specific local circumstances and cultural values.

Neither policy makers nor private sector actors or designers can hence act independently. They have to navigate within a complex system characterised by a multitude of interrelations and dependencies. Still, planning and design have a crucial role to play. The focus of the recommendations therefore shifted towards capacity building within the planning process as general theme. This involves supporting planning competence among local authorities, setting up monitoring structures to develop a solid knowledge base, and building up participatory approaches for plan making and design.

### **Reflection on the relationship between research and design**

Ultimately, it is the physical realm in which rules, policies and guidance interact with the lifeworld of the people. The quality of design and its adequateness for lower income groups was part of the evaluation criteria from the beginning. However, being deeply involved in the analysis of more abstract political and economic forces, it was not easy to bring these two poles together. Especially during the site visits to the three different cities, the interrelation between cultural values, economic forces, policies and the physical space then became more evident. Planning and design in Vienna, drawing from the socialist legacy built up in the 1920s, prioritises affordability and the provision of community spaces, whereas in London, the impact of economic necessities/logics may drive the density up and produce investor-oriented urban patterns that in fact contradict local design ideals (this point is further elaborated in the 'Evaluation' section of chapter 4).

In this thesis, design is primarily used as research method, but enhancing its role as tool to create visions and engage residents in the planning process plays an important role in the recommendations. This requires a vertical and horizontal dialogue between policy-makers, designers and residents to better inform decision making on the base of outcome, not output related targets.

### **Learning lessons FROM London**

Whereas for this thesis, lessons for London are drawn from Amsterdam and Vienna, these and other cities can also learn a great deal from London. London has the strongest neoliberal tendencies within Europe and therefore represents a useful case study about the impacts of the current political trend across many countries. In both Vienna and Amsterdam, I witnessed discussions about reforming the planning system with proposals displaying similarities to methods already practised in London. These are for instance de-regulation and planning gain mechanisms – generally a greater reliance on the private sector – that in fact largely contribute to the problems identified in London. On the other hand, cities can also learn positive lessons from London. They range from resident participation tools that are, despite the issues, quite widely applied, to context sensitive regeneration and infill solutions.

# METHODOLOGICAL AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

## **Reflection on the choice of the graduation studio**

The Complex Cities group researches how planning and design can resolve territorial conflicts within an integrated and multidisciplinary approach. In line with the mission of the studio, this project analyses planning methods and the roles and interests of the involved stakeholders. The broad focus of the research group, drawing on planning theories as well as political, economic and social sciences, provides a useful base for the research of such complex topics like estate regeneration which cannot be understood from only one angle.

The methodology used in this thesis was informed by the studio's approach to evaluate spatial patterns in relation to governance and actors involved in the decision making. The combination of stakeholder and policy analysis proved to be a critical part of my research. Furthermore, especially the international lessons chapter draws on the available expertise on international comparative studies.

## **Research process: Challenges and limitations**

The first challenge of this research project was the selection of a topic. From the personal motivation to learn more about London's housing crisis and a broad interest in planning, I started reading papers and newspaper articles, eventually narrowing the topic down to estate regeneration.

Within this topic, the next step consisted of formulating an analysis framework that would allow me to understand the complexity of the topic but would be manageable within the given time frame. However, it was difficult for me to set limitations due to the various interrelations with other topics, such as housing policy, and the investigative research approach: wanting to understand why regeneration is undertaken the way it is required an open approach in which unexpected conclusions could be taken in. Hence, its ambitious scope was from the beginning on the major challenge of this thesis.

One important step was to identify the key criteria according to which the outcomes of regeneration schemes could be evaluated – affordable housing delivery, meaningful resident engagement and good design for all. From there on, an investigation of the London case could be undertaken, spanning across the scale of an individual scheme to national politics. While the focus was on planning and design mechanisms, the nature of the topic required to become familiar with a set of related issues

such as housing and land policies. Helpful methods in focussing the analysis were the estate regeneration survey and especially the case studies. Building up the analysis from the project scale up to the governance level, I could identify the relevant policy documents and actors to be studied further. This also led to a refined problem statement. As estate regeneration in London is undertaken in a multitude of different ways, more case studies would have been useful, but were not feasible. Therefore, I chose two cases that were very different from each other – a large scale controversial project and a comparatively small infill approach - to illustrate the range of possibilities within London's planning framework.

The field trip brought a major leap forward in the analysis. The visit of regeneration projects helped me gain an understanding of the design practice, and conversations with residents gave a glimpse into the daily life on these estates and personal experiences of regeneration. Above all, the expert interviews and conversations with residents provided me with input that could not have been gained from written sources. However, the London analysis also grew very extensive and took longer than anticipated in the time planning.

As a result, the international comparison chapter had to be narrowed down. Rather than undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the planning systems in the other two cities, I started off by focussing on specific key points that had emerged from the London analysis where it would be useful to see alternative approaches. In this stage as well, the respective site visits were crucial steps for the research progress. From this, I could evaluate the respective regeneration approaches that were successful under the local conditions and could therefore be of interest to London, and drew a comparison between the regeneration approaches of the three cities.

From there on, a collection of possible recommendations was developed. Again, at this point, the challenge was to narrow down the proposal that had been developed under consideration of various aspects on different levels. For the sake of developing a clear and communicable strategy, it was necessary to draw the line between 'context' and 'content' again and focus on actions directly related to planning and design. At the same time, it was important to stay aware that, as mentioned above, the change of policies alone might not be effective due to the influence of economic constraints, cultural values, etc.

The formulation of recommendations therefore required a transfer and adaptation process from possible to likely approaches within the political context of London. For instance, re-strengthening negotiation capacities of local authorities could be proposed either by raising national grants, or the setting up of arms-length organisations or task force bodies. It proved to be challenging to find a balance between realistic recommendations that reflect the constraints, and not losing the visionary and creative aspect. As a more detailed design testing of the recommendations was not possible within the time frame, I hope this thesis can act as inspiration to take this topic one step further.

### Personal reflection

Personally, these ten months have been incredibly challenging, informative and enriching. I had the opportunity to travel to three different cities, visit interesting housing projects and talk to experts and residents. I gained deeper and comparative knowledge about housing policy, planning mechanisms and economic structures that usually only would have played a smaller role in my degree. However, they fundamentally affect the implementation of urbanism projects, and an understanding of the politics behind urban development will be useful in my later career.

Structuring, compressing and transmitting the extensive amount of information were the biggest challenges of this research. I am pleased with all the knowledge I gained, and happy to have had the opportunity to learn how to undertake such an investigative research from beginning to end.

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Regarding the literature mentioned, please refer to the Bibliography given in the report.



EVALUATION

PLANNING

CONTEXT

**START**

research definition

Problem statement

Problem definition

Problem analysis

Problem field

>Media and literature study  
>Estate regeneration survey

Theoretical framework

pre-definition

objectives

London Analysis

The planning system  
(in relation to Estate Regeneration)

The housing system  
(in relation to Social Housing)

- Evaluation criteria
- Provision of affordable Housing
- Good Design for All
- Meaningful resident participation

- Policies/Laws/Culture
- Actors
- Implementation: General planning process/Financing

- Legacy
- Social Housing sector/ Housing and welfare policies

> Literature and policy study  
> Expert interviews  
> (Investigative field work)

**starting point London research**

Case studies -  
Heygate Estate (Southwark)  
Dover Court Estate (Islington)

Local conditions  
- Estate conditions  
- Aims of the local authority

> Media and process analysis  
> Expert interviews  
> Field work - spatial analysis

feedback loops

**starting point international research**

Planning process and outcome  
(in relation to Evaluation criteria)

Evaluation

Action Point

- Synthesis

International lessons

Action Point analysis  
Vienna  
Amsterdam

The housing system  
Vienna  
Amsterdam

> Media and literature study  
> Expert interviews  
> Investigative field work

Learning lessons

- Legacy  
- Social Housing sector

Transfer  
(Reflection on cultural barriers on the transfer of the international lessons)

Recommendations:  
Catalogue of possibilities

**PRODUCT**

for London

- Synthesis -

Reflection

Application -  
Strategy

