The regeneration of low income housing estates in England and Germany

When dwellings become obsolete or even vacant, the usual response by landlords or politicians would be: tear them down. However, by doing so, part of the local history, which is also the history of the people still living there, will be destroyed. In Germany during the 1970s and 1980s, people in the Ruhr area, which was facing the closure of coal mines and steel plants for several decades, started thinking out of the box. Instead of demolishing them, plans were developed to find a new use for the old factory buildings and to retain the adjacent housing estates. Some ten years later, the same trend could be observed in England.

Both countries have since developed tools to fight the negative consequences of population decline in old industrial areas. These tools include the German “building exhibitions” (IBAs) and the English “housing market renewal pathfinders” (HMRPs). This paper will focus on these tools and especially on projects that aim to reuse existing dwellings to help revive an area. Chimney Pot Park within the Manchester Salford Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder area and Schüngeiberg Garden City, part of the IBA Emscher Park, will be taken as examples. Before moving on to these projects each section will start with a general description of the area, followed by a short discussion of the main goals of the policy tool involved.
Germany: IBA Emscher Park

The Ruhr area is a good example of a former industrial region that has lost most of its traditional heavy industry. It also lost some 10% of its population between 1960 and 2010 (www.metropoleneruhr.de). As early as the second half of the 1950s, the first signs of the retreat of traditional heavy industry became visible. While restructuring plans concentrated on a diversification of the economic structure, coal mining and the steel industry were still to play an important role.

During the 1980s, a more radical approach was adopted. In 1989 the IBA (Internationale Bauausstellung – International Building Exhibition) Emscher Park was founded by the regional state of North Rhine-Westphalia and 17 local authorities, all situated in the northern part of the Ruhr area. Total investment was more than EUR 2.5 billion, about a third of which was provided by the private sector. Goals included improving and restoring the natural environment, finding new uses for industrial buildings and improving the existing housing stock (Shaw, 2002).

Thus, apart from flagship developments like the opening of new museums and the creation of big landscape parks, IBA Emscher Park also included the regeneration of (social) housing estates, including 30 garden cities.

To house the growing population during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several new neighbourhoods were built. Many of these new neighbourhoods became quite overcrowded. In order to have a fit and loyal workforce, and to avoid social unrest, many companies started to build their own garden cities.

As a result, most of these garden cities are situated close to a coal mine or a big factory. They are quiet oasis in an often noisy and dirty environment. And they are places where everyone knows each other and shares the same experiences. Now, more likely than not, the factory or coal mines are closed. Groups of immigrants with different cultures have moved into the garden cities. The area will possibly have seen a period of decay and plans to tear down some or even all dwellings exist. After a scheme to demolish the Eisensiedlung (Iron Town) in Oberhausen was abandoned in the 1970s because of popular opposition (see e.g. Raines, 2011), garden cities were increasingly seen again as providing good and affordable living. In the end, many of them were regenerated with public money, often as part of the IBA Emscherparks. Schüngelberg in Gelsenkirchen is a good example. Schüngelberg consisted of about 300 dwellings and was built between 1897 and 1919 for the colliers of neighbourg coalmine "Hugo". Between 1916 and 1919 a plan was developed to extend the garden city with a further 200 dwellings. However, due to financial problems, this development never took place. Demolition of the estate was planned in the 1970s, but prevented by the inhabitants. However, it remained unclear what would happen in the long run (Beierlorzer and Boll, 1999).

1: The old part of Schüngelberg garden city, built in the early 20th century.

The IBA made it possible to refurbish the existing dwellings of Schüngelberg. It was also decided to finally build the 200 dwelling extension. The increased population made it possible to create a village centre. In the new part of the estate, the original street plan, characterised by winding streets, was not kept. Instead, it was decided to create long straight streets, many of them offering a view to the neighbouring slap heap (Halde) which was changed into a park with a monument on top. Improving the environment was also part of the project, with the local brook playing an important role in cleaning waste water, while at the same time providing a green border to most of the estate (Beierlorzer and Boll, 1999; own observations).

It was attempted to include the Turkish community, who also came to live in the area, in the consultation and decision making process (Beierlorzer and Boll, 1999). However, according to Waltz (2007), the communal garden, which played an important role in Turkish community life, was destroyed to make way for the new dwellings. Also rents were increased, without dwellings becoming any larger and without paying attention to the specific needs of the local people. "The only thing Turkish about it was the name of the street, which ran through the former communal garden: "Ipe' Street = Mountain Street, the result of a competition."

2: The 1990s extension: straight streets with a view of the former slap heap.
England: Manchester/Salford Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder

Although contrary to Germany England does not have a shrinking population, housing market problems can be quite extreme in some areas where almost all industrial employment was lost. In some streets and for some types of dwellings, demand became virtually non-existent. This was especially the case in parts of northern England. Here the population had been shrinking for several decades. In the Northwest (Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Merseyside) e.g. between 1990 and 2000 the number of inhabitants declined by 2.3%. In many cities, like Manchester (-10.4%) and Salford (-6.4%), the loss of population was even worse. During the same ten years in England as a whole, the population grew by 6.9%. From 2000 until 2010, the population of the Northwest remained roughly stable, with some cities like Manchester even showing a small population gain.

The national government's response to this problem of weak local demand for housing was to set up nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders (HMRPs). Pathfinder areas are selected areas that receive government money to help them solve their housing market problems (ODPM, 2003).

Initially the government created a GBP 500 million fund for a three-year period, which was extended twice with more funding available. In 2010, the newly elected government announced that a review of the HMRPs was under way. The scheme was abolished in March 2011.

Like the eight other ones, the Manchester/Salford HMRP focused on demolishing empty dwellings and making the remaining dwellings (existing or newly built) more attractive. The Manchester/Salford HMRP “has generally promoted mixed communities by improving each neighbourhood for existing residents”. However, “in some areas new homes are markedly different to the existing housing offer, and principally aimed at a more affluent market” (Audit Commission, 2008). Chimney Pot Park is a good example. This part of central Salford was regenerated by Urban Splash, a UK architectural and marketing company well known for its regeneration projects in run down urban areas. Terraced family houses were completely refurbished, with only their front facades being maintained. The idea was to keep the architectural heritage of the area, at the same time providing modern dwellings with all the mod cons. Originally, it was intended to keep more of the original structure in place, but for fiscal reasons the plans were changed. In the United Kingdom, VAT (value-added tax) must be paid for the refurbishment of dwellings, while new building is exempt from VAT. By demolishing all but the front facades, the estate could be classified as “new” (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment).

In all, 227 dwellings were to be built, with total development costs around GBP 34 million, including GBP 11 million provided by the public sector (of which GBP 7.3 million as part of the Manchester/Salford HMRP). Some local pathfinder managers, when speaking off the record, were quite critical about the amount of public money being spent on a relatively small scale project, although at the same time admitting that both the project itself and the attention it got, have helped to put Salford in the spotlight. Still, they indicated that it was not their decision to ask Urban Splash to help redevelop the estate. Instead, as one of them put it, “there was some pressure from above”. Indeed, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who was born and raised in the area, told The Times (4 July 2008): “I dragged Tom Bloxham, the head of Urban Splash, around the area on three rainy Saturday mornings and said he had to help us. He kept saying: ‘Nothing I can do, Hazel, nothing I can do.’ Eventually he said he would give it a go.”

The new dwellings, with parking facilities at ground floor level covered by gardens, feature “upside down” layouts, with bedrooms at the ground floor. Many dwellings have open plan kitchens at the second floor. They are aimed both at first-time buyers, not necessarily traditional families with children, and people wanting to stay in or return to the area (e.g. former residents of the dwellings that used to be here).

The Chimney Pot Park development does attract some criticism from the local community. Many people who lived in the houses that were to be converted, could not afford to return in the new “upside down” dwellings They had to move to other existing houses. Although they got some help from the municipality, they do not always feel they are better off than before. The Salford Star, a local independent newspaper and website, tells many stories of people being evicted from their homes and relocated to homes that are either worse or more expensive (www.salfordstar.com). Others are angry about the amount of public regeneration money that was spent to make it all possible. Even if all 227 dwellings will be built in the end, and if the total investment of public money will still be limited to the GBP 11 million intended, this would amount to a subsidy of GBP 50 000, or about EUR 60 000 a dwelling.
Conclusion

The regeneration of Schüngeiberg, as part of the IBA Emscher Park, and that of Chimney Pot Park, part of the Manchester/Salford HMRP, have a lot in common. Both are building on the (architectural) heritage of the area, both are partly funded by public money. Both are a combination of the retaining of existing structures and new building, albeit in a different way. And both are at least partially aimed at the local population, people who are living or used to live in the area, although the aim of social inclusion is more clearly stated in the case of the IBA Emscher Park.

The Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders and the IBA Emscher Park are both claimed to be a success, although it may be too early to tell, especially for the pathfinders. About the IBA Emscher Park, it can be said that it helped change the image of the area from grey industrial wasteland to something of a tourist attraction. This was again stressed by the Ruhr area being one of Europe’s cultural capitals in 2010. Maybe the key to its success is the combination of the IBA being a large scale project and at the same time a combination of over 100 small projects, all sharing some general goals, but also being responsive to local opinion and needs. The Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders seem to be more top-down than the IBA was, and more concentrated on change (e.g. attracting newcomers to the cities involved) than on tradition. Nevertheless, both project show that thinking out of the box can help to create a new image for run down urban areas.

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