New Brighton Urban Regeneration
Themes in the Reconstruction of Place

Mike Biddulph examines how property led urban regeneration is a distinct practice and process.
It is characterised by clearing outmoded buildings, provision of renewed infrastructure, rationalisation of land ownership and use of land, streamlining the planning and development process, developing property, and reimagining and marketing a locality. It is argued that through this process the local economy is encouraged by either nurturing the local market for new uses or encouraging inward investment from new sources.
Responses to addressing local need are rationalised according to local geographies. Landmark sites are tailored to respond to national or global investment possibilities. In the context of other approaches (for example those centring on community involvement) property led urban regeneration is a distinct practice and process, leading to a what might be regarded as a distinct product.

The aim of this paper is to review in more detail some themes in the reconstruction of place resulting from property led urban regeneration, with specific regard to the area under the control of the Merseyside Development Corporation (MDC). I will relate these changes to the specific characteristics of, and developments within the locality of New Brighton on the Wirral. More specifically I want to examine the process that is resulting in a new urban form, and to highlight the physical manifestations of what I will term "replacement": the process of actively redefining both the perceived and experienced characteristics and qualities of a locality in order to secure economic development.

Firstly I will discuss the characteristics of "replacement", and the logic of its relationship with processes of socio-economic regeneration. Then I will briefly outline the current approaches employed by MDC to secure the design characteristics of regeneration schemes. The specific activities of MDC in New Brighton will then be presented. This will include a review of the approach to regeneration employed, and analysis of aspects of the strategy being implemented in the area. Some themes in the reconstruction of place will then be presented with reference to developments that have been realised within the locality. Finally I will evaluate the role of "replacement" as a mechanism of regeneration, whilst also highlighting the consequences of the approach for New Brighton.

PLACES AND REPLACEMENT

Ralph (1976) suggests that places are partly a consequence of distinct and diverse experiences, meanings and values. "There are at least two experienced geographies: there is a geography of places, characterised by variety and meaning and there is a placeless geography, a labyrinth of endless similarities." Placelessness is consequently characterised by "...cutting roots, eroding symbols, replacing diversity with uniformity and experiential order with conceptual order." He goes on to suggest that the activity of generating placelessness is clearly manifest within the overriding concern for efficiency and technique in both process and product. Places, he argues, are being treated as interchangeable and replaceable. Placelessness is further characterised by "...the adoption of fashions and ideas about landscapes and places that are coined by a few experts and disseminated to the people through the mass media...places become characterised by...more or less gaudy signs and things performing functions with greater or lesser efficiency."

Renewal is resulting in "replacement". The rebuilding of what were the traditional dock areas of the Mersey waterfront is shifting the qualities of the city to reflect its "post industrial" aspirations. Directing both the perceived and experienced character of a place has become a central tenant of the regeneration process, with central agencies providing the planning and development context, and to a varying extent the actual design and development solutions. Actively directing the image and actual qualities of a place reassures both investment and local community interests. As a consequence "place" is no longer the product of a long socio-economic and cultural history, but instead a central component of a pivotal strategy that seeks to turn around current socio-economic trends. Urban design, therefore, as a discipline concerned with place, becomes a key to unlock a locality's potential. However the extent to which the efficient practices of the MDC are resulting in place or placelessness is unclear.

The interventions of an agency of regeneration must respond to the particular definition of the problem. Property led urban regeneration involves redefining the qualities of a place to ally its existing and future built form and image with conditions appropriate for inward investment and private development. Interventions are shaping the characteristics of an existing place, rather than responding to specific human needs that result from an area's decline. The process of reshaping a place is also a consequence of the desire to achieve certain goals within a limited time, whilst using techniques and finance directed at specific projects. In Liverpool this process of "replacement" is visible in the strategies for regeneration, the marketing material produced to "reimage" the areas, and also in the qualities of the resulting built fabric.

URBAN DESIGN INTENTIONS

MDC have produced a significant variety of documents, and taken a variety of initiatives that have sought to both secure and direct the character and quality of built fabric that would result from development. Area Strategies contain general policies of intent. Specific areas warrant a master plan or a development framework to form part of an outline planning application, whilst also guiding the provision of infrastructure, the subdivision of land and the areas of landscape improvement. Invariably such documents also serve to raise the awareness of the site, and project a possible image of an area's future quality. Such documents are commissioned from urban design consultants, and might result from a competition. The
Kings Dock and Princes Dock sites, adjacent to the Liver Building and the Albert Dock complex, have such plans. In addition to the development frameworks, design guidelines have been produced to inform and make suggestions about details for schemes within particular areas. Development briefs have been produced providing details of policies relating to a specific site, information for developers, and also guidance about general design quality. MDC have also undertaken extensive landscaping of existing public areas, and have employed incentive schemes to help contribute to renovation work, or shopfront improvements (funding being given to schemes that meet the guidelines for improvement). In addition image documentation is produced to promote the key sites, and improve public confidence in possible development outcomes.

Urban design related activity, therefore forms a large part of the planning for property led urban regeneration, with MDC making clear their intentions through the range of documents and approaches available to the public sector. This reflects the view that the most effective interventions to secure design quality can be achieved via pre-application guidance and consultation (Aldous, 1988).

New Brighton has had its fair share of documents and initiatives aimed at shaping the image and physical qualities of the town.

NEW BRIGHTON

New Brighton is no longer of strategic value to the development of Merseyside, although once it was. Within the region it was a distinct locality, being a tourist destination for British holiday makers. Located on the northern point of the Wirral peninsula, the town of New Brighton was characterised at its core by a 19th century fabric of two and three storey terraces supporting a fine mix of "seaside" uses and residential accommodation. Non thematic buildings included the tower and ballroom, an extensive swimming pool complex and a pier which originally served to connect New Brighton to Liverpool via a ferry.

By November 1989 MDC concluded that despite the areas general attractiveness as a residential area, it also had serious localised problems that were "...sullyng the image of the whole area...". These included "...jaded leisure facilities, a dowdy exposed promenade, unfit dwellings, inefficient and unattractive car parking, an undersized marine lake, crumbling and boarded up properties in Victoria Road, a run-down bathing pool and sporadic eyesores which imprint the hallmark of 'faded resort' on the whole area." (MDC, 1989) In summary, the physical decline of the area was a manifestation of the shifting fortunes of the local economic base.

Within the context of property led regeneration MDC have intervened to redefine New Brighton as a place, by shaping the area, and making it attractive for redevelopment. Despite the existence of a local residential population and a significant business community the approach has been from the "top down". The selected strategy has been the result of a rational planning exercise geared up to understanding the areas potential from the perspective of potential outside investment.

THE "REPLACEMENT" STRATEGY

Redefining New Brighton as a place has involved significant alterations to the area's physical fabric, functional attributes and uses. Having an existing fabric, emphasis has been upon upgrading the local infrastructure, improving the area's street furniture, demolishing existing buildings on sites identified for redevelopment, and proposing outline forms on development parcels. Details included in proposals for development parcels have indicated the acceptable density of new building, site constraints and an image. This information has allowed developers to consider at an early stage, the costs of a development that would be acceptable to MDC. In addition owners have been offered grants of between 50-75% to improve shopfronts, and for internal and external renovation of their own buildings. The Area Strategy has significantly rationalised uses within the area. This process has included identifying place themes to build on existing, and unify new, developments. "Micro" environments have been devised to be allied with investment interests. For example the road that evolved as the main thoroughfare through the town, Victoria Road, has been truncated to divert leisure traffic along other routes. Existing mixed use properties in a poor state of repair were compulsorily purchased and demolished to form development parcels. As a result the thoroughfare providing some continuity of business frontage through the area has been severed to form a progression of four distinct themed areas (or "planning units"); the local shopping area, the new residential area; the craft/studio/office area, and the "Town Square" which connects the promenade frontage with the rest of New Brighton. Landscaping components have been used to further define the parts. Planning requirements for key sites have been made in development/marketing briefs which have been sent to potential developers already active in the region.

Figure ground plan of New Brighton illustrating the relationship between the coarser grain of leisure uses, and the finer grain of residential uses. Vehicular access to the promenade has been significantly rationalised.
DEVELOPMENT THEMES
The need to encourage development by private developers leads to the qualities of a place being shaped to meet the developer’s criteria. Reconstructing New Brighton as a place is resulting in: locality fragmentation; product standardisation; visual enhancement; the use of themed historicism; and marketing of an associated idea.

Locality fragmentation
Zoning themed uses, altering route layouts, generating landscape zones, and the contemporary fabric resulting from development all contribute to fragment what was a cohesive area. Rationalising the environment is central to reducing the influence of externalities that generate risk for new investors. Victoria Road has experienced each of these developments in order to produce a site appropriate for the development of speculative housing by Tay Homes. The existing fabric, and levels of activity were not considered acceptable for new housing, so public funds were spent to isolate the area.

Product standardisation
Within the fragmented framework of uses, new standard buildings products developed to date have replaced the variety of building types that have incrementally evolved over the lifetime of the resort. In addition the increasing provision of speculative residential accommodation has contributed to the gradual process of merging the built character of New Brighton with neighbouring residential suburbs. The more varied uses that contributed to New Brighton’s distinct character resulting from its history as a resort have been lost. New leisure uses proposed are reasonably responding to shifting lifestyles, new technologies and also consumer expectations, but also result in the coarse grain of “decorated” leisure sheds that rely on a good provision of parking, and contribute little to supporting a process of reinvigorating life through the public realm of the town.

Visual enhancement
Emphasis within New Brighton has been on replacing the dereliction that has thwarted the locality’s recent history. The streetscape has also been visually enhanced, and other blighting influences have been removed, including the “non-confusing” or “undesirable” uses. Whilst private developments have, to date, standardised the building fabric of the town, infrastructure and streetscaping have generated a distinct environment relative to the context. This
process of shaping the fabric of the public realm has actively sought to nurture a new image for the town.

**Themed historicism**

The landscaping, street furniture, information boards, local murals, shop front design (but to a far lesser degree, new developments) all ally themselves with the desire to reflect an Edwardian theme and promote the resort’s past. The visual theme is derived from the period of the resort’s success, especially for the upper/middle class of Liverpool. The process encourages a sentimentalism and attempts to nurture or suggest the existence of locational attachment.

**Marketing the associated idea**

The idea of New Brighton as a place in which to invest is heavily evident in the development brief documents. Within these documents New Brighton is somewhat more than a “faded” resort. It is a distinct locality, the population of which offer “genuine friendship”:

“The beaches have been impressively restored and with coastal erosion halted, natural habitats are being established for wildlife... newly established nature trails are providing both a tourist attraction and a valuable education resource...the promenade and port areas are graced by fascinating milestone sculptures features and a major education themed sculpture will add to the atmosphere in the New Town Square...A wide range of daytime sports and recreational activities will be complemented by a wealth of wine bars, restaurants and shops...”.

**THE PLACE**

With the exception of product standardisation, these components of the regeneration process have distinct parallels with the objectives and methods of advertising. Koten (quoted in Goldman, 1987) argues that “...[F]orlon took a neutral object and, by associating it with a meaningful object, made it a symbol of something else; he imbued it with imagery, he gave it added value.” This, he argues, is the objective of advertising. It could be argued, therefore, that the initiatives in New Brighton to date have sought to contribute to the advertisement of New Brighton as a place, generating a value derived from the new meanings: a sign value (Bidulph, 1993). This sign value becomes a central tenant of the socio-economic process of both deriving and generating commercial interest and activity from the new qualities of the locality. Improving the character of the public realm is central to this process. The urban design product makes New Brighton a new and selectively defined “place” to invest. The process of providing the right environment for physical development involves reinventing, redefining or manufacturing the characteristics of place. Place becomes an important and marketable variable that can be subject to radical transformation as a result of outside interventions.

The gradual standardisation of the development product contradicts this process. Despite the intention of attempting to define New Brighton as a distinct place, new developments contribute to making it like any other. Tay Hones have worked to fit their development product into the street context, but are also building standard house units to meet the general characteristics of their market. The desire to replicate the Edwardian theme has been ignored by Quick Save whose company policy is to provide a cheap (design and build) building so that the burden of extra costs are not passed on to their customers. New leisure facilities seek to exploit opportunities offered by the current leisure market as seen elsewhere on the Wirral.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of this article has been to review some themes in the reconstruction of place resulting from property led urban regeneration, using the distinct circumstances of New Brighton as a case study. More specifically I have examined the process of “replacement” and its ability to achieve new development within what was, economically, a peripherized context.

The design of the public realm, and the visual quality of building interfaces has formed a key component of the regeneration strategy for New Brighton. Procedurally MDC have undertaken schemes that improve these areas, whilst also using forms of guidance and briefing to try and secure the quality of new private developments on infill sites.

It is possible to conclude that the content of design interventions has been biased in favour of a “replacement” strategy. The physical interventions impose new meanings and new values upon the locality, with the meanings and values biased in the interests of generating investment. The themes analysed suggest a tension. Developments and interventions by public agencies seek to promote New Brighton as a distinct place relative to its immediate context. On the other hand the actual developments are resulting in standard use and design solutions, contributing to a sense of placelessness. Within such a context interventions by agencies such as MDC can exploit the deference and defeatism of an existing local community. It is possible to impose a new order that addresses the objectives of the agency, even if not necessarily addressing the needs, interests or objectives of the local population.

**REFERENCES**


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