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Realistic regeneration : housing contexts and social outcomes of neighbourhood interventions in Western European cities

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Summary: Realistic Regeneration

1. Introduction

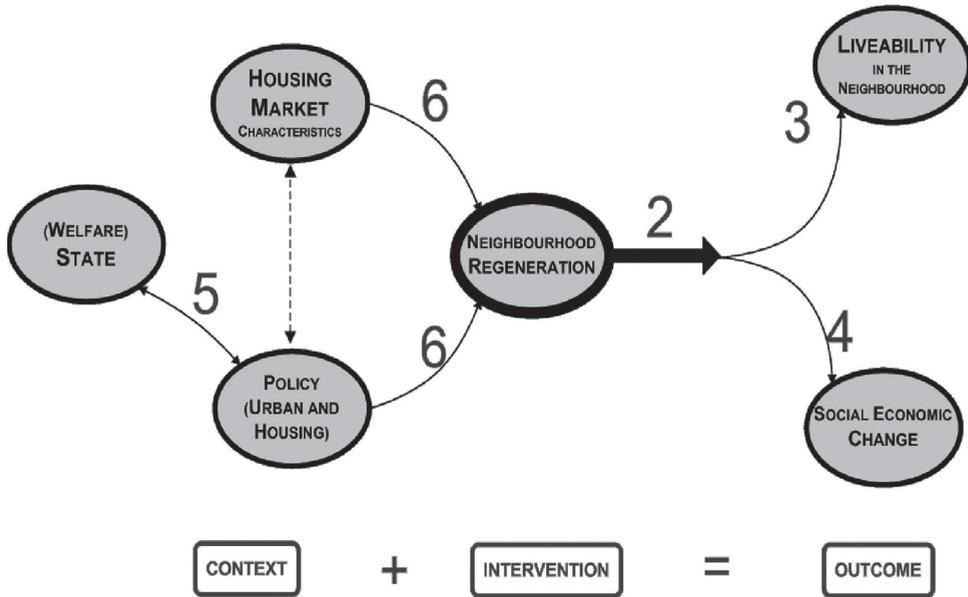
Nowadays almost every city in Western Europe has one or more stigmatised and deprived neighbourhoods, which are widely understood to be highly problematic or even no-go areas. The regeneration of these neighbourhoods, notably those built in the postwar era, has become a centre point of attention in public policy debates. Across Europe, politicians, policymakers, managers, journalists, observers, academics and the general public are not only concerned with the technical quality of housing, but more so with social issues. The neighbourhoods are identified as a nexus of poverty, squalor, immorality, violence, crime, long-term unemployment, estranged youth, drug use, extremism and cultural seclusion. Likewise, policies of regeneration are aimed to instill not only a physical change but also some sort of social change.

This study is about neighbourhood regeneration and in particular the aim for social change. The aim of this study is to appraise the state's capacity for social change at a local and supra-local level through policies and practices of regeneration. In addition, this study aims to explain the social strategies of neighbourhood regeneration by its context. Like the social practice of neighbourhood regeneration, this study places an emphasis on social change through housing-related mechanisms and on the housing context as the *explanans*. This emphasis in research derives from the realist approach, which stresses the importance of social context in explaining social phenomena and how this context provides conditions and constraints within the causal mechanism. Policy making is a social mechanism in itself whose outcomes are contingent on its (housing) context. So, the objective is to explain and understand the practice of neighbourhood regeneration itself within a multi-layered context.

In accordance with the research aim and approach, the main research question is twofold: *What is the capacity of neighbourhood regeneration policies for social and societal change, and how does the housing and policy context affect this capacity in Western European cities?*

Figure 1 outlines the study's conceptual model, which also serves as a reading guide to this book and this summary. The first part of the study (2-4) focuses on the aims and capacity of neighbourhood regeneration for social change. It is important to note that the outcomes are not defined in terms of how the governance, negotiation or implementation process went, but in terms of social change both on a local level and on a societal level. The second part (5 and 6) focuses on the context of neighbourhood regeneration policy and practice. In this study the focus of explanation will lie in the housing context. This means a focus on urban and housing policies on the national level and on the housing market characteristics at the urban and local level, including the mediating policymakers, professionals and managers.

Figure 1. Reading guide and conceptual model. Numbers refer to book chapters and the summary's paragraph numbers.



This study employs comparative case studies. The case study research strategy fits the explorative and explanative propositions of this study's questions and aims and is best suited to research the main unit of analysis, neighbourhoods and their context. The comparison is between four contexts of neighbourhood regeneration, with the exception of chapter 3, which adds 25 cases to the comparison. The cases are the regeneration within urban neighbourhoods in:

- 5) Sweden
- 6) the Netherlands
- 7) UK
- 8) Catalonia, Spain

These cases represent four distinct types of social welfare states, covering a wide array of Western European contexts. However, the relationship between welfare state and housing policies proved to be more versatile (see below). Within the case study research strategy, this study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. Furthermore, this study's comparisons benefit from and build on the findings of the RESTATE research project, which ended in 2005.

2. Neighbourhood regeneration ambitions

Urban policies in Western Europe have increasingly taken a territorial focus in addressing social problems through area-based initiatives (ABI's). Policy discourses emphasise the role of the residential environment in the social economic deprivation and the need to

socially transform areas and create balanced, or socially mixed, 'communities'. However, a territorial focus which tackles both place-based issues and people-based problems would only make sense either when a 'critical representation' of the target population resides in several areas in an already divided city, or when neighbourhood effects take place. In the European context, the existence of either scenario is not a matter of fact.

An overview of four urban policies reveals that even though the rhetoric makes multiple allusions to the existence of the two scenarios, there is no convincing evidence. Moreover, in some cases the evidence refutes policy assumptions. This means that the policies are merely tackling unrelated problems: people-based social economic deprivation and place-based liveability and housing issues. In addition, urban policies stand against a backdrop of social and cultural integration debates. It is unknown what the territorial focus will do for integration, but it is unlikely that ABI's will be successful in effectively tackling social economic deprivation in European societies. It seems that these interventions are pursued due to a need of politicians and policy makers to do something, i.e. Something Is Being Done.

3. Regeneration's capacity for liveability

If the policy ambitions behind neighbourhood regeneration are partly related to liveability, the question is whether regeneration has the capacity to make places more liveable. Because liveability is a subjective notion based on the opinions of residents, the level of neighbourhood satisfaction is used as an indicator for neighbourhood quality of life. Case study data of 29 post-WWII neighbourhoods in Europe was used in a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fs-QCA) to construe the conditions for both 'satisfied and optimist' and 'unsatisfied and pessimistic' neighbourhoods. Fs-QCA is a method based on Boolean and fuzzy logic, which aptly fits the analysis of causality of neighbourhood satisfaction for the small number of cases. The analysis included both quantitative and qualitative data on neighbourhood regeneration along with other potential conditions.

The results reveal that for a number of cases dwelling satisfaction is a necessary condition for neighbourhood satisfaction. In other words, the quality of housing is pivotal. Along with dwelling satisfaction, environmental quality, social cohesion or neighbourhood regeneration prove to be key determinants. So, there is potential for neighbourhood regeneration and housing renewal to increase liveability. However, this may not be the case for creating a new social mix through regeneration. Contrary to policy beliefs, a socially mixed neighbourhood does not appear to cause satisfaction. Moreover, the results suggest that in some cases an ethnic presence in combination with a lack of social cohesion causes dissatisfaction.

4. Regeneration's capacity for tackling social deprivation

Urban policies assert that neighbourhood regeneration benefits not only the neighbourhoods but society as a whole. Supposedly, deprived neighbourhoods are a black hole of poverty and social malaise, tearing the social fabric of society apart and creating societal divisions.

Also current Dutch urban policy has opted for a focused approach to solve urban social problems. The Minister of 'Housing, Neighbourhoods and Integration' aims at tackling social deprivation and liveability problems in a limited number of neighbourhoods. Several assumptions underpin the policy ambitions: e.g., a strong interrelationship between social deprivation and liveability; a clear social and spatial divide in Dutch society; and extra negative effects of problem accumulation.

When these assumptions are tested at the neighbourhood level, it appears that the two types of problems are in fact unrelated. This means that targeting a limited number of neighbourhoods does not effectively address social deprivation. Furthermore, there is yet insufficient research to support the idea that there would be extra negative effects associated with an accumulation of social deprivation and liveability problems. In other words, there do not seem to be any benefits to society as a whole in adopting a selective area approach to societal divisions. Especially, when considering that a mere 8 per cent of those who may need social assistance live in the neighbourhoods selected by policy. In other words, more than 90 per cent of those who need it do not pluck the fruits of urban policies. Similar results have been found in Sweden.

5. Welfare state politics and housing policy context

For context, this study placed some emphasis on welfare state typologies as a means to discern different policy environments. The selection of cases was based on a welfare state typology. So, the interplay between (welfare) state politics and housing is of particular importance to the housing context of regeneration. In Western European countries, the preferred and dominant housing tenure structures have long been associated with the form of welfare state capitalism. Large shares of public funded housing was typically associated with social democratic and corporatist states, and owner occupancy with liberal states. However, with the rise of owner occupancy in most European countries, this association lost its straightforwardness. An alternative is to view housing policies that promote owner occupancy for citizens to acquire assets, as an attempt by the state to reform social welfare provisions. The neo-liberal politics of welfare state reform are closely related to discourses of choice, personal responsibility and asset-building which are being associated with owner occupancy, or home ownership. The basic idea is that unmortgaged assets from housing wealth can supplement or replace welfare state provisions such as pensions, social and health care. Because they can purchase their own care and supplement their pensions from housing wealth, individual citizens would no longer have a need and a wish for collective welfare provisions. This view is mostly based on the British experience, where owner occupancy provides government income. However, similar assertions of ownership ideology cannot be made for Sweden. A closer examination of housing tenure policies and politics in the Netherlands and Spanish Catalonia reveals that while ownership rationales are similar, historically grown national housing systems offer different opportunities for welfare state change. The Dutch case shows ownership rationales in housing policies, yet they are not related to the provision of funding for pensions, health and social care. Furthermore, while owner occupancy does not provide government with income, the substantial social rental sector does. Housing associations provide opportunities for taxation and for 'subcontracting' social provisions and social policies, including neighbourhood regeneration. The Catalan case can be regarded as an 'ownership society'. Ownership in housing forms a pillar of the family-based welfare system. However, issues of affordability of housing in high demand urban regions such as Barcelona, have put a stress on this system. Consequently, the Catalan government slowly developed a social rental housing sector. It is debatable whether this constitutes welfare change or an effort to sustain traditional welfare-family-housing relations. The point is that in its housing policy and politics, the state is driven by opportunism as much as welfare state ideology.

6. Housing context and local social transformation strategies

As this study ascertains, regeneration policies tend to revolve around the relationship between residential environment and the individual's life chances. Consequently, neighbourhood regeneration in Western European cities often relies on social transformation strategies that use urban renewal to institute social change in deprived and stigmatised areas. However, the dictates of housing policy alone are insufficient to understand the role of the housing context. The local practice of neighbourhood regeneration offers us more insight into how context impinges upon the form and outcomes of neighbourhood regeneration.

Local managers and policy makers tend to favour social transformation as a means to make an area more manageable both socially and physically. In general, there are two types of social transformation strategies: large-scale tenure restructuring and upgrading. The first type of strategy relies on radically changing the housing stock through renewal to directly change social composition, giving local managers a lot of control. The second strategy relies on physical interventions and new amenities to upgrade the area's housing market position in order to attract middle class households. The transformation through market gives managers less control. While transformation with control is favoured by local managers, the type of strategy they are able to adopt is dependent on the housing context. The comparative analysis of four cases of regeneration in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Birmingham and Stockholm showed that the opportunities and constraints of national policy framework and regional housing market characteristics explain the type of social transformation strategies adopted at the local level. The absence of a housing restructuring agenda in Sweden, for example, inhibits the use of tenure restructuring in the Stockholm case, while it proved enabling in the other cases.

7. Conclusion

In short, this study links the housing context to neighbourhood regeneration interventions and how this affects social outcomes. The outcomes appear to be limited when confronted with the promises made by politicians and policy makers (chapter 2). While liveability and neighbourhood satisfaction may be increased when dealing with a set of areas with specific problems (chapter 3), the social economic agenda is hampered by the selective territorial focus and by the social transformation agenda (chapter 4). The reason for the current form of regeneration, i.e. with social ambitions and social transformation agenda, can be found in its context of multiple layers of government which involve the changing European welfare state, the politics of welfare state and housing (chapter 5), urban policies and moral panic (chapter 2), and local managers calling for the social transformation of 'their' deprived areas (chapter 6). This last point shows that there is a need for distinguishing between strategic policy intervention at the urban, regional and national levels and the ad-hoc needs of local actors involved.

The findings of this study serve the ongoing debate on urban policies which involve neighbourhood regeneration. This study and other research suggest that the political, social and financial costs of regeneration do not warrant it when social economic deprivation is the objective. Apart from the waste of resources, the hollow social ambitions in neighbourhood regeneration may even be harmful. An important risk of regeneration with social ambitions is the pathologisation of poverty. The social policy focus on the poor themselves and on their living environment implies that these individuals and their neighbourhoods are seen as the cause for their exclusion or destitution. As a result, regeneration can increase the stigma of poverty and exclusion

rather than lift it. More importantly, this policy focus ignores more structural causes in society. When regeneration policies do not yield the desired results, it may even amount to blaming the victim, i.e. the poor and excluded, for their predicament.

In addition, from a housing point of view the social transformation strategy may not prove to be sustainable. When low income housing diminished through tenure restructuring or processes of gentrification, the risk of unaffordable housing and displacement increases. In addition, from a policy standpoint, it will be harder and more costly to regenerate neighbourhoods when ownership is fragmented. Moreover, a regional housing stock should have a sustainable balance of different tenure types. An owner occupied dominated housing market is extremely vulnerable to displacement effects, and may endanger the ability of future generations to effectively regulate the housing market and renew dilapidated areas because of fragmented ownership. Any regeneration strategy should take this point into consideration.

So, neighbourhood regeneration should not only be treated as a political and organisational question, but also as an ethical question; do the benefits of transformation strategies outweigh the negative effects? Consequently, the challenge for every local regeneration effort will be to find a balance between the benefits of improving housing and public space and the social costs which regeneration may entail. For policy, the challenge is to critically review how regeneration and other types of social policies can achieve social change which is sustainable, ethical and realistic.

Reference

RESTATE (2005) *Restructuring Large-scale Housing Estates in European Cities: Good Practices and New Visions for Sustainable Neighbourhood and Cities*. Utrecht, Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University.