

Madeleine Lyes – Conference Report: (Re)Visioning the Urban Imagination: The Art and  
Politics of Redevelopment

Richmond, The American International University in London, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014

The Richmond conference examined representations of urban redevelopment within the transforming city. Based in London, the papers given at the conference addressed cities worldwide, from Dublin to Doha and Berlin to Belgrade, investigating the different ways the changing characters of these urban environments have reconstituted the lives lived within them.

The theme of the conference was captured in the keynote speech given by Professor Alison Rooke of Goldsmiths College, entitled “The Uses of Culture? Ethical Entanglements in the Austere City.” The paper focused on Rooke’s work as consultant and researcher in community art projects in London, analysing the new trend in funding priorities for participatory art, which brings together artists and communities to create projects together. Rooke’s lecture detailed examples of these projects, such as that of Mike Nelson at Elephant & Castle, which have made apparent newly emergent power relations in the city, and which have been censored as a result. Her concern was for the harnessing of artistic practice as window-dressing in gentrification programmes, with engagement remits written in to redevelopment plans without proper analysis of their enactment or consequences.

Similar concerns around power shifts in regeneration projects were raised by Nela Milic (Middlesex University / Goldsmiths, UK) and Anna Ross (University of Oxford, UK), who were looking at how visual art has been used as a tool both by the instigators of such projects and the citizens who lived through them. In Belgrade, Milic studied the effects of the end of communism on urban communities through participatory art, and Ross analysed the photographic record of reurbanisation in West Berlin in the late 1970s. Both papers asked serious questions of the ways top-down modernisation projects can affect communities in unforeseen ways.

Debra Hanson’s paper was a visual analysis of the newly constructed Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, at the heart of the rapidly urbanising country of Qatar. She looked at the ways the architects have attempted to embody cultural memory and authenticity in the building, in the face of dramatic changes to the local culture and environment, and queried the success of the project. Across the world, architect Nandini Bagchee (City University New York) studied another building, this time one unremarkable for its architectural features but fascinating in its history. She has mapped the “Peace Pentagon” building, which has acted as the headquarters of numerous activist and social justice

advocacy groups since the 1970s, and examined its imprint on the city's civic heritage. The contrasting notions of the civic in both projects served to illuminate a vast diversity in approaches to urban space in different geographic and temporal locations, and advocated for further comparative research in interdisciplinary urban studies.

In my own panel, Mara Ferreri of Queen Mary College at the University of London spoke about her research on the "infamous" Heygate estate in south London, using the redevelopment narrative as a case study in contemporary urban regeneration practices. Noemi de Haro Garcia (Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, Spain) used a tighter focus to examine the fight by the neighbourhood association of Portugalete in Madrid to stop urban redevelopment plans which would radically transform their area. Both papers exposed the complexities of resistance among community groups wishing to combat regeneration, and the compromises made in pursuit of their goals. In my own paper, I analysed the different ways Dubliners have reacted to the demolition threat against the Poolbeg chimneys, showing the lack of a coherent sense of the value of urban landmarks beyond their aesthetic claims. Maligned for decades and out of use since 2010, nevertheless a public outcry followed a recent proposal for their destruction. The campaign for their preservation has taken place predominantly online, and the archive of the campaign is primarily a visual one, as individual Dubliners share smartphone photographs of the towers as a gesture of support. The aim of the paper was to illustrate one example of current urban activism in Dublin and its reliance on a developing visual record of the city, arguing that this record is compromised by a concurrent growth in corporate imagery of Dublin which undermines the political potential of its impact.

The snapshot of cutting edge current research into urban redevelopment and its challenges is a valuable tool in preparing for any classroom discussion on the impact of such issues in the Irish context. My teaching in both Study Abroad and Arts departments features urban-focused topics, which will be directly informed by my experiences at the conference in Richmond.