

# URBAN REGENERATION IN CONTESTED CITIES



Belfast

## Briefing Paper 6

### Urban Regeneration in Contested Cities:

### How development projects must respond to the conditions of urban conflict

Urban regeneration in contested cities that ignores inter-communal rifts and conflict over territory is likely to miss opportunities to re-establish vital city connections and spaces which can contribute to a more vibrant city. Conflict leaves cities with the material legacy of war as well as areas of long-term neglect and urban blight. Regeneration efforts must deal with these problems, yet too often they are more focused on creating an image of a unified or cosmopolitan city which are marketed as shared or neutral spaces. In too many cases, the regeneration projects driven by political and business elites do little to address underlying divisions or the needs of marginalised communities.

Regeneration efforts can benefit from the involvement of international organisations, which can both provide capital and apply pressure for parity in the work they fund. Conflict in Cities (CinC) suggests that regeneration planning must look beyond the desire to produce 'trophy' projects and instead be sensitive to how development

can affect existing conflicts.

Urban development, in the form of buildings and other structures, can stand for many years, reminding residents of decisions that have either aided the city or increased divisions. Regeneration through dramatic physical interventions can often fail to accommodate the needs of the city or the aspirations of residents, and may address tourists rather than the local population. Even more significantly, these projects can be used as expressions of control. In Jerusalem, planning has been used as a major tool of conflict. In other places, high profile projects used to promote national interests can divide and redivide, such as the contentious decision to demolish the old East German parliament in favour of rebuilding a Prussian castle in Berlin.

#### Regeneration that divides

In Jerusalem, regeneration projects have attempted to cement the idea of a unified city under Israeli rule, and

## Key findings for policy

- **The development stakes are particularly high in divided cities where major projects will affect the long-term needs of the city.**
- **Too often public space is ignored or made inaccessible by redevelopment projects.**
- **State agencies and private companies may pursue their specific agendas in ways that marginalise the urban residents most affected by the conflict.**
- **International efforts in combination with local involvement may be able to channel funds and subvert the most politically biased and short-sighted plans.**
- **Local participation in planning decisions can give people a stake in the rejuvenation of their cities and a role in addressing their conflicts.**
- **Ultimately, local planning must be integrated with broader strategies of conflict resolution in cities.**

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have been poorly received by Palestinians. By ignoring important existing commercial connections through Damascus Gate, these plans focus on isolating the historic city centre rather than treating it as a living entity, thereby ignoring the everyday needs of Palestinians. The development of an amphitheatre in front of Damascus Gate and an adjacent park were undertaken as city beautification projects, but they also demonstrated that Palestinian parts of the city were subject to Israeli planning decisions. Today, the park is shunned by Palestinians, and whilst the amphitheatre was designed for tourism purposes it has now been turned, *ad hoc*, into a market by Palestinian casual vendors. A small square with seating, next to popular shops across the street from Damascus Gate, is well-used by the local Palestinian community for whom the site is a gathering place. Thus, a modest intervention is more appropriate to this part of the city than more ambitious projects.

In Vukovar regeneration efforts continue to reinforce its segregation. Development has focused on private homes rather than public space, or on partisan institutions such as the Croatian National Theatre. Exceptions to this have been public institutions such as schools, sports centres and healthcare facilities. However, the former are used by different communities at different times, whilst sports facilities either remain



*The Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque establishing a new scale in Beirut's city centre and on the edge of the still unbuilt Martyrs' Square.*

closed due to a lack of funding or are segregated in practice. Most problematic is that regeneration of the city has followed an 'outside-in' model, whereby regeneration at the edges is meant to revitalise the city as a whole. Instead, the result has been an abandoned and neglected city centre.

### Regeneration driven by economics

In contested cities competing groups may seek to craft images associated with their respective political projects. The reconstruction of Beirut's downtown, executed by the private development company Solidere (founded by former Prime Minister Hariri) follows a model of neo-liberal economic recovery whereby success in the city centre is believed to heal the rest of the city and even the country. Here, regeneration is defined principally by its capacity to provide an image of stability in order to attract foreign investment and tourism (whilst subtly excluding elements of the city's population). In the south of the city, Hezbollah practiced its own form of exclusionary reconstruction in the areas that were bombed in the 2006 war with Israel. They focused on the resettlement of the Shi'a population in newly-rebuilt homes. This was an act of resistance, and also worked to ensure the support of the group's popular base. Ultimately, both reconstruction approaches were used for political and territorial ends.

In Beirut, reconstruction of the city has been characterised by further fragmentation and the consolidation of territories delineated during the war. Political pragmatism has underpinned the ways in which plots on the Solidere site have been sold; the site is now identified as Sunni, with the Shi'a being the only major confessional group not to have a religious edifice in the city centre. On the periphery, real estate development, speculation and gentrification is displacing poorer sections of the population. In Beirut and Jerusalem entire portions of the city are only seasonally occupied, if at all, hollowing out central neighbourhoods. Gated communities may help to calm some residents' fears with regard to security, but these developments tend to further divide and fragment cities. On prime land, where rejuvenation is significant for a better functioning city, the gated communities only offer dead space.

Underlying regeneration efforts in Belfast is an economic development strategy reflecting neo-liberal economic

**“They are building a wall between us and them. And also... in terms of employment, there is nobody ... from the Markets area who works in the Gasworks. ...There’s a thing in Belfast called ‘the blacks and whites’ – it’s people that serve people food during conferences or something like that... That’s the only type of work that goes on in there. There’s been no real meaningful engagement from my community as opposed to with the business class there about trying to co-operate and make this area wanted by them.”**

*- Community worker in Belfast*

globalisation and a belief in its powers of normalisation, additionally boosted by the peace process. However, new investments and physical changes through regeneration are unevenly distributed in the city. Belfast remains characterised by a distinct spatial overlap between deprivation, residential segregation and violence. The rebranding of the city as a tourist destination has boosted a low-wage service economy but has favoured iconic physical projects at the expense of a city geared to the needs of its inhabitants. In recent years high-end private residential developments have proliferated in the centre, south and east of the city. Existing demand for working class housing is not prioritised in these areas, increasing inter-communal tensions over territory and deepening hostility to the ‘business class’ living next door.

### **International aid and local responses**

Approaches to regeneration in cities such as Belfast, Jerusalem and Beirut tend to see neo-liberal economic development as key to conflict transformation. Whilst this can result in some positive outcomes it can also create new divisions in the city through gentrification and the uneven distribution of any benefits. Such problems are often symptomatic of political divisions underwritten by financial gain. But in some cities, alternative approaches have potential.

In Nicosia, a bicomunal approach to regeneration has seen encouraging results. The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) was established in 1981, largely on the initiative of the mayors of the two sides of the city. Since that time, the NMP has created an overall plan for the city and instituted many projects in the historic walled city centre. The city is still divided by the Buffer Zone, but the mayors worked on the basis that Nicosia would eventually be reunited and would need a master plan that could link the two sides. The NMP presents an urban approach unique among divided cities, where talk of bicomunalism and planning is rare. The mayors circumvented the formal negotiation structures that preoccupied the national leaders, and focused on technical rather than political issues. Through the use of connected pedestrian areas, and images depicting the walled city as a whole unit rather than two divided halves, the project has attempted to create an image of the unified city. Significant accomplishments, such as the revitalisation of streets as vibrant commercial areas and the creation of pedestrian zones, enhance the everyday use and experience of the city. Much of this depended on the opening of the crossing point in the city centre. Yet the city remains divided, and far more must be achieved.

The cooperation of local authorities or groups with international organisations and funders – with the conscious avoidance of partisan state authorities – can enable an approach to regeneration that is more sensitive to local needs. Significant funding for the NMP comes from UNDP and USAID, and more recently from the EU. However, because northern Cyprus (in which the northern half of Nicosia is located) is recognised officially only by Turkey, it is only eligible for a fraction of these funds. This has resulted in a lack of parity regarding the number and quality of regeneration projects in the north and the south of the city.

Nonetheless, this has still enabled a more effective approach to regeneration than was possible in Vukovar, where the city centre was neglected with negative repercussions. There, following the withdrawal of the UN, international funding slowed and regeneration became a domestic issue; one result was that the regeneration of urban heritage sites was for many years limited to Catholic (Croat) churches to the exclusion of Orthodox (Serb) structures.

Regeneration projects can also address the needs of groups who are not accommodated by high-profile projects and approaches. In the face of Israeli attempts to Judaise the city, Palestinians draw on renovation and restoration as they struggle to preserve their own neighbourhoods. This is demonstrated in the work of one organisation which restores residential courtyards in Jerusalem's Old City as a means of both reinforcing Palestinian heritage and ensuring that Palestinians have decent places to live, giving them incentive to remain in their homes. It also provides training in conservation and pursues social outreach programmes in support of the surrounding community. Another organisation has completed work on 800 properties including public buildings, homes, schools, clinics and clubs. Work such as this reinforces the value of simple and practical regeneration initiatives that can help to meet local needs, offer residents alternatives in severe conflict situations, and help to maintain or re-establish urban connections.



*Damascus Gate is the busiest way into Jerusalem's Old City. The amphitheater outside the gate was constructed by the Israeli Municipality but is rarely used as the designers intended. Instead, Palestinian vendors have laid claim to the hard, staggered landscape, filling every available ledge and step with goods.*

### Further reading

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'Conflict in Cities and the Contested State' explores how divided cities in Europe and the Middle East have been shaped by ethnic, religious and national conflicts, with particular reference to architecture and the urban as a setting for everyday activities and events. It is concerned with how cities can absorb, resist and potentially play a role in transforming such conflict. The main research sites are Belfast and Jerusalem, with supplementary enquiry into other divided cities including Berlin, Beirut, Brussels, Kirkuk, Mostar, Nicosia, Tripoli (Lebanon) and Vukovar. This multi-disciplinary project is led by three UK universities - Cambridge, Exeter and Queen's Belfast, with an international network of partners. It is funded by the Large Grant Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (RES-060-25-0015). © Conflict in Cities, November 2012; updated by © Centre for Urban Conflicts Research, 2019; [www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk](http://www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk). Grateful acknowledgement is made to ARUP London for their support. This material is offered free of charge for personal and non-commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged. For commercial or any other use, prior written permission must be obtained from Conflict in Cities. In no case may this material be altered, sold or rented.

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