Multicultural heritage and urban regeneration in London’s City Fringe

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Summary
Leisure and tourism-led regeneration is regarded as something of a panacea to cure the ills of inner city neighbourhoods that are rich in cultural heritage, but poor in terms of the disadvantage and social exclusion of their residents. The paper critically examines an initiative to address these problems in an area of inner London where urban authorities have worked in partnership with private sector interests and community organisations "to alleviate the economic deprivation and physical dilapidation evident in areas immediately surrounding the City". It explores the scope for imaginative interpretation of the 'hidden' history of multiculturalism in European cities, through active involvement of artists and local residents in the process of conservation, animation and promotion of built heritage.

Introduction
This paper will discuss the little-known multicultural heritage of disadvantaged inner urban areas and their 'discovery' as new destinations for leisure and tourism. Over several centuries, certain districts of large European cities have accommodated successive waves of migrants, refugees and exiles, many escaping poverty or persecution in their previous homelands. Other diaspora are products of the colonial history of former imperial powers (HENRY, 2002). Known to their host societies as Little Italies, Little Polands, Latin Quarters, Arab Quarters, Jewish Quarters, Chinatowns, Punjabitowns and so on, cultural or ethnic enclaves establish themselves in particular neighbourhoods. In many cases, after a few generations, their inhabitants move on, leaving their imprint on the urban landscape and street names (TAYLOR, 2000). Known to their host societies as Little Italies, Little Polands, Latin Quarters, Arab Quarters, Jewish Quarters, Chinatowns, Punjabitowns and so on, cultural or ethnic enclaves establish themselves in particular neighbourhoods. In many cases, after a few generations, their inhabitants move on, leaving their imprint on the urban landscape and street names (TAYLOR, 2000). Nevertheless, new immigrants generally take their place, adapting the historic built environment to their own needs with limited resources. Thus, the locality retains its function and identity as a low-rent multicultural district.

Within such areas, there are often large groups of buildings deemed worthy of conservation because of their architectural or historic value, but many are derelict or poorly maintained. Public spaces, community facilities and infrastructure tend to be worn-out and neglected, since the local tax base is low. Older housing and premises for small businesses have a backlog of repairs. It is hard for owners to upgrade them to modern standards, and sensitive restoration of heritage buildings is seldom a priority. Dirt, shabbiness and neglect pervade the scene; the overall effect is depressing. A poor environment, however historic it might be, thus compounds the problems of local residents who may, with some justification, feel marginalised from nearby, wealthier parts of their city. Throughout Europe, the inhabitants of such areas have experienced attitudes that have swung, at various times, from toleration and peaceful co-existence to overt racism and violence.

In comparatively recent times, some historic multicultural areas, especially those adjacent to Central Business Districts, have become significant attractions for visitors who come to enjoy ethnic cuisine, to shop in local markets, stroll and absorb their distinctive ambience (ORBASLI, 2000). In general, urban authorities have encouraged this development, as expenditure by tourists is assumed to create wealth and help regenerate the local economy. Employment in new, clean service industries is expected to compensate for the loss of established manufacturing and distributive trades associated with the inner city. Public funding may be invested in the streetscape to make such neighbourhoods feel safe, accessible and visually appealing to visitors, including international tourists. Expressions of cultural heritage and identity in the built environment, along with markets, festivals and other events are presented and promoted as exotic spectacles (AITCHISON, 2002).

The ‘hidden’ history beyond London’s city wall
Over many centuries, the identity of the ‘City Fringe’ area outside London’s Roman/medieval wall has been shaped by its symbiotic, if unequal relationship with the centre that is now the ‘Square Mile’: one of the world’s top financial centres (SHAW, 2000). The ‘liberties’ beyond the City precincts thus developed as a refuge for excluded social groups and activities. Although their skills were badly needed from the fourteenth century, many of their trades were illegal within the City, with its restrictive guild system. Examples included brewing, dyeing, tanning and cloth making carried out by artisans from Flanders and Germany. In the seventeenth century, Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal came as moneylenders and merchants, as did Protestant Huguenots from France, with their special skills as silk weavers...
Integrating cultural heritage into the living city

and fine instrument makers. In the nineteenth century, Irish migrants escaping poverty and famine arrived, followed by large numbers of poor Jews from Poland and Russia, many of whom found work in the ‘rag’ or clothing trade.

By the early twentieth century, a wide range of manufacturing industries – many with poor working conditions – were located in the Fringe because of its pool of cheap labour as well as London’s huge market, port and railways. Although some pockets remain, the 1970’s saw their rapid decline. During this time, the Jewish population moved away, but new immigrants took their place, acquiring their small businesses, especially workshops, market stalls, shops and restaurants. Spitalfields in the east of the district now has the largest Bangladeshi community in the UK, and a growing Somali population. With the declining population base, however, these and other groups have experienced the highest unemployment rates in London. Their poverty is compounded by poor housing stock, run down infrastructure and poor facilities. Unfortunately, they have also suffered harassment and violent attacks by race-hate groups, most recently a nail bomb explosion in Brick Lane in 1999.

During the 1980’s and 1990’s, spectacular growth of financial services in the Square Mile led to redevelopment along the borders of the Fringe for office use. Community and heritage groups opposed threats to familiar landmarks such as Spitalfields Market and conflicts with developers continue to this day. Furthermore, Georgian Huguenot weavers’ houses that were previously regarded as ‘slum dwellings’, along with Victorian warehouses converted into Manhattan-style ‘loft’ apartments, attracted wealthy new occupants. Clusters of graphic design, media and other services for the Square Mile also moved into refurbished heritage buildings. These, in turn, began to support a lively collection of bars, cafes and restaurants: a nascent visitor economy. On the one hand, the influx of new businesses and affluent newcomers led to better care of the historic built environment, and new uses for derelict property. On the other hand, the local authorities were concerned that rising values would displace low-income communities. Furthermore, few local people found jobs in the new service industries and unemployment among the 30,000 Fringe residents remained high at 22%. Small enclaves of prosperity thus emerged in a sea of poverty.

By mid 1990’s, it had become clear that a strategic approach was needed to make links between functional departments of public services and across administrative boundaries. In 1996, the City Fringe Partnership (CFP) was set up to tackle inner city problems through a co-ordinated programme, led by the Corporation of London with three other local authorities, public, private and voluntary sector agencies. CFP rightly acknowledged that these problems were not endemic to the area and should not be treated in isolation from future development of London, and its relationship with the global economy. CFP’s initiatives through to 2000 included investment in ‘gateways’ linking the Square Mile and the inner city as well as training and skills development to enable small businesses to become more competitive, especially through Information and Communications Technology. These were complemented by a ‘Cultural Quarters’ programme, and consultants were commissioned to identify areas where visitors would be encouraged and where improvements would be carried out to enhance accessibility and appearance.

Cultural heritage and arts-led regeneration?
The study concluded that the most promising target markets were business people entertaining clients at lunchtime and in the evenings, as well as domestic

Figure 1. Clerkenwell Green’s built heritage includes the Karl Marx Memorial Library.

Figure 2. Brick Lane’s 18th century Huguenot church became a synagogue and is now a mosque.
and international tourists seeking a satisfying alternative to the mainstream attractions of central London. It identified three areas – Clerkenwell, Hoxton/Shoreditch and Spitalfields – where there were significant clusters of cultural facilities and organisations. These were designated as Cultural Quarters. However, as the consultants pointed out, only half of their ‘attractions’ were open to the general public or visible to the public gaze, as many were small-scale museums, galleries, libraries and archives for local or specialist audiences. In Clerkenwell, for example, these included the Karl Marx Memorial Library, the Society of Genealogists, and the London Metropolitan Archives. In the area as a whole, there were over 250 studios of artists, designers and craftspeople, many of which had potential to attract visitors by participating in exhibitions and craft fairs. Since the late 1990’s, their appeal has been well demonstrated through an annual event known as ‘Hidden Art of the City Fringe’, where artwork and crafts are exhibited and sold direct to the public.

The real distances between the City and the Fringe are short, mostly within thirty minutes walk, but the psychological distances seem much greater. Until the mid 1990’s, signposting was inadequate, and there was a general air of neglect that was not conducive to a casual stroll. The CFP thus addressed the issue of accessibility and security. Personal safety after dark was improved by better street and floodlighting, safe pedestrian routes and signage linking the Cultural Quarters with ‘gateway’ underground stations and bus stops. In Clerkenwell, to the west of the area, a local history society initiated a pedestrian route modelled on the Boston Freedom Trail with plaques, banners and a mapguide designed by a local artist. In Spitalfields, investment in the public realm has focussed on the famous street markets and the imagery of ‘Banglatown’ is affirmed in the design of street lamps and other amenities. Local restaurants are encouraged to refurbish their frontages with grant aid. There are also proposals to restore a number of vacant historic buildings and a new ‘London Cultural Heritage Centre’ will be a flagship attraction to encourage ‘a sense of pride amongst the community and promote an image of London as an exciting and vibrant multicultural city’ (LB TOWER HAMLETS, 1996).

All this highlights the pivotal role that interpretation of heritage and the arts is now expected to play in the process of regeneration. The CFP initiative was established with ambitious aims concerned not only with revitalisation of the area itself, but with its potential contribution to ‘the strength of London as a whole – Inner City Action with a World City Focus’. As yet, however, the significant cultural legacy of the locality’s immigrant communities over the past four hundred years is hard to ‘read’, and many of its historic and artistic attractions are housed in places to which the public has limited or no access. Notwithstanding the efforts of local tourism and regeneration agencies to communicate its attractions to target

**Figure 3.** As fig. 2, another detail of the mosque.

**Figure 4.** Brick Lane’s historic brewery now accommodates designer studios and two night-clubs.
markets, long-standing stereotypes and place-myths will take some time to dispel. As yet, where the area appears on the tourist map at all, its representation in mainstream ‘guidebook’ tourism remains fragmented and off-putting to the prospective visitor. For example, The Rough Guide (HUMPHREYS, 2001) refers to the generic East End in the following terms:

‘The name is synonymous with slums, sweatshops and crime, as epitomised by anti-heroes such as Jack the Ripper and the Kray Twins, but also with the rags-to-riches careers of the likes of Harold Pinter and Vidal Sassoon, and whole generations of Jews who were born in the most notorious of London’s cholera-ridden quarters and have now moved on to wealthier pastures’.

Conclusion
The case study illustrates some important issues for urban authorities throughout Europe that see tourism as a catalyst for regeneration in multicultural neighbourhoods. The significant cultural legacy of the area’s former inhabitants is far from obvious to the casual observer: the architecture and other features of the built environment offer few clues. Likewise, the creative activities of current inhabitants are, for the most part, hidden from view. The development of an emerging visitor economy thus requires an approach to place-marketing and interpretation that respects the rich and complex histories of former inhabitants, and at the same time draws strength from active involvement of the present-day population of local residents, artists, craftspeople, their small businesses and community organisations. In this case, there is now a series of festivals featuring the performing arts of the black and Asian communities. These are widely promoted and attract large, racially mixed audiences.

There are, however, justifiable concerns that, formulaic place-marketing models imposed by external agencies may reinforce rather than challenge cultural stereotypes, misrepresenting the internal diversity of place identities that are seldom simple, preserving as museum pieces situations that are seldom static. The one-way traffic and attention of visitors may become intrusive, disturbing the rhythm of people’s everyday activities and adversely affecting their local environment. Ironically, the self-conscious designation and sign-posting of cultural pluralism may foster a homogenous culture of consumption that becomes disconnected from the social life of local population. In time, the ‘success’ of such programmes – in terms of economic and physical regeneration – may displace established residents and businesses, leaving isolated visitor-oriented enclaves contrasting sharply with the poverty of adjacent inner city areas.

A more optimistic scenario is that, through a well-regulated, planning framework informed by the participation of local communities, emerging visitor economies may stimulate wealth creation that benefits ethnic minority residents and businesses without displacing them. Public policy must address the spatial manifestations of social exclusion, whilst facilitating at new uses for old buildings that will finance sensitive refurbishment. The will to establish an attractive showpiece for urban tourism may provide the rationale to upgrade the public realm of the streetscape and amenities that can be enjoyed by local residents as well as visitors. The designation of such areas as cultural quarters serves to emphasise and to celebrate the present-day as well as historic contribution of immigrant communities to the creative life of European cities. The process will thus raise ‘local pride’ in areas where low self-esteem has long been reinforced by the negative perceptions of outsiders.
References


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