

The Public Sector in Urban Housing and Regeneration: converging and diverging experiences in Asia and Europe

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Urban planning

Housing is a key contributor to urban revitalisation or decay. Slum clearance and regeneration, the displacement of the urban poor and social minorities, the replacement of low-rise, densely occupied streets with high-rise estates and environmental limitations on development – these issues are faced by Europe and Asia alike.

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By Anne Power, Bingqin Li and
Hyun-bang Shin

To address problems of urban decay and revitalisation, the public sector has to adopt new policies and practices. A fundamental challenge for the public sector is to recognise its limits and constraints, and to mobilise under-used resources. Researchers envisage a redefined role for the public sector, as an 'enabler' for the recipients of public services who have too often been regarded by policy-makers and practitioners in developing countries as passive objects. A key goal is to give people more choice and control over what happens.

Sustainable urban growth is a critical issue today, especially in rapidly urbanising, densely populated countries such as China and India. The rapid concentration of the population in urban areas and the need to provide facilities and housing raise the issue of how to contain urban expansion while minimising envi-

ronmental impacts and the wasteful use of land and energy. This necessitates redefining the role of the public sector in housing policy and administration.

The primary purpose of the workshop was to bridge conversations between researchers and practitioners in Europe and Asia to enhance understanding and identify best practices. To what extent should the public sector intervene in housing development? What lessons can be drawn from public sector intervention in East Asia and Europe? Who are the other key actors and providers of housing? To what extent do social, economic, political and cultural factors account for specific housing experiences in each country? What dynamics are driving different patterns in different parts of the world? Is urban housing policy becoming more fragmented, even more chaotic, than before? Why are the urban poor the target of so much policy debate and action? Can they influence policy outcomes and practices? Will social segregation and exclusion accelerate under global pressures, or reduce as the 'globe shrinks'? Are urban pressures declining in Europe through de-concentration and

rising in Asia due to urbanisation? Is there evidence of polarization? How do urban pressures affect the sustainability of urban development? What are the tasks for the public sector? How have environmental issues brought together public sectors from different countries and how may they interact with each other in the future?

Participants from twelve European and Asian countries attended the workshop in Beijing. Eighteen papers were presented on three main themes: 'Urbanisation and Housing Pressures', 'Urban Housing Provision and Polarisation' and 'How Cities Manage Urban Renewal'. The issues were discussed in-depth, with due recognition of the limits and constraints of the public sector and the importance of non-state initiatives in mobilising resources and improving governance. The summary points from discussion during the workshop are compiled by John Hills:

Diversity

- National housing and urban patterns vary a great deal: there is no inevitable evolution towards a common pattern; nor can one simply transplant lessons

from one country to another. Poverty within particular cities is varied in the kinds of people affected and location within the city (France, China).

- Homogenous, uniform housing has been a failure. Allowing people variety and individualisation is not a reflection of selfishness (Denmark). Cities are meant to be diverse.
- Deprived neighbourhoods and their residents are coming to be seen as a resource, not just a 'problem' (France). Coping with the complexity of regenerating poor neighbourhoods is difficult (managing 'conflicting co-operation'). It requires particular skills from those doing so, that are rather rare (France, Italy). It also requires 'capacity building' in the skills of residents and local workers (Denmark, UK, Hong Kong).

Conflicts

- The income levels to which the government gives housing assistance are often very high, particularly if tied to owner-occupation and above-average standards. This reinforces existing inequalities ('a double portion of good fortune') rather than meeting the greatest needs (China).
- There are conflicts between the goals of resident participation in regeneration and the interests of powerful groups pushing through something different. In extreme cases this can involve coercion and violence (Korea).
- More generally, there is a choice between clearance of low quality housing and displacement of residents and renewal and upgrading of existing housing (Germany and elsewhere).
- The competition to become the most successful global city can lead to high social costs in a 'World Cup' for cities, which only one can win. Policies can lead to a combination of 'fortress towers' in 'hot spots' and 'cold places' (even in suburban owner-occupied apartment blocks), with extreme contrasts between them (Japan).

Inheritance

- People and their housing needs can change fast, but buildings change slowly, and government policies even more slowly (Germany). As a result governments and populations spend many years living with the decisions and mistakes of the past.
- Cities may contain precious physical and cultural heritage. But neighbourhoods also contain a 'social heritage' of social contacts, networks and social capital ('close neighbours are better than distant relatives'). This asset is very fragile and easy to destroy through displacement and dispersal of communities.

The European Alliance for Asian Studies

Workshop Series

The members of the European Alliance for Asian Studies are convinced that the humanities and social sciences are crucial to building long-term cooperative relations between Asian and European partners. Their study brings insight into each others' political, social and economic concepts, and to the way parties cope with issues of common interest.

The Alliance is very fortunate to have found the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in Singapore to jointly stimulate cooperation in the field. ASEF's objective is 'to enhance better mutual understanding between Asia and Europe through greater intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges'. In its intellectual exchange programme, ASEF stimulates academic discourse through, amongst its other activities, the ASEF/Alliance Asia-Europe Workshop Series. Through this series, ASEF demonstrates its long-term commitment to joint research (and education) as key elements in the (cultural) rapprochement between Asia and Europe.

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- The costs of displacing communities and of losing existing buildings should be included in measuring the costs and benefits of alternative approaches to city renewal. ◀

Bingqin Li is Lecturer in Social Policy at the London School of Economics, UK.
b.li@lse.ac.uk

Anne Power is Professor of Social Policy and Deputy Director of the ESRC Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, UK.
anne.power@lse.ac.uk

Hyun-bang Shin is Research Assistant and PhD Candidate at the ESRC Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, UK.
H.B.Shin@lse.ac.uk

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