

'Problem Neighbourhoods' in a Part-Linear, Part-Network Regime: Problems With, and Possible Responses to, the Housing Market Renewal Leviathan 2011

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Abstract

This thesis came about as a result of conflict around the implementation of the Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) in the north and west midlands of England. While some actors see a mix of housing redevelopment and refurbishment as essential to an effective urban renewal strategy, others dispute this vision of progress, fearing a loss of heritage, home and community. The thesis approaches this problem by developing the critical academic literature on urban renewal and combining it with insights from planning theory and complexity theory. Until now, the impact of actor-network theory on empirical urban renewal research has been marginal, contributing only clarifications and adjustments to theoretical debates. By contrast this thesis uses actor-network theory as the basis of a detailed empirical investigation.

The thesis begins with a discursive exploration of the urban renewal tradition in the UK; this exploration historicises a more detailed investigation of the discursive and institutional practices of a group of applied researchers who actively lobbied for the creation of the HMRI. By attending to the social function of knowledge and scrutinising its epistemological justification a network of actors is revealed. Actors within this network all have interests in maintaining a stable set of normative concepts as guiding principles for urban renewal practice. Those concepts are provided in the guise of objective research which is based on neo-classical economic assumptions. A point is reached where the scale of network expansion threatens the mobility of these concepts as a theoretical foundation for urban renewal practice. In response, an immutable mobile or black box can be seen to emerge which embeds a specific, localised network of interests in a purportedly objective call to create 'a better mix of housing'. Case studies of housing market renewal in Liverpool and Lancashire reveal the 'monstrous' (Law, 1991) effects that this black box has on planning schemes and the interests of those living in the affected neighbourhoods. Despite leading to some fantastical claims, and sometimes disastrous consequences, the narratives which make up the black box are rarely challenged because in the short term they support the interests of organisations which are engaged in the process.

The scientific manner of the HMRI's progression is a consequence of the relationship between local and central government. The problems caused by vacant housing for local authorities and housing associations exceeded the capacity of these organisation to respond and a strong case was

therefore required to persuade central government to act. Once government responded, its support became dependent on maintaining the arguments in this case. Alternative ways of understanding and responding to the problem, which might have been promoted by the recent communicative turn in planning practice, were therefore marginalised. The result has been an urban renewal process guided by path-dependent ways of problem-framing that serve selected interests at the expense of others. The findings suggest the need to rethink democratic processes to safeguard a secure, but fluid idea of 'public interests'. Unlike the abstracted form that discrete planning theories tend to take towards mediating interests in planning, this thesis argues that developments in democratic regulation must be firmly grounded in and develop from specific practices. It therefore seeks a way forward that combines the realities of representational democracy, understood as an engrained culture of case building and lobbying to secure government action, with a call for a new commitment to the democratisation of knowledge. The thesis concludes by suggesting a number of practical ways in which governance dynamics and regulation might be adapted to ensure greater democratic scrutiny, and improved effectiveness of urban renewal schemes.