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*Diversity, Cohesion and the Richness of Cities*

## **The Concept of “Culture” in Multi-Ethnic Areas Regeneration Policies: *Common Views, Weaknesses, Experiences, Perspectives***

Dr. Paola Briata

Diap, Politecnico di Milano

Via Bonardi 3

20133 Milan

Italy

Tel: +39 (0)22 399 5426

Email: paola.briata@polimi.it

### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, cultural policies for urban regeneration have explored ways of looking at the culture of immigrant groups as a resource for the vitality of urban life and economy. In this perspective, the paper examines how the concept of “culture” can be constructed, in order to analyse the dynamics of urban multi-ethnic settlements, and to show how it can be used in urban regeneration policies that aim to address problems of diversity, local development, and social cohesion.

Two main research frameworks will be considered:

- based on the current debate on multi-ethnic societies, the paper will provide an overview of the most widely recognized weaknesses of the more traditional “models of inclusion” – assimilation, integration, multiculturalism – in order to point out the most interesting aspects of the emerging pluralist model of integration. In particular, this model is interesting because it recognizes that integration is a two-way process including both immigrants and the host society;
- the pluralist model of integration helps also to render problematic the most commonly held views of immigrants as all potentially excluded people, and of their culture as only linked to national, ethnic or religious origins. Culture is also a matter of gender, age, education, permanence within the host society, and socio-economic condition.

Recognizing these differences implies assuming that not all immigrants have the same needs and that not all immigrants are poor or potentially socially excluded.

Policies that aim to deal with diversity without creating problems of social justice between immigrants and natives should be able to recognize these differences.

The paper examines how the concept of immigrants’ culture has been used in the last seven years’ experience of the SRB urban regeneration programmes of the Spitalfields area in East London, a case that, in recent literature, is often quoted as a best practice of cultural policy for urban regeneration in a multi-ethnic area.

## **Introduction: regeneration, cultural policies and immigrants' groups**

Our town and cities are increasingly diverse and the complexity of this diversity is accelerating. Hence, issues of diversity, ethnicity and cultural differences are increasingly important for policy makers.

In recent years, cultural policies for urban regeneration have explored ways of looking at the culture of immigrant groups as a resource for the vitality of urban life and economy. It has been argued that it is time to look at ethnic diversity not as a *problem*, rather than an *opportunity*<sup>1</sup>. In these terms, cultural diversity could be seen as a source of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship.

Based on the current debate on multi-ethnic societies, in the first section the paper examines how the concept of "culture" can be constructed, in order to analyse the dynamics of urban multi-ethnic settlements, and to show how it can be used in urban regeneration policies that aim to address problems of diversity, local development, and social cohesion.

In the second section, the paper examines how the concept of immigrants' culture has been used in the last seven years' experience of the SRB urban regeneration programs of the Spitalfields area in East London, a case that, in recent literature, is often quoted as a best practice of cultural policy for urban regeneration in a multi-ethnic area.

The paper illustrates the argument that this case shows that the idea of culture that was mobilized in the regeneration process contributed to boost the local economy, but also to exacerbate boundaries between cultural communities defined by ethnicity which before the program design and implementation were not so strong. Moreover, the project created new conflicts "inside" the so-called "ethnic minority community", as well as "outside" it, being not so helpful to enhance social cohesion and solidarity in the area.

In the third section some conclusions are drawn, in order to explore some possible paths for policies that aim to deal with diversity, building bridges and not new boundaries, between cultural communities.

### **1. Immigrants groups and culture**

#### **1.1. The traditional models of inclusion: a "tidy bounded" idea of culture**

The debate on multi-ethnic societies, points out that different models of inclusion can be recognized, which imply different ways for societies and governments to reconcile cohesion, equality, and diversity. This first part of the paper will provide an overview of the most recognized weaknesses<sup>2</sup> of the more traditional "models of inclusion" – assimilation, integration, multiculturalism – in order to point out the most interesting aspects of the emerging pluralist model of integration, and to show how this model could provide *a different way to look at the concept of culture in multi-ethnic societies*.

The *assimilationist model* of integration is based on the assumption that a society cannot be stable and cohesive "unless all its members share a common national culture, including common values, ideals of excellence, moral beliefs, social practices, and so forth" (Parekh, 1998: 2). According to this model, minorities can decide to assimilate to the prevailing "national culture", as well as to retain their "separate culture", but if they choose the second way, they "should not complain if they are treated differently" (*ibid*: 2).

The model usually called *integration* implies a partial form of assimilation in which the private-public realm distinction plays a crucial role. The model is based on the assumption that "all that is necessary for the unity of a polity is that its citizens should share a *political* culture, including a common body of political values, practices and institutions, collective self-understanding and a broad view of national identity" (*ibid*: 2). The society cohesion is therefore located in the public realm, while individuals can choose any way of life they prefer in the private sphere. The main weakness of this model is that it is not always that simple to keep separate the private way of life from the public one.

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<sup>1</sup> Brownill & Darke (1998); Runnymede Trust (2000); Bianchini & Bloomfield (2006); Comedia (2006).

<sup>2</sup> There is a growing body of literature focused on these weaknesses. See, for example, Martiniello (1997); Delle Donne (1998); Parekh (2000); Tosi (1998), Gallissot *et. al.* (2001); Colombo (2002).

It has been argued that assimilation has historically been the traditional French way to integration (since the 1789 revolution), while the integration model was favoured in Britain. More realistic analysis illustrates that these models are not mutually exclusive: this means that the French approach to integration is less assimilationist than the public discourse argues, as well as the British society reality not being so respectful of diversity as the integration model asserts (Giraud, 1995). Moreover, these models present an ideal situation, but they are not so useful to describe and explain how integration really takes place in a society, day after day.

All these models can be seen as normative, as well as descriptive categories. This distinction is very important considering the *multicultural model* as a descriptive category, and pointing out the misleading use of the word “multicultural” when considered as a synonym of “multi-ethnic”. The first point to make clear on multiculturalism is related to the fact that the presence of different ethnic groups is only one of the *numberless diversities* that a multicultural society can include<sup>3</sup>. In a multicultural society, diversity could be a matter of national, ethnic or religious origins, as well as of gender, age, education, socio-economic condition, and so on. All these remarks are helpful to understand that *any kind of society*, even the apparently simplest one, *is multicultural*.

On the other hand it is important to consider that multiculturalism has been proposed also as a normative category, and that this term has been used to describe a model which implies the State intervention to help minorities and promote differences, mainly through affirmative actions programs. This model has been deeply criticized for the unrealistic societal forms of organization that it implies, as well as because the affirmative action model of intervention could contribute highly to exacerbate differences, even where they don't constitute a problem<sup>4</sup>.

## 1.2. The pluralist model of integration: culture as an evolving social construction

The current debate on multi-ethnic societies has pointed out that all these models main weakness is that they tend to consider the immigrants and the host society culture as *tidy bounded, static and homogeneous*.

From this perspective, immigrants' integration could be seen as a *one-way process*, implying that minorities should be in some way “absorbed” in the *supposed homogeneous culture* of the majority (Tosi, 1998). The first problem of this assumption is that any group or national identity and culture *is never homogeneous*. As the Parekh Report has underlined “a sense of national identity is based on generalisations and involves a selective and simplified account of a complex history [...]. Many complicated strands are reduced to a simple tale of essential and enduring national unity [...]. Its purpose is not to give an accurate historical account, but to enable individuals to position their personal life-stories within the larger, more significant, national story. *Identification, not knowledge*, is its *raison d'être*” (Runnymede Trust, 2000: 16, *emphasis added*). This shared identity could be built up through formal and informal channels over centuries.

This means that any group or nation culture, as well as any form of collective identity, can be seen as an *always evolving social construction*, more or less open to the sources of cultural change.

It is important to underline that such an evolving process *involves the immigrants', as well as the host society's culture*. On one hand, the demand for some forms of assimilation could come from the immigrants living in the host society; on the other hand the host society cultural horizons could change or be enriched, thanks to the immigrant presence and permanence. In this view, the immigrants, as well as the “native” culture could be seen as the “result” of a never-ending process of contamination and hybridation.

From the immigrants' point of view, this means that the “ethnic minority community<sup>5</sup>” is not the only source of identification, and that communities are not constructed only on the basis of ethnicity, race or religion, but also on a

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<sup>3</sup> Many authors agree on a definition of multicultural society as a society where two or more cultural groups are included: see Martiniello (1997); Cotesta (1999); Kymlicka, (1995); Gallissot *et. al.* (2001); Melucci (2000a; 2000b); Tosi (1998).

<sup>4</sup> In this perspective it's important to consider that also a social action can give a high contribute to “create a diversity” where it doesn't exist or where it is not so strong (Sen, 2006). For example, some works have pointed out the paradoxes of affirmative actions programs that may also contribute to exacerbate differences, encouraging people to “identify” in a ethnic group not for a sense belonging, but for opportunism (Kymlicka, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> It has been noticed that the expression “ethnic minority community”, very popular in the British policies to address fund towards multi-ethnic neighbourhood, involving all people with no British/British origins, doesn't help to distinguish the cultural-socio-

myriad of other negotiated positionalities. Individuals may also occupy several communities simultaneously, and ethnicity or religion may not be the primary signifier for them.

For this reasons, the Parekh Report points out that even if the term community, used with reference to immigrants groups: “can give the impression of stable, coherent, historic groups with tidy boundaries [...] it is simply wrong to think that there are easily measured groups of people [...] who all think alike and are not changed by those around them” (Runnymede Trust, 2000: 10). Any individual could be a significant member of several different communities at the same time, and especially young people “have developed the capacity to manoeuvre between distinct areas of life (it has been said that they are skilled ‘*cross cultural navigators*’)” (Runnymede Trust, 2000: 29, *emphasis added*).

From the host society point of view, the phenomenon of hybridation can also be recognized. A good field to observe these processes is, for example, literature: it has been noticed that the English language, over the centuries, “has greatly benefited from the contributions of writers for whom it was not the mother tongue and who introduced into it new metaphors, images and idioms” (Runnymede Trust: 48-49). Contributions that, in some cases, are already part of the British literary history: it should be remembered, for example, that in 2001 the Nobel Prize for literature went to Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a *British writer*, according to the national and international press, even if he was *born in Trinidad from a Muslim-Indian origin family*. Despite his Islamic and not Western origins, which play a core role in his books, Naipaul has firmly declared his sense of “ownership” to the secular Western culture<sup>6</sup>.

These remarks may help to explain why the current debate on multi-ethnic societies has pointed out that a *pluralist mode of integration* should also be considered. A model able to recognize how much the migrants’ presence can contribute highly to pluralize the host society and vice-versa. In this perspective, *integration can be seen as a two-way process involving both immigrants and the host society*: cultural boundaries are thus not fixed, but always contested and subject to being redrawn<sup>7</sup>.

The pluralist mode of integration helps also to render problematic the most commonly held views of immigrants as all potentially excluded people, and of their culture as only being linked to national, ethnic or religious origins. Moreover, to be part of a cultural community could be much more to do with choices – including power choices, or opportunism – than “ownership” (Sen, 2006).

This means that *a focus on culture in multi-ethnic societies* should be able to recognize and emphasize not only the “traditionally ethnic original cultures” and their relationships with the “host society ones” (whatever these expressions could mean), but also to the *hybrid forms of culture* that the contact between the immigrants and the host society has made possible. Cultural policies for urban regeneration should be able to recognize these processes and contaminations and to deal with them.

In the next section, the paper examines how the concept of immigrants’ culture has been constructed and used in the last seven years’ experience of the SRB urban regeneration programs of the Spitalfields area in East London, a case that, in recent literature, is often quoted as a best practice of cultural policy for urban regeneration in a multi-ethnic area.

## **2. A cultural policy for urban regeneration in Spitalfields (East London)**

### **2.1. The case-study**

Spitalfields is a district of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, just outside the eastern border of the City of London. Historically known as an industrial, poor, working-class area, as well as for providing refuge for different waves of immigrants (the most important groups have been Huguenots refugees, escaping from Catholic persecution in France in 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Jews fleeing the pogroms in Eastern Europe a hundred years later), during the last 35 years Spitalfields

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economic diversity as well as the fluidity of these groups. Moreover, it can encourage immigrants to “build up communities” only on the base of the benefits that could be gained (Couper, 1995). This doesn’t mean that a special attention shouldn’t be given to immigrants that very often still have to face problems of poverty, social exclusion and racism, but that policy makers using forms of affirmative action should carefully control the fund distribution criteria, trying to prevent this approach paradoxical outcomes.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Guardian* and *La Repubblica*, 11.10.2001.

<sup>7</sup> See Barth 1969; Cohen (1985).

has become one of the biggest Bangladeshi enclaves in Europe. At the beginning of this new century, it has been estimated that 70% of the population of Spitalfields has Bangladeshi origin (Dench *et. al.*, 2006).

During the 1970s and the 1980s, deindustrialization strongly affected the local socio-economic structure: nowadays Spitalfields, as well as Tower Hamlets, is still suffering from high rates of unemployment that affect the local working-class groups, as well as the immigrant origin ones.

According to the national index of deprivation – that establishes which are the neediest neighbourhoods in Britain, entitling them to bid for urban regeneration funds – Spitalfields has often been labeled as the most deprived ward in London. For this reason, from 1991 a number of local regeneration projects, mainly funded by government area-based initiatives such as City Challenge, Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and New Deal for Communities, have been undertaken. All the initiatives have tried to focus on similar objectives, integrating policies and projects, but there is no doubt that “Building Business” and “Connecting Communities” SRB programs, run from 1997 to 2004 by the public-private arms-length company Cityside Regeneration Ltd, have played a major role in the regeneration of the area. The total program is worth approximately £42m (£32m from SRB; other funds from European, charity and private money)<sup>8</sup>.

In this context, funds were spent to invest mainly on visitor economy, promoting the area as Banglatown. These investments have contributed highly to transform (in less than ten years) a poor and perceived dangerous place, a “dark corner” for more than four hundreds years<sup>9</sup>, into one of the coolest areas of London. The project has enabled Brick Lane (the main street of the district, where the majority of Bangladeshi restaurant and shops lie) and its surroundings to compete with the other major ethnic enclave in London: Chinatown in the West End (Fremeaux & Garbin, 2002). Initially, the rebranding of the area as Banglatown was only part of a tourism strategy designed to boost the local economy, promoting the Bangladeshi restaurants and venues, but, as the Bangladeshis can count on the majority in the Council (more than 30 councillors out of 51 are Bangladeshis) Banglatown is now also a new political entity, following the renaming of the local electoral ward as Spitalfields & Banglatown.

According to the SRB community involvement statement, many local associations have been involved in the regeneration process. A particular attention was given to ethnic minorities’ representatives in order to participate and have an active role. For this reason, in recent literature (including the Parekh Report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain) this case is often quoted as a best practice of urban policy in a multi-ethnic area (Runnymede Trust, 2000) and Banglatown has become a symbol of “cosmopolitan” London (Brown, 2006).

Moreover, the opening of the Rich Mix Centre in a former garment factory close to Brick Lane, should have provided a flagship project of a new way to look at “diversity” in regeneration policies as an opportunity, rather than a problem<sup>10</sup>. The Rich Mix Centre is a cultural foundation that houses education and workspaces, exhibition spaces, a cinema and a 200-seater performance venue. The aim is to create a new kind of cross-cultural art centre to “celebrate diversity”, involving immigrants as well as people from all over the world.

It has been observed that “in the narratives of local urban development, the ‘multiculturalism’ has a central role to play. The desire to ‘put Banglatown on the map’ of the global and cosmopolitan city echoes the *celebration of diversity* of the present Labour government. In that sense, the *local ‘culture’* described as an important capital for the revival of the area has to be enhanced by various projects reflecting the particularity of the local ethnic community (Fremeaux & Garbin, 2002: 186, *emphasis added*)”.

In the following section the paper will try to understand *whose local culture was really mobilized* in the Spitalfields area regeneration processes, and why this way to celebrate diversity could be read as a problem rather than an opportunity, in a cultural policy for urban regeneration in a multi-ethnic area perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Cityside Regeneration (1996; 1999; 2004).

<sup>9</sup> See Jacobs (1996); Eade (1997).

<sup>10</sup> See Brownill & Darke (1998); Bianchini & Bloomfield (2006).

## 2.2. Whose project?

We have seen that in the Spitalfields area regeneration processes a particular attention was given to ethnic minorities representatives in order to participate and have an active role. Some preliminary remarks on the so-called Bangladeshi community living in Spitalfields will be helpful to understand *which part of the ethnic group* took a major role in the regeneration policies, and *which idea of culture* was mobilized from these groups. Even if it is not possible to deal here with all the complexities of this “community”, a focus on the three main generations now coexisting in it may give an idea of the different ownerships that can be observed in this group of supposed homogeneity.

The *first generation* arrived in Britain in the 1960s: mainly they were single men, coming with contacts, housing and work already established for them, settling for long enough to make money to invest at home.

In 1971 the civil war to gain independence from Pakistan, led East Bengal to long term political instability and violence. Wives and families reached men already living in Britain, and the Bangladeshi community living in Tower Hamlets rapidly increased. The socio-economic organization of this community was based on the *role of extended families* that could include from 100 to 200 people, concentrated within a few blocks of houses. As Forman has noticed “on this scale the family is a mini ‘welfare state’ providing for those who cannot provide for themselves” (Forman, 1989: 25). The “family” as well as the “community” were the first friendly contact with the host society for the newcomers, the link for job searching and, later, provided the informal network for money acquisition to start any kind of small business (Dench *et. al.*, 2006).

The dependence on these informal networks was very strong for the newcomers, becoming less important for settlers during the integration process in the host society. Nowadays, more than 35 years after the major immigrants’ wave, the Spitalfields’ Bangladeshi community shows a very complex socio-economic stratification. In this context, the informal networks still bind the poorest members to the traditional community and to the local area – especially old people from the first generation, and above all, old women that in some cases even don’t speak English.

At the beginning, the community leadership was controlled by the first generation, but during the 1980s and 1990s: “the first generation’s leadership was challenged by more Anglicised second-generation cohort, which forged highly effective alliances with white radical activists within the Labour party. Second-generation activists gained positions of responsibility not only within the local political apparatus, but also in a wide range of public organizations [...], development agencies such as Cityside, and community organizations. Certain individuals also operated on the London-wide and national-stage (Begum & Eade, 2005: 184).

In their analysis of the Bangladeshi community, Begum and Eade consider also the condition of the third generation of young Bangladeshis “born and bred” in Britain. Some of them are now almost completely “integrated” into the British society, in the sense that they can be considered skilled cross-cultural-navigators in their relationships with the family, the local community, and the mainstream British society. Others still have to face problems of social inequalities, racial discrimination and exclusion. Begum and Eade point out that even if the overall community structures established by their parents “have absorbed the alienation felt by many young people by providing a sense of cultural belonging working through local community, voluntary and political structures”, it is not possible to ignore that, in some cases, “in contrast to secular organizations, community groups linked to faith-based organizations have helped to manage the frustration of third-generation Bangladeshi Muslims<sup>11</sup>” (Begum & Eade, 2005: 189).

These are only a few examples that illustrate the argument that in the so-called Bangladeshi community can be recognized different belongings, identities and loyalties.

In the last 15 years, the rebranding of the Spitalfields area as Banglatown was a priority especially for the *second generation elites* who have been successful in establishing political, cultural and religious institutions, as well as in

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<sup>11</sup> It’s important to point out that even the realm of religion is more complex than it may at first seem, and that hybrid forms due to immigration processes can be recognized: “the Islam practiced in Bangladesh, and in Britain among first-generation migrants, bears traces of local Hinduism and leans towards the liberal Sufi tradition. The resurgent religion which is popular among the young is, by contrast, based on Iranian and Arab models of Islam” (Dench *et. al.*, 2006: 96).

creating a thriving local economy based on ethnic restaurants, shops and leather garments trading. These elites – associations leaders, politicians elected in the local Council and entrepreneurs – established an alliance with Cityside Regeneration to spend funds from SRB.

In this context, it's important to remember that the elites cannot be considered "the voice" of all the Bangladeshi people living in Tower Hamlets: they represent groups of interest, in some cases the most powerful ones.

The project to transform Spitalfields into Banglatown was a cause of tension "inside" the so-called Bangladeshi community, as well as "outside" it. From an "inside" point of view, not all the "Bangladeshi community" appreciate the *exotic reinvention* of Spitalfields. For example, some religious actors involved in the East London Mosque activities (which has been built in the 1980s close to Spitalfields, and is one of the largest Muslim religious centres in Europe) have largely criticized Banglatown and all the events organized around this brand: their main concern is the "lack of morality" of the events that encourage "unrespectable behaviour *influenced by western secular values* [...] which [...] prevent young people to think Islamically" (Fremeaux & Garbin, 2002: 187, *emphasis added*).

On the other hand, from a point of view which is both "inside and outside" the Bangladeshi community, it's important to point out that Spitalfields has also a number of social networks established to face problems that people of any race and origin living in the district may have. These associations are not "ethnic-based", but "problem-based", and include womens' groups, youth clubs, "black and white" small business associations and so on. People working in these networks face in their everyday life and activities cross-cultural problems and don't appreciate the *simplification of the immigrant culture* that the *aestheticization* and *spectacularization* (Fincher & Jacobs, 1998) of the area tends to present as homogeneous.

Moreover, it is important to remember that Banglatown has been created mainly thanks to national SRB resources that should go to the most deprived neighbourhood *to face poverty and social exclusion*. For this reason, these networks don't appreciate how the money has been spent in one of the neediest districts of Great Britain.

In the last thirty years local working-class people have been competing with immigrants for work, and, increasingly, for access to welfare support and public services (first of all, housing). The high visibility of this project, as well as its clearly ethnic connotation, have allowed the regeneration actors to say that ethnic minorities in the area have been helped, even if only a very small part of the Bangladeshi community was really involved. At the same time, the high visibility and the ethnic connotation of the project have contributed to strengthen the hostility for the "newcomers" by the old white working-class population (Briata, 2007a).

The Banglatown project could be read almost in two main different ways:

- following the SRB statement, as a means to create local development as well as to face problems of social cohesion;
- as a cultural policy for urban regeneration based on a project set up to celebrate diversity in a multicultural metropolis.

With reference to the first point, there is no doubt that the local development objective has in some way been reached. From the social cohesion point of view, the case-study shows that the project was not so successful, as it created new conflicts "inside" the so called ethnic minority community, as well as "outside" it.

With reference to the second point, accepting that the programs were not so helpful to enhance social cohesion and solidarity in the area, and concentrating only on the symbolic dimension of Banglatown and of the Rich Mix Centre as a sort of "flagship project" in a 21<sup>st</sup> century cosmopolitan metropolis, it could be interesting to understand how a key-concept as culture has been constructed and used in a place like Spitalfields to build up Banglatown. This is the main aim of the next section of the paper.

### 2.3. Whose local culture? Culture and “authenticity”

As shown in § 2.2, the high visibility, as well as the aestheticization and spectacularization of Bangladeshi culture “staged” with Banglatown has been deeply criticized “inside” the so called ethnic minority community” as well as “outside” it. One of the problems seems to be that Banglatown staged a culture that, in some way, is “not authentic”.

In this section, the authenticity issue will be used as a guide to understand which conception of culture could be recognized in Banglatown. To deal with this problem, a very interesting Jane M. Jacobs work on “aestheticization and the politics of difference in contemporary cities” (Jacobs, 1998) may be followed. Jacobs says that “aestheticization and spectacularization are often depicted as only ever working negatively: to *override more real urban cultures* (the appropriation of difference); as generating a proliferation of *inauthentic diversity* (depthless fragmentation); or as contributing to the production of new intensities of difference (social polarization)” (*ibid*: 252-253). The author argues that she wishes to render problematic these commonly held views of the aestheticization of urban life. She goes on quoting Sharon Zukin’s work where she says that: “aestheticized urban transformation, such as gentrification or themed redevelopment, results in the dismantling of ‘older urban solidarities’, which are then replaced with consumption spaces ‘shaded by new modes of cultural appropriation’ (Zukin, 1992: 204)”. Jacobs goes on saying that “in this view, the new cultural logic of global capitalism simply works to estrange ‘real culture’ from its *more authentic, because localized, origins*” (Jacobs, 1998: 255, *emphasis added*). As a conclusion, Jacobs underlines that, in her opinion, these accounts refuse to see “the realm of images and image making as *meaningful practice*: something which is *socially produced*, has politics, is material and is productive (*ibid*: 258, *emphasis added*).

Following this debate it is important to observe that an evaluation of the processes of exotic reinvention, aestheticization and spectacularization based on “authenticity” arguments could be *particularly insidious*: taking into account that this experience arose from a part of the Bangladeshi community, is it possible to argue that the process which led to the construction of Banglatown is “a not meaningful practice”, “not authentic”, “not localized”, “not socially produced”?

A way to answer these questions is to remember that Banglatown came about from an alliance established between the political and entrepreneurial Bangladeshi community elites and Cityside Regeneration to spend funds from SRB. These elites have *consciously decided* to stage some aspects, including some stereotypes, of their original culture, to build up a space of consumption functional to their economic interests.

From this perspective, Banglatown could be seen as the expression of a successful entrepreneurial class of people of immigrant origins. These entrepreneurs could be seen as skilled cross-cultural-navigators as well, because they have been able to build up a project in which a mix of different “cultures” could be recognized: for example, some aspects of their “traditional ethnic culture”; the host society entrepreneurial culture; the cosmopolitan metropolis culture, demands and rhetoric.

This means that is not possible to argue that these people’s objectives and aims, including Banglatown, are an expression of some kind of “not authentic” or “not locally rooted” relationship. On the contrary, Banglatown could be seen as an expression of some kind of cross-cultural-navigators’ culture, even if its concrete outcome is a sort of disneyfication of a place. This is to say that, from this paper’s point of view, “authenticity” is not the core problem considering Banglatown as a form of cultural policy for urban regeneration.

Anyway, even accepting that authenticity is not the issue in a project like Banglatown, and arguing that in this project could be found traces of a cross-cultural-navigators culture, some problems can be recognized:

- first of all, this policy approach doesn’t seem to help to face those problems of social cohesion that – as we have seen – should have a core role in any multi-ethnic society;
- secondly, the project seems to deal with an idea of culture still defined mainly by ethnicity rather than on other issues that may be more helpful to build bridges between people and communities.

In the last part of the paper, the possible relationships between these two issues will be analysed.



### 3. Conclusions: working on similarities, building bridges

The Parekh Report underlines that “a state is not only a territorial and political entity, but also an imagined community” (Runnymede Trust, 2000: 15) and that “cultural meanings appeal to people’s imaginations but are difficult to pin down. They are embedded not in formal rules, but in all the informal aspects of cultural life that are taken for granted” (*ibid*: 19-20). In the “Arts, media and sport” section it points out that “there are insufficient representations [...] of the increasingly hybrid society that Britain is now” and recommends that “a national cultural policy be developed through widespread participation and consultation. It should pay particular attention to issues of cultural inclusion and identity” (*ibid*: 161-162).

From this perspective, cultural policies could play at least two possible roles<sup>12</sup>:

- a sort of “community building” role, through neighbourhood level transformations, involving community organizations to create more inclusive urban spaces;
- an innovative and provocative role, to try to “pin down” some of the “informal aspects of cultural life that are taken for granted” through more symbolic projects.

The first possible role, even if considered in the Spitalfields regeneration policies rhetoric, took a very small part during their implementation. At the same time, ambitions to consider the second possible role could be found in the projects’ lines (or, once again, in their rhetoric), but the focus on “the celebration of diversity” didn’t help to look at problems in a real innovative way.

It has been pointed out that the main weakness of the more traditional ways to look at multi-ethnic societies is that they tend to consider the immigrants’ and the host societies’ culture as tidy bounded, static and homogeneous. This conception of cultural communities lead to a “community by community” approach in urban policies, where groups are mainly defined by their ethnicity. The core role played by the Bangladeshi community in the Spitalfields regeneration process is the key-issue for the current literature to consider this case as a best practice for urban policies in a multi-ethnic areas, and there is no doubt that projects almost completely ran by ethnic minorities representatives are still very uncommon in Britain<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, in this project ethnic minorities are seen as a resource rather than a problem<sup>14</sup>, and funds have been spent to boost the local ethnic economy.

Despite these unquestionable innovative aspects, there is no doubt that the celebration of diversity through Banglatown tend to reproduce an approach in which cultural communities are defined by their ethnicity in isolation (the Bangladeshis, the Somalis, the Caribbean, and so on).

As policies can contribute to address people as members of communities of various kind, this paper has tried to illustrate the argument that the “community by community” approach could be misleading, because its paradoxical outcome could be to reinforce the ethnic boundaries, instead of building bridges between cultural communities.

It has also been pointed out that tensions between immigrants and natives may be exacerbated by a process that doesn’t recognize that not all immigrants have the same needs and that not all immigrants are poor or potentially socially excluded. Policies that aim to deal with diversity without creating problems of social justice between immigrants and natives should be able to recognize these differences. Urban regeneration policies in the Spitalfields area have not been able do it, and this case-study shows that this approach may create local development, but also new conflicts “inside” the so called ethnic minority community, as well as “outside” it.

Moreover, even accepting that the programs were not so helpful to enhance social cohesion and solidarity in the area, and concentrating only on the symbolic dimension of Banglatown and of the Rich Mix Centre as cultural policies for urban regeneration in a 21<sup>st</sup> century cosmopolitan metropolis, how could key-concepts like “diversity”, or “ethnic culture” be constructed and used to really break away from the most common held views of immigration?

Experiences show that when people of immigrant’s origin reach full citizenship rights in the host society, ethnic communities boundaries tend to become fluid and unfixed. Individuals are free to choose and change ownerships,

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<sup>12</sup> See Jacobs (1998).

<sup>13</sup> See Brownill & Darke (1998).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

loyalties and communities, becoming cross-cultural navigators. Banglatown seems to celebrate a diversity through the aestheticization and spectacularization of the immigrants' culture presented as homogeneous. The Rich Mix Centre celebrates diversities proposing events that seem to reproduce the traditional ethnic-national-religious boundaries division between cultures. Hybrid cultures don't seem to have a role in the area.

The problem is thus also to explore the "overlap between communities where ethnicity and race do not operate as primary signifiers" (Comedia, 2006: 3). From the Spitalfields experience is possible to learn that a cultural policy for urban regeneration in a multi-ethnic area could work more on *similarities* though the so-called ethnic groups, *rather than on diversities*. A way could be not "celebrating diversity", but *finding similarities* and looking for "communities" to be involved not only on ethnic-based criteria. This could be possible also considering culture not only as an issue of national, ethnic or religious origin, but also as a matter of gender, age, education, permanence within the host society, socio-economic condition, and so on.

The London East End has always been a port of entry in England for different waves of immigrants, as well as a traditional working-class area – the "largest working class city in the world"<sup>15</sup>, according to Engels. At the same time, Spitalfields is not an exclusively Bangladeshi area, even if the Bangladeshis are the majority. This has always been a *multi-ethnic* and *multicultural area*, and, paradoxically, the dominant Banglatown brand has *reduced the perception of these diversities*, rather than celebrating them.

For its history, Spitalfields, and the London East End in general, might have been a very good place for a project really able to celebrate multiculturalism, working on similarities between cultural communities rather than on diversities. "Multicultural", could for example have been declined not on ethnic, but on socio-economic condition base: a focus on the similarities between the traditional working class extended family based socio-economic structure, and the Bangladeshi one could have been a key-issue. Both the traditional working class community and the Bangladeshi ones represent communities of interests linked to a territory with a certain pattern of social relationships: they are "territorial" groups of people and their socio-economic structure implies close social and geographical relationships. Bangladeshi families, especially the poorest ones, still live in a way that could evoke the traditional working class life in this area<sup>16</sup>.

A cultural policy for urban regeneration in a multi-ethnic society should be able to establish platforms for intercultural dialogue<sup>17</sup>. This means that a core problem should be dealing with diversities without building up new boundaries between "natives" and "ethnic" groups, as well as without reinforcing boundaries that in everyday life are not so strong. In this paper it has been argued that a focus on similarities, rather than on diversities, could be helpful. This doesn't imply a completely ethnically-blind approach, as it has been argued that people of immigrant origin still have to face problems of poverty, social exclusion as well of racism, but that also a mix of approaches and ways of looking at multicultural societies should be considered.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Dench *et. al.*, 2006: 22.

<sup>16</sup> O'Byrne has pointed out that "there is clearly no 'real' definition of what actually constitutes [...] a 'working class community'. It is generally understood that significant 'ingredients' include solidarity, close-by family and social networks, shared lifestyles, and limited spatial mobility (although this last point is particularly contentious)" (1997: 77). See also Young & Wilmott (1957); O'Neill (1999); Day (2006); Dench *et. al.* (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Bianchini & Bloomfield (2006); Comedia (2006).

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