

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

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Paper objectives

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 and used in urban regeneration policies that aim to face problems of diversity, local development, and social cohesion

Research framework

Based on the current debate on the multi-ethnic societies, the paper provides an overview of the most recognized weaknesses of the more traditional “models of inclusion”

– assimilationism, integration, multiculturalism –

in order to point out the most interesting aspects of the emerging pluralist mode of integration and to show how this model could provide a different way to look at the concept of culture in multi-ethnic societies

Which use of “multiculturalism” in this paper

Assimilationism, integration, multiculturalism

All these models can be seen as normative, as well as descriptive categories

From a descriptive perspective, multicultural is often considered as a synonymous of multi-ethnic but the presence of different ethnic groups is only one of the numberless diversities that a multicultural society can include

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

This implies that any kind of society, even the apparently simplest one, is multicultural

Traditional models weaknesses

Assimilationism, integration, multiculturalism

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

From these perspectives, 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)

Culture as an evolving social construction

On the contrary, any group or national identity and culture is never homogeneous: a sense of national identity is based on generalisations and involves a selective and simplified account of a complex history (Parekh Report)

This shared identity could be built up through formal and informal channels over centuries

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

Such an evolving process involves the immigrants', as well as the host societies' culture

Phenomenon of hybridation

From the immigrants' point of view the "ethnic minority community" is not the only source of identification

Individuals may also occupy several cultural communities simultaneously, and ethnicity or religion may not be the primary signifier for them

Especially young people may develop the capacity to manoeuvre between distinct areas of life "it has been said that they are skilled cross cultural navigators" (Parekh Report)

From the host society point of view, phenomenon of hybridation can also be recognized (literature is a good example)

These remarks may help to understand why the current debate on multi-ethnic societies has pointed out that also a pluralist model of integration should be considered

The pluralist model of integration

This model is able to recognize how much the immigrants' presence can give a high contribute 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

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 linked to national, ethnic or religious origins

Moreover, to be part of a cultural community could have much to do with personal choices – including power choices, or opportunism – than “ownership” (Sen, 2006)

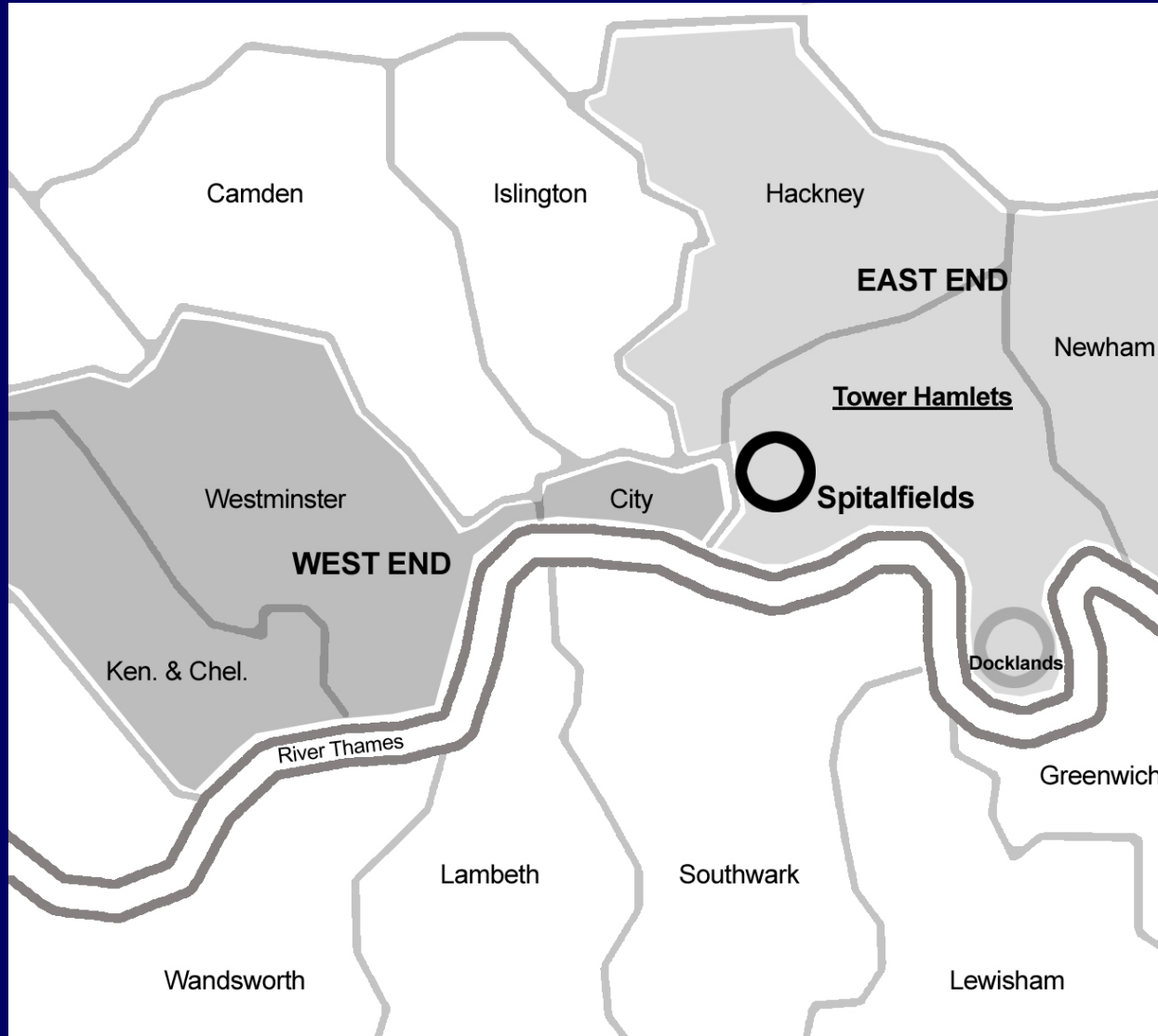
The role of cultural policies

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” 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

The following case-study shows how the concept of culture can be analysed, and how it has been constructed and used in the last 7 years experience of the SRB urban regeneration programs of the Spitalfields area in East London

The case-study



The paper examines the last 7 years experience of the SRB urban regeneration programs of the Spitalfields area in East London

The case-study

Historically known as a working class area, as well as for providing refuge for different waves of immigrants, during the last 35 years Spitalfields has become one of the biggest Bangladeshi enclaves in Europe



The case-study

Funds from SRB have been spent to invest on visitor economy, promoting the area as Banglatown



These investments have given a high contribute to transform a poor and perceived dangerous place in one of the coolest areas of London

Community involvement

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 this case is often quoted as a best practice of urban policy in a multi-ethnic area



Who has been involved?

Banglatown was a priority especially for the elites of the 2nd generation of Bangladeshi immigrants

In the last 35 years, these elites have been successful in establishing political, cultural and religious institutions, and in creating a thriving “ethnic” local economy



Who has not been involved (1)?

Not all the so-called Bangladeshi community appreciated the project



The exotic reinvention of the place was not a priority for the religious actors involved in the East London Mosque activities (one of the largest Muslim religious centres in Europe) that have criticized the “lack of morality” of the events connected to Banglatown

Who has not been involved (2)?

Funds from SRB should be used to face problems of poverty and social exclusion

The high visibility of Banglatown has caused new hostilities between the Bangladeshis and the remnants of the old working class

These two groups have always been in direct competition for local resources and services

Who has not been involved (3)?

Banglatown was not a priority for the 2nd and 3rd generation Bangladeshi activists that have established a number of social networks to face problems that people of any race and religion may have in the district

People working in these important historic networks face in their everyday life and activities cross-cultural problems and don't appreciate:

- ✓ how money has been spent
- ✓ the simplification of the immigrant culture that the “disneyfication” of the area tends to present as homogeneous

Main criticism – “authenticity”

From a cultural policy point of view, one of the main criticism seems to be that Banglatown stages a culture that, in some way, is “not authentic”, but an evaluation of a processes of exotic reinvention based on authenticity arguments could be *particularly insidious*

A Jane Jacobs (1998) work on “aestheticization and the politics of difference in contemporary cities” may be helpful

In this work she wishes to render problematic the commonly held views of the aestheticization of urban life

Jacobs versus Zukin

Jacobs quotes Sharon Zukin work when she say that:

“aestheticized urban transformation results in the dismantling of older urban solidarities, which are then replaced with consumption spaces shaded by new modes of cultural appropriation” (Zukin, 1992)

For Jacobs “in this view, the new cultural logic of global capitalism simply works to estrange ‘real culture’ from its *more authentic, because localized, origins*”

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”

Which idea of culture?

The 2nd generation Bangladeshi elites produced Banglatown. They 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.

These entrepreneurs could be seen as skilled cross-cultural-navigators

They have been able to build up a project in which a mix of different “not only ethnic cultures” could be recognized:

- ✓ some aspects of their “traditional ethnic culture”
- ✓ the host society entrepreneurial culture
- ✓ the cosmopolitan metropolis culture, demands and rhetoric



A celebration of diversity?

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”, 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, even if quoted as a best practice of urban regeneration able to “celebrate diversity”, has reduced the perception of these diversities, rather than “celebrating” them

Building bridges, not new boundaries

A real multicultural approach to Spitalfields (useful also to prevent the hostilities between immigrants and natives groups) should have worked more on similarities between not only ethnic based cultural communities, rather than on ethnic based diversities

The history of Spitalfields might have been a very good source of inspiration for a multicultural based flagship cultural project, focused on similarities rather than on diversities

For example, a focus on the similarities between the traditional working class communities lifestyle and socio-economic structure and the immigrants' ones (the extended family role, solidarity, close-by family and social networks, shared lifestyles) could have been more helpful for a multicultural project aimed to build bridges, not new boundaries, between the cultural communities living in this area

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