

The challenge of social innovation in urban revitalization  
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Urban revitalisation projects may seem an unusual setting in which to study social innovation. In the past large scale urban revitalization projects have been heavily criticised for their focus on the built environmental and achieving economic development goals with limited attention given to the local community who are the the supposed beneficiaries. Successful social innovation by definition requires that innovation is accepted socially. There needs to be active participation beyond the tokenism of many urban programmes. Drewe and associates demonstrate through the use of case studies that existing practice in social innovation is far from limited:

“urban revitalization encompasses innovative milieus, local mobilization, empowerment of social actors at the local level, local development policies and new forms of governance.” (p251)

The first five chapters of the book address a range of theoretical issues raised by social innovation. In chapter one the technological origins of innovation in academic research are explored and in chapter two the concept of innovative milieu is applied to urban revitalization. In chapter three there is an emphasis on institutional aspects as Harrison argues that those who innovate are those who successfully transform their institutional environment. Chapter four develops this with a discussion about the role of the state and flexibility in coping with a turbulent environment. Chapter five provides a link between the theory and case studies, taking a multidimensional approach to the concept of social innovation. The second part of the book is organised into nine case studies that explore a very wide range of good practice examples in industrialised and industrialising countries. The case studies vary greatly in scale from a community project for young people in the Dutch town of Gouda through to the EU URBAN initiative that involved 15 countries and 188 projects. There is a need for good practice examples to be identified, evaluated and disseminated. Currently there is too much time lost between successful innovation and it becoming mainstream practice. An overall theme from the case studies is the importance of place in developing locally suitable solutions. The history of localities is not just a backdrop in which to carry out urban revitalization but fundamental in shaping the social relations, urban form, education opportunities, health and welfare facilities and environmental conditions.

Klein and associates draw on social movement approaches to help interpret the social innovation taking place in two declining inner urban neighbourhoods of Montreal. Faith based groups were concerned with social welfare such as community clinics, day care, food banks and a community newspaper. Their activities alone could not resolve the problems of the areas as more and more employers withdrew. Social action by unions involved strikes to deliver better pay for workers. While strikes have been effective actions in the past they do not work against the backdrop of widespread industrial plant closures experienced in Montreal's declining inner urban neighbourhoods. For union organisations there was an urgent need for social innovation to focus their activities instead on

job creation. In response, the unions established a venture capital fund that could be used to support social enterprise. Unions began participating in co-operative networks with universities, training centres, and research centres. Efforts were needed to support new businesses locating in inner urban areas rather than in the suburbs and to help locally grown businesses expand. Klein and associates point to the involvement and resources brought in by organisations from outside the neighbourhood to the networks. Critics of local economic development projects have argued that neighbourhoods in economic crisis do not have the resources to assume responsibility for their own redevelopment (Polese, 1996; Amin, 2005). Action in the Montreal neighbourhoods was not restricted by what could be achieved with the resources of local stakeholders. Plans to benefit the local areas coincided with wider city level plans to shift the economic base towards a range of new sectors.

In the Liverpool case study Roberts also highlights the importance of partnerships, but those forged from organisations with their own identities over longer periods. This contrasts with the transitory partnerships created in response to short-term regeneration funding initiatives that are prevalent in the UK. The Liverpool case study of Eldonian Village provides a clear example of the shifts that have taken place in urban policy in England since the 1970s. Initially the community were entirely excluded from plans to carry out comprehensive redevelopment – removing all of the existing housing stock and moving residents to a number of newer suburban housing estates that were themselves already experiencing difficulties. The refusal of residents to move and their coming together to develop alternative strategies has provided an important experience for other communities facing large scale redevelopment. The locally run and managed housing co-operative has delivered new homes that people want to live in without forcing people to leave the area and breaking social connections. It has also created local direct jobs and allowed space for new small business to grow. One of the criticisms of the project is the architecturally conservative nature of the new homes. However, these were the styles that people wanted and it demonstrates that social innovation does not necessarily take place alongside technological innovation. Pragmatism was an important element of success with funding being secured through the Conservative Governments Urban Development Corporations. This is the same fund that bypassed local communities in London Docklands, showing the importance of local conditions on national policy initiatives.

While the Montreal and Liverpool case studies represent successful examples bringing in external partners the R&M Activity Centre in Gouda shows the reality that many bottom-up projects face in the quest for recognition and financial stability. Their work to integrate Moroccan youth within Dutch society contrasted with a top down approach taken by the municipality. Little practical or financial support has come from the municipality, the police, the private sector or even the local neighbourhood association.

My main reservation about the book is that while much of the material is highly relevant to practitioners involved in urban renewal and local economic development the contributions vary in their level of accessibility to a practitioner

readership. The five theoretical chapters at the start could be off putting to this important potential audience. This is unfortunate because there are some very important lessons that still do not appear to have been absorbed from these good practice examples. For example:

“When central governments initiate local development policies that make communities more accountable without giving them the necessary resources and powers to implement solutions, this is not a positive contribution to solving local problems” (Klein and associates, p106).

Striking examples of this can be seen in the reforms the Government is currently pursuing in England, devolving responsibilities for economic development, urban planning and service delivery to communities without practical or financial resources to accompany devolution.

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