

'Mix it Up – Developing Shared Spaces and Shared Places'

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Any discussion about the 2011 riots inevitably draws upon the immediate circumstances that surround them. Different commentators emphasise the 'opportunistic criminality', or 'poverty and deprivation', or poor race relations' – or a mixture of all these 'causes'. But we rarely look beyond the fray and address the more fundamental questions like 'what sort of community do we want for the future, what should it look and feel like?' In fact, any link to the physical and social environment is almost entirely absent and any vision for communities of the future is not even on the agenda.

Concerns about community design and structure only seem to arise when things go wrong, going back to the tackling of the vices associated with urban decay through the UK's early slum clearance programmes, to the more recent attempts to disperse asylum seekers and avoid concentrations in particular areas. But, in general, there has been presumption against intervention, based largely on the view that to promote integration would interfere with personal choices and market forces. There is, therefore, little by way of established practice and professional competence in conceptualising and planning mixed environments, let alone implementing and managing them.

We are not even sure that they are 'a good thing', though there is now plenty of evidence which suggests that any form of segregation can embed prejudices about 'others' and outsiders and create a 'them and us' view of the world. We are even less sure about the role of public spaces and how the public realm contributes to more harmonious communities. For example, London is unique in the UK in having very rich 'millionaire's rows' cheek by jowl with sink council estates, with equally divided social networks around them, but we do not really know if this breeds resentment on the part of the 'have nots'. Certainly, the presence of such sharp divides means that it is unlikely that people from different backgrounds will find themselves in the same factories and offices, places of learning and recreational spaces and is hardly conducive to building mutual understanding.

We appear to have lost some of the earlier idealism surrounding development. The idea of mixed communities, or 'social balance' featured prominently in earlier planning visions, such as Rowntree's New Earswick Village in York, Howard's Garden City movement and Cadbury's Bourneville Village outside Birmingham. And, in 1949, the Health and Housing Minister, Aneurin Bevan, was only too willing to promote the idea that new post-war council housing should include a diverse mix of workers:

... it is entirely undesirable that on modern housing estates only one type of citizen should live. If we are to enable citizens to lead a full life, if they are each to be aware of the problems of their neighbours, then they should all be drawn from different sections of the community. We should try to introduce what was always the lovely feature of English and Welsh villages, where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street ... the living tapestry of a mixed community.

The 'mixed communities' of social class have been promoted through more recent sets of planning guidance, but with very little conviction and imagination - often just the furthest corner of a new private development set aside for social housing. And in relation to 'race', no such vision has yet emerged, with the high levels of segregation in some towns and cities across the country being largely ignored.

This led Trevor Phillips, the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to complain in 2006 about the unthinking development objectives for the London Thames Gateway area:

Here we are, about to build one million homes in the South East without a clue as to what creates a mixed community. High density housing is increasing and there is evidence of increased segregation and different groups becoming more exclusive.

There is no real positive vision for any form of mixed communities to guide our architects and planners. This is not a simple matter and would need to be based upon a deep understanding of our communities, not just a flat earth policy of integration. For example, communities will still want maintain their own heritage and support systems, perhaps with a significant degree of clustering, in which the many different groups develop meaningful relationships, without tipping over into 'parallel lives'.

The pretence that segregation – whether on race, class, or any other lines - is a natural phenomenon, resulting from the exercise of free choice, is untenable. The choice of housing is severely constrained by price, by concerns about safety and acceptance; the choice of school, is also determined by socio-economic position and by location and faith; the workplace and occupation is also heavily influenced by social class and skill level, and in some instances by discrimination; and social and cultural networks are bounded by historic, faith, class and heritage positions. Inequality and culture are inextricably bound together.

There are many ways in which community design can 'nudge' people in the right direction, but we seem to be moving in the wrong direction. Lownsborough

and Beunderman, in *Equally Spaced?*(2007)¹ suggest that the ‘search for spaces of comfort in relatively homogeneous micro-communities is becoming increasingly popular’ and that there is a retreat from the shared realms of the community. They also suggest that the number of public spaces is dwindling because of the reduced role of the public sector and that many public spaces now have implicit barriers to entry that diminish their truly public character. Even if these spaces are ‘public’ they may not be ‘civil’ and are not conducive to lingering and exchange.

Public spaces should present a range of opportunities for positive interactions ranging from ‘everyday and banal’ encounters, to functional engagement and to celebratory and participative interaction. But we are some way from understanding how they work as trusted spaces and how to foster interaction with an approach which embraces innovation and creativity. We need to take every opportunity to understand and develop community design and to ensure that it is consistent with the present of diversity of our communities in all their forms – and to ensure that it can actively help to promote cohesive societies.

¹ Lownsbrough, H. and Beundemann, J. (2007), *Equally Spaced? Public Space and Interaction between Diverse Communities*, a Report for the Commission for Racial Equality, (London: Demos)