

Editorial

Global Cities, Regeneration and the Translocal Communities of Europe

Although economic migration from the developing to the developed countries is essentially a post second world war phenomenon, the scale of such movement speeded up with the relative economic boom in the West in the 1960s. In Europe, particularly in UK and other Western/North European countries there had been a steady rise of economic migrants from South Asia and the Caribbean islands who were offered jobs mainly in the manufacturing service sectors. In line with the classic settlement pattern of Industrial revolution, the immigrant workers appeared to be settled in particular areas of industrial/financial cities of London, Bradford, Sheffield, Leeds, Oldham, Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt.



Following the sudden worldwide oil shortage in the early Seventies and the rise of industrial/manufacturing sector in the developing world (particularly in Japan, South East Asia and parts of Central and Latin America) there had been an abrupt job cuts in the both heavy and medium sized industries in Europe. The job losses seemed heavy with the immigrant workers who started living close to each other with dilapidated and often over crowding housing conditions.

However, while there had had been an apparent slowing down of obvious pull factor from Europe, some unexpected political turns in the ex colonial countries caused increased influx of migrants in the mid-seventies. Probably two glowing examples of such phenomenon were in Uganda and Surinam. In Uganda, the South Asian British subjects were forcibly thrown out to UK and in Surinam with its independence, the subjects had the choice to come to the Netherlands. In UK the Ugandan South Asian migrants settled mainly in the industrial city of Leicester while in the Netherlands, the Surinamese were resettled in Bijlmermeer, in the outskirts of Amsterdam.

Unlike the settlement in Leicester, the Surinamese immigrant community in the Netherlands had a welcome settlement at a newly created modern middle class large housing designed by the Swiss/French architect Le Corbusier. Here in the late sixties Corbusier designed a futuristic functional city based on a commuting community who would travel to and fro between Bijlmermeer and Amsterdam. Like similar failed urban planning and design in other parts of the world (see Malik, 2006), here too the Bijlmermeer new city failed to attract sufficient critical mass of middle class to justify the utopian concept of a 'functional city'.

Fast forward to the 1990s, Bijlmermeer gains notorious reputation of multicultural area living with all kinds of social problems. Like many other similar multicultural cities of Europe (including East London), Bijlmermeer went through successive urban renewal/regeneration programme. In my last edited volume (Shakur, 2005) I attempted to provide a critique of some of the failed urban design and uncertain future of Bijlmermeer (see Leeming and Shakur, 2005).

Over the last couple of years, my colleague Jamie Halsall has been accompanying me on our annual human geography field trip to Amsterdam. Jamie has taken a keen interest in 'multiculturalism and cohesion' in Bijlmermeer which has an interesting parallel to his current doctoral research in Oldham. In the following section Jamie narrates some of his findings.

From the outset the Bijlmermeer development was seen to be a desirable place to live in the 1960s. This was indicative of the mood of post war Amsterdam in that it reflected a move away from the traditional style of living to the modern (see figure 1). This modern approach gave people who lived in the Bijlmermeer access to open green spaces, transport links and more importantly attempted to meet the needs of the community.

Figure 1: An example of the typical high rise buildings in Bijlmermeer.



Source: (Halsall, 2007).

However, following the establishment of Bijlmermeer there was a gradual realisation that all was not well with the planners' dream of a new way of living. As pointed out by Bijlmermeer Renovation Planning Office 2005 there was a downward spiral of social problems which included unemployment, housing and crime. To quote: "...high rate of crime in the shape of theft, robbery and violence. The district tumbled into a downward spiral which became worse and worse..." (Bijlmermeer Renovation Planning Office 2005, p1). There was an increasing number of ethnic minorities living in the Bijlmermeer attracted by the low rents and the beginnings of the establishment of their own communities. Throughout the 1980s these newly formed communities began to experience the very style of living that Bijlmermeer was designed to eliminate turning the planners' dreams of a new way of living into a planning disaster (see figure 2).

Figure 2: An example of lack of imaginative planning.



Source: (Halsall, 2007).

In the early 1990s the authorities, with the realisation of the problems of Bijlmermeer, decided to tackle the district head on. In order to achieve this there were long consultations between the Government and the local residents living in the Bijlmermeer. The solution they came up with was to change the Bijlmermeer geographically. This involved the regeneration of the area completely. Firstly, by developing the Arena Project, which attracted big businesses to invest in the area resulting in retail opportunities (see figure 3). Secondly, reshaping the housing in the Bijlmermeer resulted in more open areas and a more balanced selection of affordable housing. This was achieved by pulling down some of the high rise buildings and replacing them with new family unit housing (see figure 4).

Figure 3: The Arena development.



Source: (Halsall, 2007).

Figure 4: New family unit housing.

Source: (Halsall, 2007).

Over the next twenty years it will be interesting to see if the measures taken in response to Bijlmermeer's problems have been successful. On a recent visit (2007) some of the residents were sceptical about what was going on and their concerns were that there is nothing for young people, there were difficulties for employment for ethnic minorities and that there is no sense of a community. It is clear that Bijlmermeer remains a planning challenge that is not easily resolved.

References

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