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## **Landscapes of Differences: Policies, Resources, Inhabitants**

**Paola Briata**

Bartlett School of Planning,  
University College London, p.briata@ucl.ac.uk  
Tel +44 (0)20 7679 4797

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The paper deals with the multi-dimensional aspects that “differences” may assume in urban space, choosing to focus on space policies carried out in multi-ethnic contexts.

A brief overview of the regeneration initiatives carried out in the Bangladeshi enclave of the Spitalfields area in East London is provided, rendering problematic some core issues: (a) what kind of differences counted in this “best practice” process? (b) What were the main forms of intervention from the space policies’ point of view? (c) What kind of problems may arise intervening in this way? (d) Who are “winners” and “losers” in a process like this? Finally some starting points to think about “out of the mainstream” paths to intervene in urban landscapes of differences are proposed.

## 1. Identifying differences

Introducing a reflection on the “landscapes of difference” means to clarify what kind of differences may be considered, operating some selections on the spaces where they usually “take place”. The paper will consider the expressions of differences in *urban spaces* of western world cities with reference to the *multi-dimensional* character given by Fincher and Jacobs (1998) when they describe urban spaces as places where coexist in a more or less pacific way diversities connected with religion, ethnicity, age, class, professional life, gender, sexuality.

Differences may be *more or less visible* in the urban space. Some typical examples of *visible differences* may be the “ethnic” shops’ settlements in western world cities, the gay presence in some specific neighborhoods such as Le Marais in Paris, the different-able people’s presence in some social housing districts where “disability” constituted an “advantage” in the ranking to have a public housing flat<sup>1</sup>. Despite all these distinctions, there is no doubt that the main “difference” that usually comes to mind mentioning diversity issues in the cities is related to the national origin of economic immigrants in western world societies.

The paper will consider mainly landscapes of differences related to the newcomers’ presence and visibility in urban space, underlining that *visibility* may be itself one of the most problematic aspects of the immigrants’ settlements (Tosi, 2000)<sup>2</sup>.

Last but not least, difference in this paper is considered as an *evolving social construction*, as any kind of “culture” is more or less opened to change, leading to hybridization phenomena. Immigration is a good field to observe these processes. From the immigrants’ point of view, the “ethnic minority community” is not the only source of identification: individuals may also occupy several communities simultaneously, and ethnicity or religion may not be the primary signifier for them (Runnymede Trust, 2000). From the host society’s point of view the phenomena of hybridization can also be recognized<sup>3</sup>. This is to say that differences have not fixed boundaries, and that these boundaries are always contested and subjected to be redrawn. In the next sections these remarks on diversity will be used to critically analyze a case-study on planning in a multi-ethnic neighborhood, introducing some reflections on how space policies were able to change a landscape of (ethnic-socio-economic)-difference, what kind of differences counted in this process, who were winners and losers in this story.

## 2. A case of planning in a city of difference

### 2.1. The Spitalfields area regeneration in East London

Spitalfields is a district just outside the eastern border of the City of London (Briata, 2007; 2009). It has historically been known as an industrial, poor, working class area as well as for providing refuge for differ-

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- 1 Some of these urban environments arise due to the socio-economic changes of cities; some are “safe places” that may be considered as reactions to long-term discrimination by the mainstream society; others may be the unexpected outcome of a public policy.
  - 2 Workers that move in the host societies without the families may not constitute a problem, on the contrary, families and communities that “use” urban spaces, schools and services, may be considered as “invaders” (Dench et al, 2006). Places of worship for Muslim people do exist in all European cities, but building up a typical mosque with a minaret usually cause very aggressive debates (Home, 1997); corner shops opened 24 hours a day run by immigrants’ families may be a resource for a city, but spatial concentration of shops selling “culturally-defined” goods may lead to label places as ethnic ghettos (Ambrosini, 2010).
  - 3 A good field to observe these processes is literature: English language has benefited from the contributions of writers for whom it was not the mother tongue and who introduced into it new metaphors, images and idioms – contributions that, in some cases, are already part of the British literature history. In 2001 the Nobel Prize for literature went to Vidiadhar Sarajprasad Naipaul, a British writer according to the press, even though he was born in Trinidad from a Muslim-Indian origin family. Despite his Islamic and not western origins, Naipaul has firmly declared his sense of “ownership” to the secular western culture.



ent waves of immigrants<sup>4</sup>. During the last 40 years, Spitalfields has become one of the biggest Bangladeshi enclaves in Europe, and at the beginning of 2000, it was estimated that 70% of its population had Bangladeshi origin.

During the 1970s and the 1980s deindustrialization strongly affected the local socio-economic structure: Spitalfields has been labeled as one of the most deprived areas of London and for this reason from 1991 a number of regeneration projects have been undertaken. In this context, funds were spent mainly to invest on visitor economy, promoting the area as Banglatown. These investments have contributed highly to transform a poor and stigmatized place into one of the coolest areas of London. The projects have enabled Brick Lane – the main street of the district where the majority of Bangladeshi restaurants and shops lie – to compete with the other major ethnic enclave in London: Chinatown in the West End.

According to the national regeneration programs, many local associations were involved in the recovery process. Particular attention was given to ethnic minorities' representatives to allow them to participate and have an active role. As projects almost completely run by ethnic minority representatives are still very uncommon in Britain, the core role played by the Bangladeshis in this regeneration process is a key issue that has brought to consider it as a best practice for urban policy in a multi-ethnic area (Runnymede Trust, 2000). Banglatown has become a symbol of cosmopolitan London but some questions may arise:

1. what kind of differences counted in this “best practice” process?
2. What were the main forms of intervention from the space policies' point of view?
3. What kind of problems may arise intervening in this way?
4. Who are winners and losers in a process like this?

## 2.2 What kind of differences? – A community/by community approach

Some preliminary remarks on the so-called Bangladeshi community living in Spitalfields will be helpful to understand what differences counted and which groups took a major role in the regeneration policies.

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, settling for long enough to make money to invest at home. In the 1970s wives and families reached men already living in Britain, and the community 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. The family and the community were the first friendly contact with the host society for the newcomers, the link for job searching and provided the informal network for money acquisition to start small businesses. The dependence on these informal networks was very strong for the newcomers, becoming less important during the integration process in the host society. Nowadays the community shows a very complex socio-economic stratification, and the informal networks still bind the weaker members to the traditional community and to the local area.

At the beginning, the community leadership was controlled by the first generation, but during the 1980s their leadership was challenged by a more Anglicized second-generation cohort, which forged highly effective alliances with white radical activists within the Labour party and gained positions of responsibility within the local political apparatus, development agencies, public and community organizations, (Begum, Eade, 2005).

Regarding the third generation of young Bangladeshis born and bred in Britain, some of them are now almost “integrated” into the British society, others still have to face discrimination and exclusion. In some cases, in contrast to secular organizations, new community groups linked to faith-based organizations have helped to manage the frustration of third-generation Bangladeshi Muslims (Begum, Eade, 2005).

These few examples illustrate how in the so-called Bangladeshi community different belongings, identities and loyalties can be recognized. The rebranding of the Spitalfields area as Banglatown was a priority espe-

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4 The most important groups have been Huguenot refugees, escaping from catholic prosecution in France in the 18th century, and Jews fleeing the pogroms in Eastern Europe a hundred years later.

cially for *the second generation elites* who have been successful in establishing political links, as well as in creating a thriving local economy based on ethnic restaurants and shops. These elites cannot be considered “the voice” of all the Bangladeshi community: they represent *groups of interest*, in some cases *the most powerful ones*. Banglatown represents a “landscape of difference” *created to “stage” differences* through aestheticization and spectacularization of Bangladeshi culture, but creating this image was not an objective for all, including people of Bangladeshi origins. For example, there are organizations set up in the last 40 years by immigrants and natives that face in their everyday life and activities cross-cultural problems, and don’t appreciate the simplification of the immigrant culture operated by the exotic reinvention of the place. These groups were not involved in the regeneration initiative because they didn’t agree with the dominant Banglatown brand. In their view, the celebration of diversity through Banglatown reproduces an approach in which cultural communities are mainly defined by their ethnicity in isolation (the Bangladeshis, the Somalis, the Caribbean): a “community by community” approach whose outcome could be to reinforce the ethnic boundaries, instead of building bridges between cultural communities. For example, the projects’ main focus on Banglatown led Bangladeshi entrepreneurs to build up new networks and associations on an ethnic base, and this can be seen only as a *paradoxical outcome* in a place where color blind small business associations have been operating from the mid-1970s.

### 2.3 Spatial policies – a “social mixing” initiative

One main objective that led to the creation of Banglatown was linked to the idea of putting a stigmatized place “on the map” of London to attract tourists, visitors and users. This objective is becoming a common one for policies working in deprived places, including those characterized by a significant immigrants’ presence.

This is due to the fact that debates on planning in multi-ethnic contexts have been dominated by the topic of the newcomers’ concentration in specific neighborhoods (Marcuse, Van Kempen, 2000). In the mainstream visions of public debate and policies “ethnic neighborhoods” are considered as “worlds apart” which create barriers to interaction with the rest of the society, hindering the integration of individual immigrants (Mustered, Andersson, 2005). For these reasons, spatial policies have often been characterized by a dominant approach that aims to mitigate forms of concentration, by dispersing immigrants and problematic groups in general across the urban territory and/or breaking up their settlements’ territorialities by introducing people of different ethnic, social and economic background (Home, 1997; Yiftachel, 1990).

In the last twenty years these forms of intervention have been adapted by policy discourses to changing conceptions of the role of the state in public provision, as well as to new development scenarios of the post-industrial cities that have to be attractive for business services, creative industries, knowledge-based economies and tourism. The *promotion of “diversity”* at neighborhood level in terms of social class, income, ethnicity, and lifestyle has been proposed as a precondition for socio-economic upgrading of people living in deprived places (Donzelot, 2006). Policies aimed at stimulating diversity in social housing estates, inner city areas or decaying historical center have been carried out in a wide range of countries, becoming *mainstream approach* to “problematic” neighborhoods (Mustered, Andersson, 2005). Despite the different patterns of socio-spatial segregation that characterize the different countries, a number of common aspects in conceptualizing and pursuing objectives of diversity could be underlined: social and functional mix are presented as strictly interrelated objectives, and policies aimed at stimulating diversity should involve housing, retail business, services and public spaces (Urban Task Force, 1999).

In the last years, a growing body of international literature has critically analyzed anti-segregation policies focusing both on their principles, as well as on the results that have been observed where they have been implemented. These works will be summarized in the next section.



## 2.4 Problems – Spatial proximity implies interaction?

Analytical works have been helpful to underline that social mix is considered in public discourses and policy agendas as a key factor to enhance individual and groups' opportunities for *upward social mobility* at least for three main reasons:

- a *local development* perspective – as social mix may be helpful to change the perception of deprived and problematic neighborhoods “from outside”, counteracting stigmatization, attracting new inhabitants, and stimulating broader socio-economic opportunities for people living “inside” these places;
- a *social upgrading* perspective – related to the supposed “civilizing” influence of wealthier residents and users, whose presence could motivate problematic individuals and groups, thanks to the contacts with role models from a different socio-economic background;
- a *social cohesion* perspective – as the exposure to “the other” can lead to mutual understanding, learning or, at least, tolerance.

One major objection is linked to the fact that considering social mix as a key factor for change in residents' behavior thanks to the wealthier residents' influence, means reducing these people's problems to “social pathology”, neglecting that poverty and social exclusion depend also on structural social and economic factors, and that the single persons or groups' know-how/will/exposure to otherness, as well as the local level initiatives may be not enough to reach socio-economic upgrading (Raco, 2003).

At the same time, based on the outcomes of anti-segregation policies, it is possible to say that spatial proximity between different socio-economic/ethnic groups does not necessarily translates into social interaction between people of different background (Allen et al, 2005). Other perspectives have seen anti-segregation policies as a spatial declination of security policies, reading them as a means for the public hand to re-establish control on places that seem to have only their own rules (Atkinson, Helms, 2007). Last but not least, there are studies that have analyzed mixing initiatives in the context of new development scenarios of the post-industrial metropolis where they may be seen as strategies to change the deprived neighborhoods' image and population in the broader cities' contexts: in these view they may be seen as forms of *state/municipality-led gentrification*, carrying with them significant threats of displacement for the weaker groups (Lees et al, 2008). These issues that deal with winners and losers of these processes will be explored in the next section.

## 2.5 Winners and losers - Why not ghettos?

A completely different point of view has been analyzed by studies less interested in the “external” exclusion of “segregated” neighborhoods and more focused on the internal dynamics among the inhabitants of these places. The debate on the limits and on the potentialities of segregated places has a long history that goes back at least at Park studies' (1925) in the context of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology. Despite this, the interesting aspects of the recent *rediscovery* of these issues is due to their connotation as “a reaction” to social mixing initiatives and to the strong link that they establish with the current situation of the welfare state restructuring. These perspectives have tried to look at segregated neighborhood not only as dangerous environments with their own rules, but also as places that could have a potential in stabilizing the cities (Cattacin, 2006). These places' function in contemporary societies would be underestimated because here immigrants and people of low socio-economic status can find a warm and loyal surrounding and, considering the shrinking capacity of intervention of the welfare state, self-regulated spaces of mutual-help and solidarity. These relationships have a strong capacity to act and to solve concrete problems, and mixing policies may weaken or brake established networks, without giving any other kind of resource back. These perspectives do not suggest considering the spaces of segregation in a positive way tout court: their potential integrative role in the cities is in fact strictly connected with the welfare state's financial crisis and the related difficulties in the implementation of redistributive policies.

In the Spitalfields context, changes were an advantage for the more “integrated” part of the Bangladeshi community, but contributed highly to break-up some established territorialities and networks that were still important for weaker groups’ – especially women and elder women.

### 3. Narratives, policies, resources, inhabitants

Despite the vast amount of critical academic literature, social mixing initiatives still remain the main form of intervention in the immigrants’ settlements, revealing a sort of disjunction between research and policy agendas that may be helpful to stimulate reflections on the weak aspects of research on these issues. In particular:

- there are critical views of social mixing policies that seem still to be linked to a negative image of the immigrants’ and weaker groups’ spatial concentration. These negative views appear in some way embedded also in the researchers’ analysis, and may condition the research point of view, not being useful to explore innovative approaches and ways of action;
- there are studies that underline the public hand’s will to re-establish control on problematic neighborhood, considering this issue mainly in a negative way, but the conditions of decay that often characterizes these neighborhoods, renders the public hand’s will to establish forms of control far to be illegitimated. A negative view in this sense may not be helpful to explore the “control” issue differently, declining it in terms of care and not only in terms of repression;
- there are studies that suggest to reconsider the self-regulating capacity of segregated places. The welfare restructuring is without any doubt a reality, but this does not mean that the public hand shouldn’t and couldn’t have any kind of role in these places, for example managing situations of conflict or integrating and/or sustaining existing networks. Underestimating the public hand’s possible role in these places may not be helpful to explore innovative paths of intervention.

Existing literature’s gaps may create open spaces for further research and analysis based on two main families of problems related to: the connections between the *descriptions* of problematic neighborhoods and the consequent *forms of intervention*; *the role* that may be played by the *public hand* in these places.

As underlined by policy analysis and social sciences, analysis and problems’ framing are strictly linked with existing tools that decision makers may mobilize to cope with them (Bobbio, 1996; Crosta, 1998). In this direction this article works on the hypothesis that some core concepts and narratives that underpin analysis and forms of intervention in these places – in particular the problematic aspects of concentration – may be considered as “assumptions” that, far to be proofed, play a large part in conditioning the public debate and policy agendas, but also in orientating the researchers’ ways of seeing.

A way out could be exploring ways of reframing descriptions of multi-ethnic settlements considering the “concentration/segregation” issue as a powerful assumption that is at once both descriptive and prescriptive. In this perspective, social mixing policies may be seen not as one of the possible answers to concentration, but as an embedded answer to descriptions based on concentration. This could mean that not only policy agendas should be reframed as literature has underlined until now, but that also our ways of looking at the immigrants’ settlements – as researchers – should be subject to challenge and put under critical and auto-critical observation.

Mixing policies rationales are based on the problematic aspects of “concentration” of immigrant, poor, “different” people. In the introductory part some elements to render problematic the most common views of difference have been introduced. This means that also *defining concentration* is not that simple as it could seem at a first view.

A starting point to work in a different direction could be considering the issue that the “external” image of these neighborhoods – the narratives constructed for example by media and policies – is often different – mainly worst – than the “internal image” – rendered by people who live, work and use these places.



In the last years, a number of attempts to describe problematic neighborhood from the insiders' point of view have been made in different European contexts by academics (Fioretti's work on Torpignattara in Rome, 2011), third sector's activists looking for new ways of interventions (Mimosa Association's work on the Padua station area – Banca Etica, 2008), inhabitants (Goldring's work on La Goutte-d'Or in Paris, 2006), writers (Kuruville's shorts stories on multi-ethnic Milan, 2012; Sinclair's works on Hackney in London, 2009). Residents usually do not feel comfortable with the negative descriptions of their neighborhoods made by the media and policy makers. These works have tried to focus not only on the problematic aspects perceived from outside, but on everyday life and coexistence problems as they are perceived and described from "inside" by natives and newcomers – people, community groups, users<sup>5</sup>. Descriptions made also by "voices" of a multi-ethnic co-existence de facto – that imply problems, mistrust and prejudices – but that in some circumstances may lead to consider the "outsiders" as "established": micro-stories that tell of concrete problems, and of the local capacity (or not) to cope with them; resistance by the local groups to the existing dynamics; tactics that render everyday multi-ethnic and multi-cultural coexistence possible; awareness of what kind of problems could be faced at the local level, and what kind of problems require a not local approach or/and the public hand intervention.

These ways of looking may be more helpful to understand some strengths and weaknesses of these places such as the capacity of some local association to strike root and cope with everyday life problems, or the level and nature of some conflicts. Such a way of looking, focused on the resources of multi-ethnic environments – may be helpful also to understand the role that the public hand may play in these places – provider, enabler, conflict mediator, regulatory. A role maybe less focused on breaking up problematic groups' concentration through social engineering, and more focused on managing the coexistence of people with different (and not only ethnic) backgrounds, potentially but not necessarily in conflict. This does not mean that all the resources to cope with the problematic aspects of these neighborhood could be found inside them, but that in the comparison between the insiders' and the outsiders' perspectives some new paths of research and action may be explored.

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5 For example, among the more significant outputs of the "participated analysis carried out in the area of Padua station by Mimosa could be mentioned (Briata, 2011):

- the differences between the perception of the place 'from outside' and 'from inside'; between the daytime and night; between women and men (independently from the immigrant/not-immigrant origin);
- a vision of the immigrants' presence from the Italian residents' point of view that does not hide problems, but at the same time that is not a stereotypical one – there is not a negative perception of immigration in general, but a number of deviant behaviors are associated with the foreigners;
- a vision of security that does not seem to be complacent with the narratives based on 'emergencies' proposed by the media, but that claims for the restoring of a 'lost normality' through initiatives able to bring regeneration, vitality, a different positive visibility of the area that "should be much more similar to the city centre" (Banca Etica, 2008).

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