Old Slums and New Neighbourhoods – Post World War II Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal in Great Britain and Germany. Case Studies in London and Hamburg

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Slum clearance as a planning model was established in the 19th century with many variations following in the 20th century. It was based on a vision and a planning culture of demolishing old houses and replacing them by better, more modern (and more expensive) buildings. Although there is a great variety of urban situations, different morphologies and urban fabrics some principles were basic for a long period. Planning ideals of this period were based on similar visions world wide and the war offered a unique chance to put them into practice. In Britain as early as 1941 the Cabinet accepted the principle that the physical destruction of cities, due to enemy bombing and economic decline in the regions, would require strong central and local government intervention in terms of both economic and physical planning for the ‘City of tomorrow’. Although there had been different political systems and a diversity of urban situations, the planning models seemed to be similar in this period. There was a almost universal agreement that reconstruction combined with slum clearances would be necessary and need to be planned rather than left to the free play of the market. The key to post-war rebuilding was seen as planning – for slum clearance, for land use and for housing production.

In Britain large housing programs for the post-war period were accepted as policy in the middle of the war. Similar problems with a housing crisis as made after World War I should be avoided. Housing and slum clearance were important to tackle post-war unemployment through expansion of the building industry labour force. In Germany the Nazis made plans made for a massive public housing program after the war based on the winning of the war and the exploitation of foreign workers. This program, housing standards and financing were implemented by the democratic German governments in the 1950s and 1960s.

This paper is focussing on the period from the beginning of the war to the end of the sixties, a period of about 30 years, two cities: London and Hamburg, although planning and rebuilding of Coventry was probably the prototype and the test-bed of the fifties. So far most of the research has been done on new housing, New Towns, modern architecture and mass housing production but not on continuity and interplay of slum clearance and urban renewal with new housing.
The origins of slum clearance in Britain and Germany lie in the last third of the 19th century. Huge clearances followed in Hamburg the cholera epidemic in 1892, but there was no legislation on the national level in Germany until 1971. In England the concept ‘unfit for human habitation’ was developed and legislation established already in the 19th century (Torrens Act 1868, Cross Act 1875). In England especially London had a long tradition for slum clearances and the thirties the first national slum clearance campaign was launched (‘Great Crusade’). In Germany in the thirties the necessity of slum clearance was no question, but the National Socialists had other priorities. Only some projects like in Hamburg were implemented, accompanied by massive propaganda.

The war time debate on reconstruction linked planning traditions of past and future. Many plans emphasised the poor pre-war urban environment an conditions and the need for improvements. “London was ripe for reconstruction before the war; obsolete, bad and unsuitable housing, inchoate communities, uncorrelated road systems, industrial congestion, a low level of urban design, inequality in the distribution of open spaces, increasing congestion of dismal journeys to work – all these and more clamoured for improvement before the enemy’s efforts to smash us by air attack stiffened our resistance and intensified our zeal for reconstruction” (Abercrombie/Forshaw, 1943, p. 20). In Germany the Nazis condemned planning and housing of the 19th century as ‘speculative housing’ and even housing of the 1920s was judged as ‘ugly tenements’. After the World War II rebuilding in Great Britain and Germany was often combined with demolishing and clearing away older buildings. The increasing war damage from 1940 onwards, gave the planners a unique chance to put their new ideas into practice, it offered chances for radical change. Planners began to consider rebuilding at the time of first war damage in 1940, especially after the bombing of Coventry. The plans developed war similar in Great Britain and Germany, although there are also many important differences, a mixture of convergence and divergence. The plans in these two cities mainly aimed at air-defence, less monotony, decentralisation and structuring and organisation of cities by means of neighbourhood and residential areas.

The important development plans for London and Hamburg are:

London
MARS Group Plan 1942 (Modern Architecture Research Group)
Royal Academy Plan 1942 (Planning Committee RA)
Interim Report 1943 (RIBA)
County of London Plan 1943 (J. R. Forshaw, P. Abercrombie)
Greater London Plan (P. Abercrombie)
Administrative County of London Plan 1951 (London County Council)
Greater London Development Plan 1969 (Greater London Development Plan)

Hamburg
Generalbebauungsplan 1941 (Konstanty Gutschow)
Generalbebauungsplan 1944 (Konstanty Gutschow)
Generalbebauungsplan 1947 (Baubehörde)
Aufbauplan 1950 (Baubehörde)
Aufbauplan 1960 (Baubehörde)
**London plans**

The 'home front' was important and many promises for 'a better Britain' were made including plans for better housing and living conditions. “London was the weakest place on earth (...) the Achilles heel of Britain and the British Empire” a journalist wrote in 1939. In England during the war about 200.000 houses were destroyed, another 250.000 demolished, and as a result of war priorities no new houses were built for a period of five years.

The MARS Group Plan (1942) for London, originated from the principle of neighbourhood units and intended a fundamental reorganisation of ‘chaotic’ London. “Only by forming clearly defined units which in turn are part of larger units a social life can be organised” wrote Korn and Samuely in 1942. It was a radical schematic plan thought up by a young team of enthusiastic architects including neighbourhood-units for 6.000 persons and new borough units for 50.000 persons. Purdom classified it as a ‘fantasy that has no relation to the needs and aspiration of man”. Two other independent plans were published 1942 and 1943 for London and its region with proposals for improvements (Marmaras/Sutcliffe, 1994, p.431).

A neighbourhood-unit model was intended to be applied not quite as radically, but with similar concepts in the form of estates in the county of London Plan of 1943. The Plan by LCC Architect Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie aimed for lower population densities and structuring ‘the amorphous mass’ of London. “The war has given us a great opportunity, and by bitter destruction of many acres of buildings it has made it easier the realisation of some of our dreams” wrote Lord Latham in the Foreword. So London was divided into social units, urban villages. Four or five residential units with a shopping centre and a school were planned to create one neighbourhood. This was the model that was to function.

In 1944 Abercrombie’s Greater London Plan was published. There were immense changes planned in the areas bombed and the reconstruction of destroyed areas was modelled on similar principles but with new dimensions. Abercrombie wrote: “We have used the community as the basis planning unit. Each community would have a life and character of its own, yet its individuality would be in harmony with the complex form, life and activities of the region as a whole”. London’s East End (Bethnal Green), Bermondsey and other parts were all classified as slums and further demolition was planned to enable a clean sweep type of planning. No less than 1.033.000 persons were proposed to be ‘decentralised’ and dispersed, 618.000 from London as proposed in the Forshaw-Abercrombie Plan and 415.000 from congested areas in Greater London.

If we take a more detailed look at two blitzed areas, the plans for Shoreditch in London and Barmbek in Hamburg look very similar. Abercrombie thought buildings and dwellings not destroyed by German bombs in the slum-areas in the East End should be demolished. Similar in Hamburg, the next plan for Barmbek is a tabula rasa of plan, creating new residential units and neighbourhoods.

**Hamburg plans**

In 1941 in Hamburg the private architect Konstanty Gutschow, not the building or planning department of the city, was responsible for town planning. In 1937 the boundaries of the cities were extended and Hamburg was amalgamated with the Prussian cities Altona, Wandsbek and Harburg. As Hamburg was important for the war economy of Germany this was long overdue. The 1941 plan was based on the organisation principle of neighbourhoods. In this context, town planning followed principles aligned to the National Socialist ideology. According to the principle units of the National Socialist Party were imitated in the planning of new housing
estates to represent a cross-section of German Society, Jewish people and ‘unwanted’ groups not belonging to the ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ excluded. A mixture of row houses (owner-occupied), small blocks and tenement buildings with flats for rent was planned. The ‘Ortsgruppe als Siedlungszelle’-estate was planned for about 7,000 people with schools, shops and infrastructure.

Most important however was the expansion of the harbour in Hamburg. This was to be intended to be far larger than the one of London because of increasing trade, the growing importance of Germany and new colonies Germany intended to acquire. When Gutschow made this plan there was only minimal war damage in Hamburg and he had grandiose ideas for the modernisation of the city, which included a new bridge over the river Elbe and the only new skyscraper Hitler would permit in Germany.

If we compare the MARS Plan to a 1944 plan for Hamburg by Gutschow’s colleague the private architect Hans Bernhard Reichow, the scheme looks very similar. Reichow believed in organic town planning and his so called ‘cells’ look different from the MARS Plan schemes. Reichow always used examples from the natural environment for his ‘organic’ type of planning, and he changed the names of his units. Until 1945 he used the National Socialist term ‘Ortsgruppe als Siedlungszelle’ later calling them ‘Organic neighbourhoods’.

Gutschow was very well informed about the London plans by the foreign secret Information Service. He knew the central role of the neighbourhood concept in British war time reconstruction. In Hamburg in 1944 a further master plan also by Gutschow, was developed on the basis of war damage, which further developed the idea ‘Ortsgruppe als Siedlungszelle’ leading to less monotony. There are many more green areas and green belts in the plan dividing up the residential areas and neighbourhoods. This concept was tested in destroyed districts and was to be the basis for spacious rebuilding of other districts in Hamburg.

**Post-war plans, clearances and housing**

After 1945 in Germany, the ‘ideological ballast’ in town planning was rejected and so western, democratically influenced ideas about neighbourhood units grew out of the National Socialist idea of ‘Ortsgruppe als Siedlungszelle’ which were renamed ‘Siedlungsknollen’, or ‘Neighbourhood cells’. Some of the senior planners were removed from office or allowed to resign. But most of the (pre-)war planners (‘Gutschist’s’) did find new jobs, which enabled them to bring into the postwar period the models, concepts and practices they developed during the Nazi era (and before) (Diefendorf, 1993 p. 181).

After the war in 1947, parts of Abercrombies’s Greater London Plan were published in the German language in Hamburg and Bernhard Shaw was quoted: “Rebuilding London as it was, would be crime”. In order to offer the Germans more (democratic) examples of modern planning, a German translation of Thomas Sharp’s book on Town Planning was published in 1948 which also contained principles of the neighbourhood idea. British planners from the military wanted to establish principles for rebuilding Hamburg similar to those of British cities and they wrote: “The huge destructions during the war offer Hamburg a unique chance for sanitary rebuilding (...). The rebuilding can now proceed in conformity with modern concepts”.

When the British occupation arrived in Hamburg in 1945 they were surprised at the parallels of planning ideas. In Germany instead of being dominated by political ideology, planning was now based on organic analogies. The German visions and ideas for rebuilding in Hamburg were modest in comparison with the ideas for London. The bombing and war damages had left a lasting impression on the losers and the political and economic insecurity
did not allow ‘great visions’. Nevertheless the general building plan of 1947 and rebuilding plan of 1950 in Hamburg contained the ideas and principles of neighbourhood units and relieving city monotony. Planned were lower population densities and green belts to divide the residential neighbourhoods.

The war had a modernisation function not only for planning but for the British society and politics. The amount of political interventions was increased (‘Beveridge Plan’). What was possible during the war should be possible in peace time. “The war opened up an unparalleled demand for experimentation and innovation” (Bullock, 2002, p. xi).

In London too, the ‘great visions’ for Town Planning after the War could only partly be put into practice. Financial difficulties and ownership problems hindered the realisation in the inner city built up areas even when there was hardly any international controversy between the planners about basic aims and models for rebuilding. The planners in London as well in Hamburg, were forced to concentrate on lower population densities and on the planning and building of new estates. This was done according to the principles of neighbourhood units on the edges of towns, as well as partly rebuilding (mostly in the reconstruction areas) in the inner parts of the cities after the War. Of the original fourteen New Towns, eight had been in a ring around London and planned to take a total of 400,000 people out of the slum areas of the overcrowded city.

**Slum clearance and housing in Hamburg**

The housing shortage in Germany and especially in Hamburg, where half of the housing stock was blitzed, was dramatic. For Hamburg no figures for clearances of housing in the post-war period exist. When the political situation and financing was secured again, housing projects were began immediately. Some maintenance of the demolished housing stock was possible and this was the beginning of a mass housing production period in the 1950s.

The first and most important project in Hamburg was the ‘Hamburg Project’ as a headquarter for the British Army in Western Germany. The British Military Forces wanted an architectural competition for the project. The competition was won by a group of architects from Hamburg (B. Hermkes, R. Jäger, R. Lodders, A. Sander, F. Streb, F. Trautwein, H. Zeß). The project included twelve skyscrapers and was planned with offices and flats for British officers. 6 buildings have 15 floors, 6 buildings 10 floors. Before the war there had been 185 houses with about 730 flats in the area. In a period of housing shortage buildings in the area were demolished to get space for the new project. The project was based on the visions of modern architecture, the first and unique example of high rise buildings with this scale. The construction methods, steel-frame, were not known and new in Germany. In Hamburg there was a shortage not only for steel but for all building materials shortly after the War. When the British Government finally decided in 1947 for Frankfort as a headquarter, the Hamburg Government refused to take over the project as a ‘present’. It seemed to be impossible to finish the buildings, which were in the phase of construction. Finally after long discussions the parliament of Hamburg decided to take over the project and to finish the buildings as public housing. Over 2,000 flats were built between 1949 and 1956.

One of the biggest projects in Western Germany was implemented in Altona after 1958. In the Altona-Altstadt area lived about 90,000 people before the war. Most of the buildings were demolished by bombing especially in the eastern part of the area. In 1955 planning started with a team of the planning department of the City of Hamburg (Werner Hebebrand, O. Sill, A. Dähn) and the Neue Heimat, the biggest housing company in Germany. Ernst May was the head of the planning group in the Neue Heimat, and had planning experiences from Frankfort, the
Soviet Union and Africa. Over 10 years were lost before planning and construction works started. Meanwhile some buildings had been erected without planning permission, some had been modernised and some even squatted. The plans for Neu-Altona included the demolishing of many older buildings. New roads were planned, increase of green space from 2% to 15% in the area and new housing, avoiding the old mix of housing and working on one plot. These planning visions followed the Charter from Athens with a clear separation of housing and working spaces.

**Slum Clearance and housing in London**

The 1946 New Towns Act and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act created strong powers and the New Towns became Britain’s most admired and most visited planning achievements. For London the Administrative County of London development Plan 1951 stated that some 100 areas stood in need of comprehensive treatment. But in fact, owing to the financial liability only eight most urgent areas were selected to be dealt with as Comprehensive Redevelopment Areas (Marmaras, 1997, p. 12). These were as follows: Stepney-Poplar, Bermondsey, Elephant and Castle, Bunhill Fields, Barbican, St. Paul's Precinct, Tower of London and South Bank.

In Greater London, between 1955-1964, 45,113 houses were demolished (Yelling, 2000, p. 241), on the ‘worst first’ basis, with clearance area demolitions. The ‘pull down and tear out’ method was no solution, it created other new slums somewhere else. Most of the demolished houses were from the Victorian period, terraced houses, especially in the East End of London with lower densities than in the more compact city of Hamburg with an urban fabric dominated by tenements. There was a broad support for building flats (‘mixed development’) for people being moved for slum clearances as well as a general response to the problems of housing and reconstruction.

If we compare this Hamburg project with their counterpart in London, Churchill Gardens in Pimlico, they seem to be very similar. Designed by two young architects Powell and Moya, who won the competition, for the Westminster City Council in 1946 it was planned as a ‘neighbourhood unit’ in the beginning. Churchill Gardens was a mixed development with ten-storey-blocks of flats, four-storey maisonettes and a few three-storey terraced houses for large families (‘anglicised Gropian Zeilenbau’). Social infrastructure, schools, shops and a community centre were integrated in the project. A view to the Thames was offered for most of the tenants. Monotony of the LCC’s pre-war housing estates was avoided by a mix of building heights. Churchill Gardens was an important demonstration of the successful use of modern architecture for housing.

The 1951 Festival of Britain, in the tradition of 1851 Great Exhibition, was a demonstration with a great international resonance of British reconstruction, but primarily for the home-front. The South Bank side chosen for the festival was far from optimal. But as a demonstration project for modern housing was developed in the East End as ‘Live Architecture Exhibition’.

In the Lansbury Estate area in Stepney the first Compulsory Purchase Order was made in 1949. This was the first area of land developed comprehensively and on a neighbourhood basis. The layout of the area was prepared by the LCC’s Architects department, but also many private architects were involved. The neighbourhood was planned with a maximum number of social facilities, such as nursery, primary and secondary school, two churches, pedestrian shopping centre and public open space. Also a maximum of housing types was offered: six- and three storey flats, four-storey maisonettes, three- and two storey terraced houses and houses with a flat over them. The exhibition area of Lansbury was useful to demonstrate new types of neighbourhood planning and new types of house, flat and maisonette for Londoners. The
Lansbury project was part of the Stepney-Poplar Comprehensive Development Area with a population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants. Lewis Mumford counted the estate as “one of the outstanding examples of post-war urban planning” (quoted in: Percy-Marshall, 1966, p. 4). In 1954 the ‘exhibition area’ was almost completed, good homes by contemporary standards at that time.

But soon the results of Lansbury were criticised by visitors as a ‘major disaster’ but also by new tenants (Westergaard/Glass 1954, p. 33). The tenants still had aversions against tenements (‘model dwellings for the poor’) and the relatively high density. The Lansbury people were typical East Enders with their specific socio-(sub)cultural traditions. The majority was dependent upon industries and port activities near by. Also the ‘romantic’ vision of the ‘social balance’ didn’t function well. A group of new middle-class people also settled in the Lansbury area getting problems with the old social homogeneity, class structure and solidarity of the East Enders.

Planning visions – divergence and convergence

Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal may appear as excellent examples of the post-war consensus in Britain and Germany. All parties strongly supported the ideas of clearing unhealthy housing and the visions of modern housing – as public housing - with light, air, electricity and sun. But the key issue could not be solved. The gap between the quality of accommodation which poorer households can afford out of income and some notion of minimum acceptable housing conditions. State intervention widened this gap, when on the one hand the demolition of slums with compensations had to be paid to the landlords and on the other hand also new subsidised council housing, new neighbourhoods with schools, social infrastructure etc. was built with public subsidies.

It was very expensive to compensate private owners and old underground infrastructure must be used in parts. The neighbourhood unit principle was more important for new estates on the periphery and in England in was the basic principle for the structure of New Towns. Thus it can be concluded that the neighbourhood idea was not that important for rebuilding inner cities and the built up areas. In the early 1950s the focus of reconstruction shifted to the periphery. Social housing (prefabricated) was then assigned the task of solving the problems of housing shortage, which was often affected by building large housing estates.

To sum up, the war had a function of modernisation and interventions in economics, society and planning became necessary. A core element for ‘modernisation’ became the expansion of the housing programme connected with urban renewal. Planning ideas from the United States, as the winner of war, became more important in Europe (‘American Century’). But soon it seemed quite clear that the ‘great visions’ could only partly be put into practice. Problems of landownership, building costs and problems of creating a social new community from scratch made the implementation of the planners visions impossible.

The world wide planning euphoria of the 1960s produced technocratic models which reduced the neighbourhood theory to a technical, organisational norms of planning. Jane Jacobs in 1961 strongly criticised the myth of the neighbourhood; the ‘doctrine of salvation by bricks’ was a worn out ideal of planning, she argued. There were new questions about ‘public interest’ of clearance. Although tenants that opposed clearance received most attention others gratefully accepted slum clearance as a chance for better life (Yelling, 1999, p. 6). The planners became unpopular and their main work was unspectacular, the inspiration of the 1940s had gone.

Spawned by new variants the international planning movement became more diverse
(Ward, 2002, p. 155). The legendary charismatic figures, of the first generation with their ‘visionary’ and ‘missionary’ ideas left the scene and new professionals dominated the international planning scene. The international organisations dealing with planning matters remained quite small (IFHTP, IULA and CIAM) but offered regular opportunities for exhibitions, tours and conferences. The future trends of planning, urban change and slum clearance became dominated by the United States (‘Americanisation’), but also the Netherlands and Scandinavia became international models for the welfare state and for planning cultures.

The end of the 1960s formed a break in the continuity of reconstruction. Many new housing estates had been built and the housing shortage and demand wasn’t as urgent as fifteen years before. In Hamburg over 120,000 flats of social housing were built in one decade. In London many terraced houses were demolished and replaced by tower blocks, although the aversion of many Londoners against this ‘modernisation’ by flats and high rise buildings remained. Housing companies and construction industry wanted further work. In 1965 a Commission ‘Our Older Homes: A Call for Action’ intended the demolishing of 800,000 houses. But in 1968 a tower block in London’s East End (Ronans Point) collapsed and the end of the high rise development period was followed by ‘low rise high density’. There were new attempts to move away from ‘expert’ definitions of ‘slum’ and ‘unfit’ housing towards more ‘modern’ conceptions of urban redevelopment and urban renewal.

At the end of the 1960s the longest economic boom of the century came to an end. Although a big demand for office space made the extension of the CBDs necessary, a reorganisation of areas next to the city centres and the demolishing or conversion of housing from the 19th century for office uses. Inner Cities lost populations and the discussion about urban slum clearance came in the fore again, however with a different character. Slum clearance has often meant the displacement of an existing low-income population, creating space for more profitable office, commercial and luxury residential development, or the provision of transport facilities (Gibson/Langstaff, 1982, p. 12). Urban redevelopment and gentrification were the new paradigms, followed soon by urban rehabilitation and urban revitalisation. Slum clearance and urban renewal was followed by the ‘inner cities debate’ of the 1970s focussed on other areas, another population and different planning paradigms.
Literature

Die Grindelhochhäuser: Das Bau-geände nach der Neuordnung.