

Conflict and Consensus in London's 'Banglatown': Engaging Diverse Communities at Street Level

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Adjacent to the centres of European, as well as North American cities that are gateways to immigration, leisure and tourism has provided a powerful catalyst to regenerate run-down and neglected areas that are rich in cultural diversity, but poor in most other respects. Public resources are often over-stretched. Nevertheless, inner city authorities - sometimes with external support - have selected particular districts and invested in the public realm to create an attractive setting that will accommodate an influx of visitors that in some cases include international tourists. Thus, they seek to pump-prime an emerging visitor economy that is expected to deliver a wide range of benefits, including the restoration and conversion of redundant buildings. More broadly, it is expected to stimulate the urban economy, create new jobs, raise local pride and enhance the city's appeal as a vibrant cosmopolis.

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Over the past ten to twenty years, there have been some remarkable transformations of neighbourhoods that seemed unlikely destinations for urban tourism. The (re-)presentation of such areas as spaces of consumption has generated new business opportunities, inward investment and badly-needed employment. However, in some cities, there are justifiable fears that an increasing number of visitors will 'crowd out' local residents, noisy disturbance will continue late into the night, crime and anti-social behaviour will become problematic. Disneyfied 'ethnic quarters' will displace established communities, accentuating tensions in the areas beyond the gaze of visitors. The paper reflects upon whether this pessimistic prognosis is inevitable.

In particular, it critically examines the rejuvenation of Brick Lane in London's East End, and its re-imagining as 'Banglatown': a high-profile urban visitor destination. In the main thoroughfare of an area that is home to the capital's largest Bangladeshi population, a two-year long consultation project led to a profound re-think. Previous assumptions as to local preferences were questioned as the ethnically diverse local communities became actively involved in proposals to improve the streetscape (implemented 2002-6). The paper reviews the development of community participation to make the locality more accessible, safe and attractive for local users as well as visitors. Drawing on this experience, it advocates techniques for community involvement that incorporate the following key principles:

- (a) City governments and regeneration agencies must identify the full range of 'stakeholders': residents, local firms and community organisations, they must not allow one interest group to drive the scheme;

- (b) Each 'stakeholder' group must be allowed to contribute to the design process in a calm setting, and on an equal footing: with each other, as well as with practitioners who provide specialist expertise in urban design;

- (c) Differences between the priorities and preferences of the various stakeholder groups are thus made transparent, and local knowledge is used to inform the formulation of design solutions, working down from broad strategic options to the fine-tuning of proposals.