

“It won’t be another Covent Garden”: The Bankside Cultural Quarter

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INTRODUCTION.

Contemporary regeneration initiatives in the western hemisphere suggest that the cultural economy is at the heart of economic processes transforming cities. Manifestations of such transformations may be seen in the construction of flagship buildings to accommodate the arts and in the development of cultural tourism. These have an impact on the public realm including the symbolic and associative qualities of perception and experience of the city.

In the late nineties there has been a re-imagining of the fringe of Southwark adjoining the River Thames in London that has re-labelled this area as a cultural quarter. At the centre of this initiative for the Bankside Cultural Quarter is the Bankside Tate Gallery of Modern Art, that when it opens in May 2000 is predicted to attract some three million visitors annually. North Southwark is being transformed from a dank backwater of the City of London across the Thames to a destination of choice within a competitive world city. This paper attempts to explore some features of the urban change that have undoubtedly impacted on northern Southwark through an investigation of how people who live and work in the area view the public realm around Bankside Tate Gallery.

The paper examines the process of this spatial transformation, which has yet to be fully completed. It draws on case study material from the Bankside Cultural Quarter which includes in-depth interviews with residents and professionals. It will also focus on the dialectic between proposals of the agents of urban change and the lived experience of the residents, arguing that the process of transformation of the area lies in danger of excluding the residents, materially and symbolically, despite the employment of cutting edge techniques for regeneration and sympathetic designers and professionals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary architecture and urban design practice has generally welcomed cultural regeneration initiatives, applauding the opportunities it offers for masterpieces such as Gehry’s Museum of Modern Art in Bilbao or for installing a

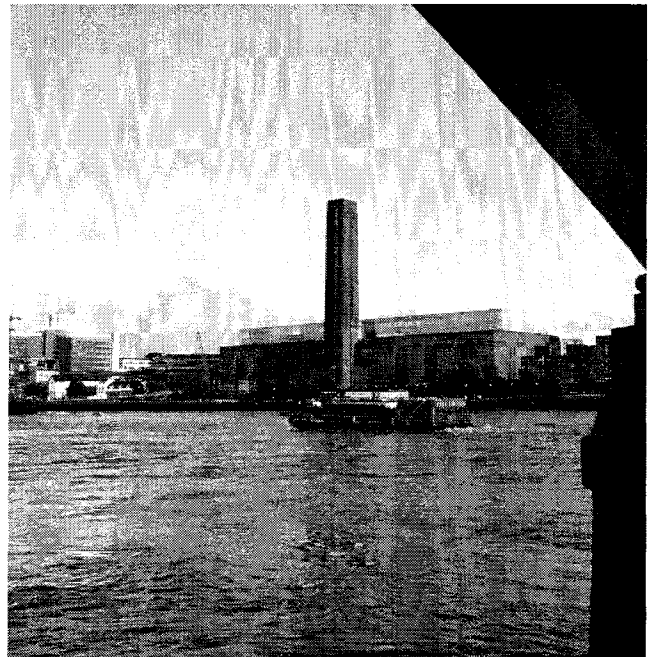


Fig.1. Tate Gallery of Modern Art, Bankside: photographer Brett Williams (source London Borough of Southwark (1999) Bankside Means Business London Borough of Southwark)

coherent urban design strategy, as has happened in Dublin’s Temple Bar. Theorists from all disciplines have been less content and have moved to criticism. As Madanipour (1996) has pointed out, certain developers have acted swiftly to incorporate urban design techniques into their schemes for the revitalisation of historic areas. In these the notion of culture as everyday life, a popular culture based on a nostalgia for a ‘lost’ (or perhaps never experienced) urbanity have been exploited to transform former industrial areas into places of spectacle and mass consumption for a tourist market (Ellin 1996).

This approach to revitalisation has been criticised for its production of space as an aesthetic object (Harvey 1989), its loss of authenticity and lack of social and cultural values

(Zukin 1988). The rise in land values often associated with such initiatives which re-valorise and re-configure the public realm have also come under attack, with observations that such interventions frequently displace existing resident populations, encouraging a new urban elite to 'takeover' the area (Zukin 1993, Smith 1996).

Apart from the sometimes brutal operations of the property market, more subtle forms of exclusion have also been observed. An important part of such transformations is the rebranding of the appropriated space. Zukin (1995), in a US context, notes an alliance between 'high culture and wild commerce', arguing that the promotion of 'cultural institutions by corporate interests reinforces the symbolic economy of a city within a global hierarchy and also may override local interests.

Many of the criticisms of cultural regeneration strategies have come from the United States. Latterly there has been a querying and unsettling of these observations, using case study material from other countries. Lees (1998) has suggested that regeneration initiatives in the 'wild' areas of public streets, given an alliance of political forces, can provide benefits for the homeless and the dispossessed. Jacobs (1996) also argues that a bland conformity in the aestheticisation of space is not inevitable, that local differences and political struggles can still be voiced and given public expression.

Urban public space is a concept that covers both physical and social relations. The meanings and significance attached to these physical objects and spatial flows are socially constructed and are thus the product of social processes (Soja 1989). Lefebvre (1991) notes that physical and social spaces and their imaginative associations are interactive and should be considered as a single dialectic notion of space. It is this dialectic notion that is important in this paper.

BANKSIDE: THE CONTEXT.

Physical Transformation

The Bankside area provides a microcosm of London's history. From the late middle ages to the late seventeenth century, Bankside's urban character was framed by its location opposite the historic City of London and it accommodated many of the activities which the City itself prohibited, such as brothels and theatres. In the nineteenth century the area became an important site for industry with its warehouses and wharves blocking the river from its hinterland (Hebbert 1997). The urban structure of the area was much changed in the middle decades of the twentieth century, through the depredations of bombing raids and the construction of social housing. In the 1970's and 1980's the decline of manufacturing industry and the docks left the area with its current fragmented structure.

The current transformation of Bankside can be understood as part of a fifty year long impetus to regenerate the central section of the South Bank of the Thames. After years of resisting the construction of offices in northern Southwark,

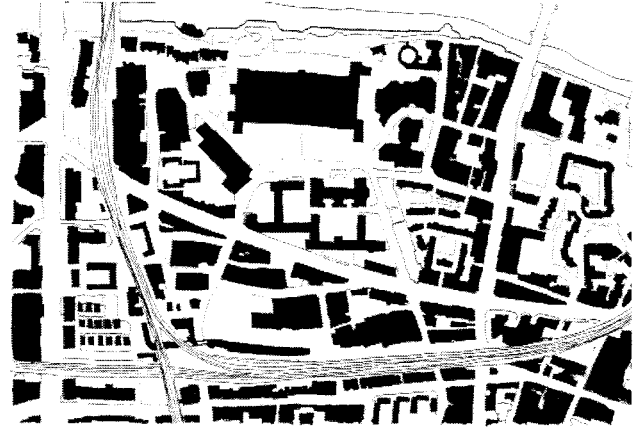


Fig.2. Bankside's fragmented urban structure. The power station is in the centre.

in the nineties, the local authority found a means of economic development in tune with the times in the form of boosting cultural activities and tourism.

Three major projects will transform the Bankside area. These are the construction of a simulacra of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (completed 1996), the conversion of the disused Bankside Power Station into an extension of the Tate Gallery of Modern Art or TGMA (architects Herzog and de Meuron) and the construction of the Millennium pedestrian Bridge which will connect the TGMA to the approach to St Paul's Cathedral (architect Norman Foster in conjunction with the artist Anthony Caro, and engineer Ove Arup). Both of these latter projects will be completed in May 2000. These cultural facilities are further bolstered by opening of the Jerwood Foundation, the presence of two small theatres and a number of private galleries. Further opportunities for the extension of cultural tourism are now being exploited in the eastern portion of Bankside, with the opening of a two museums. Plans are also under discussion to re-model Borough market, a disused fruit and vegetable market, as a centre

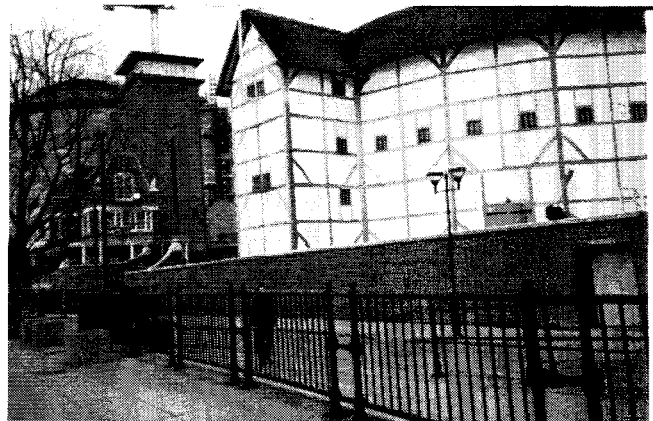


Fig.3. Globe Theatre and Riverside Walk

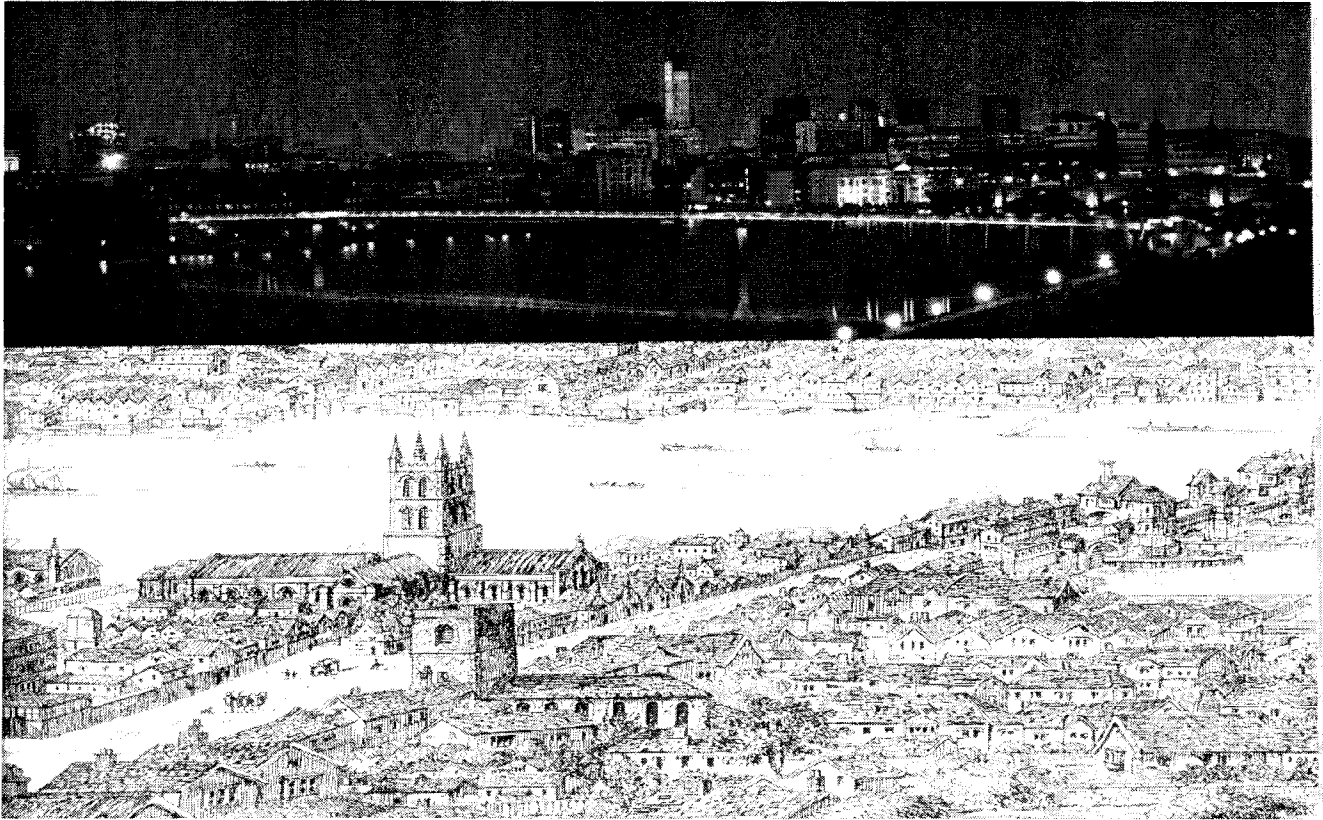


Fig.4. Proposed Millennium Bridge and Southwark in 1543 (source London Borough of Southwark(1999) Bankside Means Business London Borough of Southwark)

for specialist food shopping.

In a response to the challenge of accommodating 3 million visitors to the new Gallery and to raise the quality of life in the area, the local regeneration agency has launched a programme of street and public space improvements. Further improvements are also currently underway to some of the spaces which residents in the area are expected to use. The budget for the street improvements far exceeds that of the open spaces programme by a factor of approximately 7:1.

Consultation is taking place through a number of means. In no sense could it be claimed that the spatial transformation was wished upon local residents or businesses without some attempt at discussion. Nevertheless, because there was no over-arching design strategy there was no opportunity to consult with the public over the proposed changes to the public realm as a whole, nor to establish a consensus over the existing important features of the area.

Social Transformation

The Bankside area is located within Cathedral Ward in the London Borough of Southwark. Southwark scores eighth on the index of the most deprived local authority areas in Great Britain (DETR 1998). Relative to the other wards in Southwark Cathedral Ward is not the most disadvantaged according to government indicators. This is witnessed at one level through the under-average unemployment figures for the ward relative to Southwark as a whole.

There is also a clear tendency for households being made up of single people to become more prominent part of the population between 1981 and 1991. Cathedral Ward is marked for having a relatively small percentage of owner occupation and a high proportion of households in "social housing", 71.2 % at the 1991 Census. The high levels of social housing means that the residential population is relatively fixed beyond market forces.

PERSPECTIVES ON ACTUALITY AND PROSPECT IN BANKSIDE.

The tables below set out a summary of the main points raised in the interview material. The first consideration focuses on what cultural agents, social professionals and residents have to say about the Bankside area in general. The second theme concentrates on what these three groups have to say about the shared spaces within the Bankside quarter. The third and final theme deals with views on the prospects of change in the area associated with the introduction of cultural facilities in the area.

INTERPRETATION OF BANKSIDE IMAGES.

It was anticipated that residents would not share in the commonality of the urban agents conceptions for the revitalisation of Bankside. The interview data revealed more subtle sets of convergence, difference and ambiguity. The

Social Group	Character Of Social Group	Characteristics That Group Associates with the Bankside Area in General
cultural agents	professional/ partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • downgrading of history • portrayal of area as ready for change
environmental/ professionals	professional/ partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respect for historical west of area • portrayal of area as backwater • portrayal of area in need of upgrading • respect for peaceful character of area
social professionals	professional/ partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • division of area north-south • inward looking, stasis of area • acceptance of need for regeneration • characterisation of area as 'isolated'
residents	pro-change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acceptance of need for revitalisation • dislike of 'deadness' of area • excitement at being part of central London • affection for symbolic history of area • lack of amenities - e.g. shops
residents	against change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disinterest in cultural attractions • lack of physical mobility • affection for industrial past • lack of amenities - e.g. shops

Table 1: Summaries of key utterances of groups towards the general character of the Bankside area.

Social Group	Character Of Social Group	Characteristics That Group Associates with Sharing Space Within the Bankside Area
cultural agents	professional partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • control of space important because of control of image • need for visual linkages to central London
environmental professionals	professional partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provision alternative spaces for residents • upgrading shared space • provision of designated routes for visitors • exclusion of through traffic • animation of space
social professionals	professional partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • managing shared space as a problematic • high profile externality of the gallery • concern to keep tourists out of estates
residents	non-professional, total	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intense emotional response to Central Thames Path (River Walk) • dislike of traffic • desire for more green space • desire for more open space

Table 2: Summaries of key utterances of groups towards public space in Bankside area.

Social Group	Character Of Social Group	Characteristics That Group Associates with the Dynamics of Change in Bankside Area
cultural agents	professional partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creative of urban 'buzz' • area integrated in central London
environmental professionals	professional partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visual revitalisation of public realm • development of mixed area in terms of use and tenure • retention of resident population • animation of public realm
social professionals	professional. partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social polarisation between poor tenants and rich owner occupiers • continuing lack of social amenities • social isolation of marginal population
residents	non-professional, total	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • worry about being forced 'out' • fear of increased crime • continuing lack of social amenities

Table 3: Summaries of key utterances of groups towards the dynamics of change in the Bankside area.

utterances of key actors and a sample of residents reveal the contradictory relations which surround the production of a new type of space within Bankside.

That there is a mood of concern about appropriation through gentrification generally on the part of the residents is undeniable. This was not framed by a desire to uphold the status quo; the need to bring life into the area was mentioned by members of each group. There was also a partial acceptance by the residents for the new visitor attractions, which in some cases, amounted to a positive enthusiasm. Despite this enthusiasm, fears about the future of the area were expressed. It is striking that whilst many of the residents welcomed the insertion of new visitor attractions into the area, they still voiced anxieties about the effects of these attractions eventually 'forcing' them out of the area.

At the time of the interviews a rise in property values was being observed all along the river front, with newly built flats being sold for a price roughly equivalent to fifteen times the average wage. Since the interviews took place, prices have soared still further. Residents who could profit from this increase in prices were obviously appreciative, but still expressed reservations about the effects it would have on their less fortunate neighbours. Since the interviews this fear has reached a sharper political expression in other stretches of the Southwark river bank. Newspaper headlines that quote tenants' leaders' accusations of 'social cleansing' have appeared in local and London-wide newspapers and have been repeated on national television. It is this tension over the future social mix of residents which provides the largest point of cleavage between environmental professionals and cultural agents and residents. Even so, many professionals were in favour of a wide mix of residents. One commented:

... it's not going to be another Covent Garden, it's going to be much better than that, it's not just going to be toys for tourists...(cultural agent)

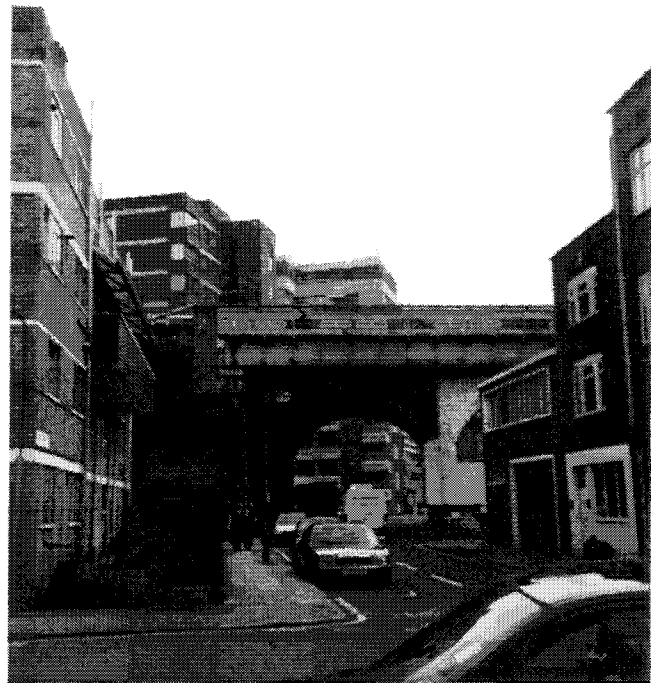


Fig.5. Residents acknowledged the need to bring life into the area

One of the most commonly expressed fears of residents was that the new shops and services which would be encouraged to come into the area would be aiming at a target clientele of tourists and upper-income residents. This fear was echoed even by residents who welcomed the influx of new bars, cafes and restaurants. In particular they were concerned that regen-

eration would not bring a response to what they saw as the needs of the area, needs which were inclusive rather than exclusive. The types of facilities mentioned most frequently in the interviews were a supermarket, other essential food shops, a publicly run swimming pool and leisure centre and facilities for children and youth. Otherwise the view was expressed that the area would be geared towards visitors and 'the rich' and would hold 'nothing for them'.

The property market and presence or absence of social facilities provide 'hard' indicators of inclusion or exclusion. The interviews also covered other more subjective, symbolic or associative experiences of space. One comment that was common to the overwhelming majority of the residents' interviews was their affection for the river itself and the experience of walking along it. For some residents this was a treat only to be enjoyed on 'high days and holidays', for others it has entered not only their symbolic world but their daily spatial behaviour in terms of walking their dog or other habitual routines. The River Thames has a richness of meaning and association which cannot be explored here but the residents' comment provides a flavour:



Fig.6. View across the River Thames from Bankside to St. Paul's Cathedral

But the places I like are the river and museums .e.g. the Clink, when I'm down at the river there's a sense of calmness and relaxation, you can let your imagination go, I go down there about twice a week. I still feel comfortable there in spite of all the building workers, office workers and tourists. (social housing tenant, male, middle-aged)

In terms of the design concept, the riverbank is seen as an important tourist route and space. Even before the Bankside Tate opens, the residents are reporting conflicts with visitors, complaining of being 'beaten back' by sheer pressure of numbers, of having to avoid the river bank at during the day because of the noise and crowds.

It seems that they bring in large parties of tourists. Those are the ones that I particularly object to, the ones in long lines or are all spread out or they are having lectures on the side of

the river and they come the whole width of the pavement and you can't get through. (housing association tenant, male, young)

The settlement which seems to have been made is that the residents will 'have' the green spaces of the open spaces programme, which tend to be away from the riverfront, whereas the riverfront will be open to all. This settlement with the residents does not address the power of the Thames as a symbol nor its emotional force as a natural element. Concessions have been made to the residents through the major projects, such as changes to the proposed design of the north side of the Tate and these concessions have been quite often 'won' by activities of the residents' bodies themselves. Overall, it can only be concluded that the visitors have been awarded the most symbolically powerful space through sheer weight of numbers.

It could be said of this analysis is that it privileges the resident over the visitor/tourist and the other users of the space, the office workers. There is a presumption that as the public spaces are part of an area which has a significant residential population, that the residents therefore have more 'right' to the public spaces than do incoming visitors, tourists of office workers. This ambiguity of the issue of the 'ownership' or right to public space was not lost to the residents, a small number of whom mentioned their own roles, in other cities, as visitors or tourists.

It remains to be seen whether the residents conclude that the street improvements programme is "all just for the tourists" as one resident described an enhanced street lighting scheme and whether the open spaces programme will answer their needs for green space and recreation. A judgement can only be made when the works are complete.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper is part of a process of exploring the transformation of the Bankside area through the most recent chapter in a story from industrial use into a place of high culture and mass tourism. There are evidently many threads to such a metamorphosis but common themes to the analysis of such transformations emphasise the dominance of: corporate and private interests over local views, of global interests over local difference, of the aestheticisation of space over its sensory enjoyment and of the commodification of use and activity.

At the time of writing it is not clear how the balance of forces within the area will be resolved. There is still the possibility of a truly shared space, between residents, tourists and office workers, a space in which global, homogenising forces have been tempered by a strong local context and a resident population whose rights of habitation could not be ignored. The final end-game for the public realm of Bankside in its current phase of urban development is yet to be played out.

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