The Unintended Consequences of Urban Policy

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Which government policies have really improved our cities – made them better places to live and work? Not an easy question to answer. The result of policies to solve the ‘housing problem’ or to sort out London’s traffic have led to, at best, mixed results and worst, to disappointment if not disaster. But there is good news: there are real success stories but, strangely, their success in city-making was unintended. They were a benefit that government neither foresaw nor intended, the result of the Clean Air Act and the expansion of higher education. Together, they did more to improve London than any legislation aimed at tackling urban problems.

Clean air did not just bring the expected public health gains but also made vast areas of London that had been low-lying and therefore in the grip of smog ripe for reconsideration, re-imagination and subsequent regeneration. Because streets tended to collect dirty air they became associated with slum living, but now, in clean air, they suddenly appeared handsome. What had looked like a slum suddenly looked like a place to live and bring up children. Clean air not only tackled respiratory diseases, it enabled us to see our city with fresh eyes.

The student population of post-war Britain increased tenfold bringing a new urban population. The children of parents who had escaped the gloomy industrial city for the suburbs were eager to escape the suburbs to the excitement of the city. They liked being urban and were happy to share a house in a terraced street that their parents would have called a ‘slum’. Many stayed on after graduation to lavish care on the run-down terraced houses that would become the newly gentrified inner city: Camden and Islington, then Hackney and Tower Hamlets, now Newham. The slums were reborn as desirable streets for first-time buyers.

The first wave of these new migrants to city life was small in number and they were happy to keep warm with paraffin heaters. Successive waves of student incomers had higher aspirations and, as student grants gave way to student loans, new credit paid for refrigerators, microwave ovens and DVD players, and it left (borrowed) money to spare to spend on coffee at two pounds a shot, bars, clubs, music and theatre. Clean air paved the way for student loans to regenerate the city.

Why did the Clean Air act and an increased student population bring unforeseen beneficial consequences while attempts to ‘solve the housing problem’ or ‘the traffic’ problem’ were less successful? It is because the ‘problem-solving’ mentality of bureaucrats seeks to divide the city into ‘bits’, be it ‘housing’ or ‘transport’, to isolate the problem-solving from city-making. The bits were ‘solved’ at the expense of a wider sense of place and community. Indeed, cities themselves were seen as ‘problems’ (and hence the need to escape to the suburbs), whereas we now realize they are the generators of cultural vitality and wealth. We no longer see London as a patchwork of sites for comprehensive redevelopment, but as a world city holding its own against New York, Tokyo, Berlin, Paris and Beijing.

A city of vitality and wealth creation, as London surely is, needs a vision of itself that is bigger than the bits, be they housing or transport. The good news is that mayors
can do this. The bad news is that they do it on a city-wide scale, not a neighbourhood scale. So can we get an overall view of Highgate? The new Localism Bill, despite its shortcomings (particularly the lack of funding to implement it), can provide an opportunity for a neighbourhood like Highgate to develop a vision of itself that can incorporate the pressing demand for new homes and improved transport, yet not be dominated by the mentality of isolated ‘problem-solving’. It is our opportunity to look at where we live with new eyes and work afresh.

What happens if we see Highgate through new eyes, and take what has been seen as a problem and turn it into an opportunity? In Highgate, Archway Road is often presented as a ‘problem’ – scruffy, noisy, polluted, but mercifully resistant to gentrification and with rents cheap enough for businesses to start up. Could we see Archway Road as a street of dreams?

We have to overcome a poor start. For example, ‘helping to solve the traffic problem’ they (Transport for London?) erected at considerable expense the huge electronic signboard seen here. It gives messages to motorists edging up the hill such as “expect delays.” These seem to be aimed at increasing depression while stating the obvious. How sad is this? Why not change the mindset by using these signs to display poetry – something to take us out of ourselves for a moment? If we can have poetry on the tubes, why not on the roads? Or the sign could spread the word about the Archway Road of our dreams, letting travelers know about culture (Jackson’s Lane, the Red Hedgehog, the Boogaloo); places to worship (including the centre for Hindu Tamils); cuisine from a dozen countries; shops (including in Richardson’s, north London’s most mysterious furniture store). Archway Road, despite the traffic, is a place where people live, and even linger. It has it all - culture, religion, eating and drinking, shopping… Let us celebrate it as a place to live, to linger, to dream – and as an A1 Road!

The photo shows the electronic signboard on Archway Road. Could it be sued for poetry? Or to celebrate Archway Road as ‘street of Dreams”