

Note on regeneration research prepared for inaugural meeting of London Action And Research on Regeneration Group (LAARRG)

"Regeneration" is rapidly reaching the end of its shelf life. Along with other slippery terms like "sustainable" and "diverse" it has become little more than a fig leaf used to legitimate any urban property development.

Those who view regeneration as a project to reduce urban deprivation treat it as axiomatic that it's a good thing and thus something to be attempted in areas of high deprivation. Successive London Plans, for example, designate all the London zones exhibiting high levels of deprivation as 'regeneration areas' without seeing any need to justify the identity.

Others think of regeneration in purely physical terms - as almost any process which replaces old buildings with new, low value buildings with higher value ones or which permit further densification of the use of land. With the shrinking of public spending and public initiatives we have seen the term become little more than a synonym for privately-oriented urban property development—albeit state-sponsored in various ways.

As London increasingly displaces its low- and middle-income populations through its development process, reinforced by cuts in benefits and increased insecurity for tenants, the tensions surrounding regeneration become ever stronger, but they are by no means new: they have been a feature of the process for decades. [[link to JustSpace conference 2013](#)]

These tensions surfaced formally in the public hearings (Examination in Public - EiP) on the 2009 draft London Plan, now adopted as the [London Plan 2011](#). The hearings received evidence from numerous affected individuals, from tenants' and residents' groups, academics and others (with some co-ordination in the [Just Space network](#)). The thrust of this evidence was that there are precious few benefits flowing to residents of deprived areas (in whose name 'regeneration' is done). Communities get dispersed, support networks broken, many are never re-housed, rents and other costs rise and those affected have little or no say in what gets done. This evidence carried a lot of weight with the expert panel which concluded that there should be stronger mechanisms to minimise adverse effects on prior residents and help ensure that they participate in the benefits.

[see box 1 below]

Although the Mayor resisted this argument and scarcely modified his plan, the GLA has not laid the tensions to rest. There are at least two signs that some thinking is under way. In 2011 the GLA Economics team published a research paper in which concluded:

" Without data to do this [longitudinal studies] it may not be possible to determine conclusively whether culture-led regeneration, or indeed any regeneration, works."
[see box 2 below]

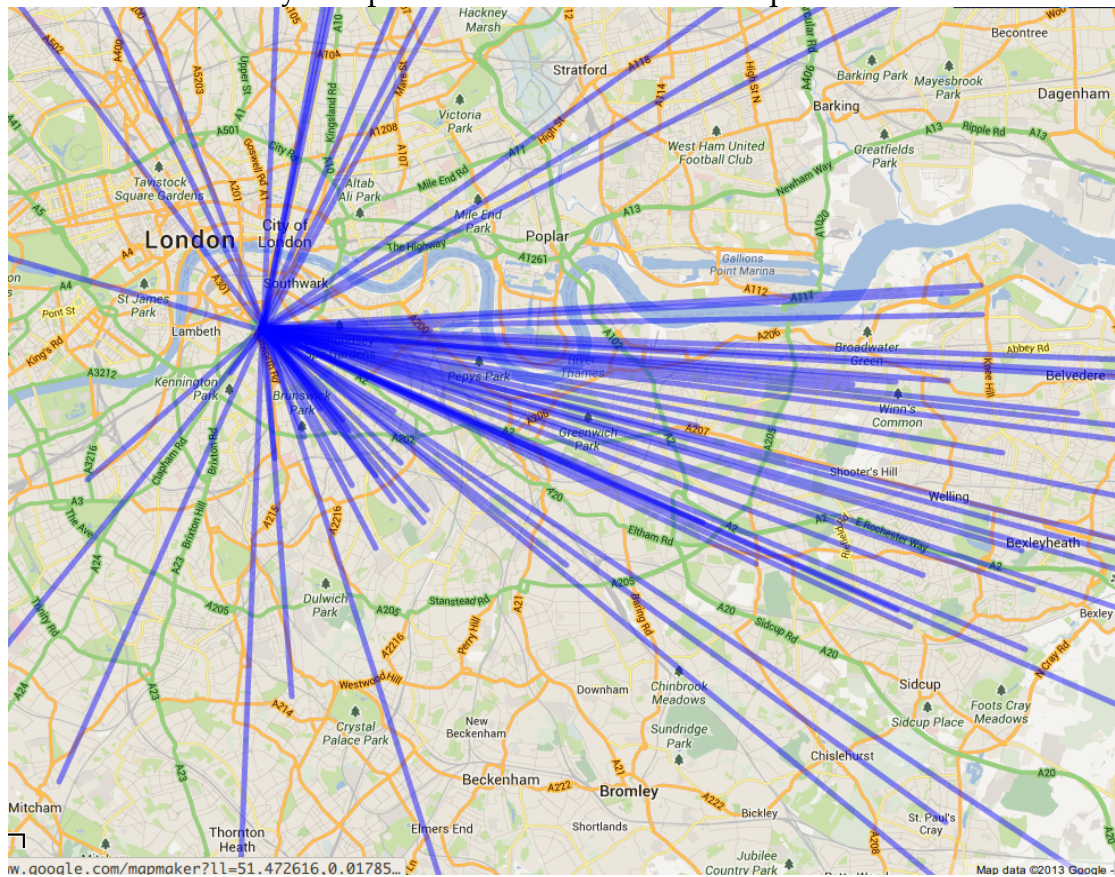
Now in 2013 the London Assembly has created a new "[Regeneration Committee](#)" which might be brave enough to look at the issues afresh before London is finally rid of its working class population .

Underlying our collective incapacity to halt or re-direct the regeneration machine is a major research failure. It is that we do not undertake the kind of long-term research which would track those affected by regeneration and thus challenge the standard discourse. We do not adequately identify gainers and losers—though we do know a lot about the mechanisms which transmit gains and losses—and above all we do not even try to follow affected people over the years to find how they respond to the urban renewal processes to which they are subject.

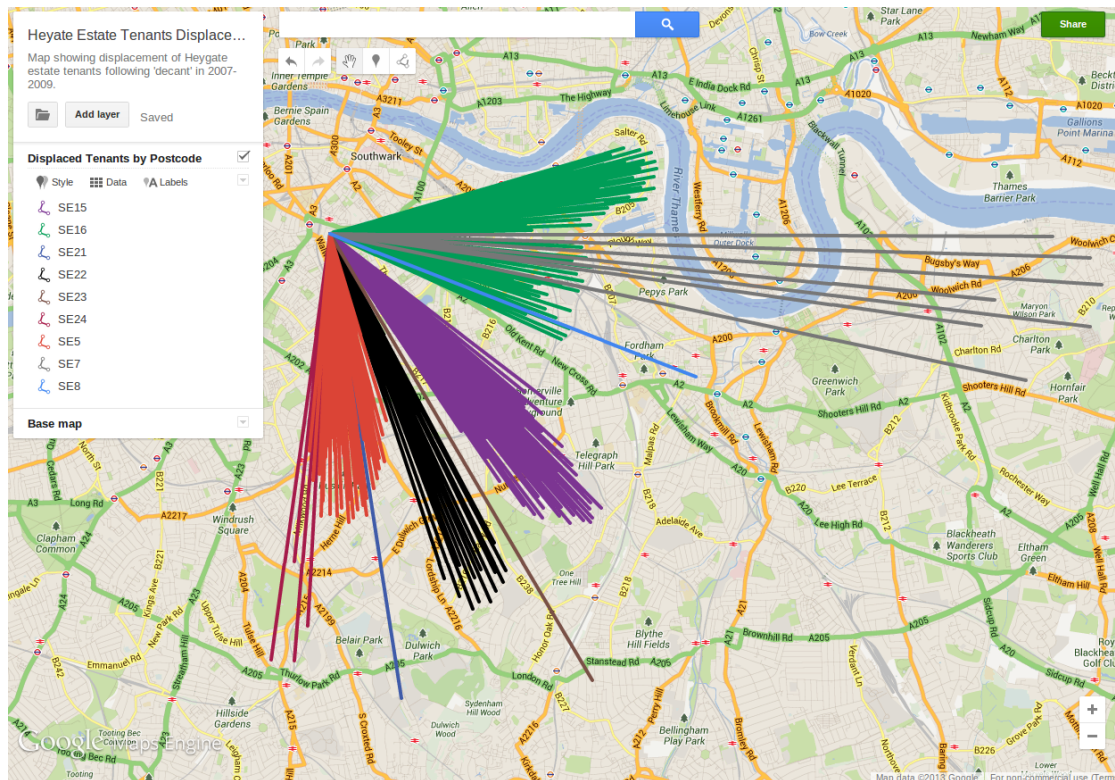
I had a brush with this research problem in the late 90s, negotiating with the Government Office for London (GOL) a contract to evaluate a regeneration project at King's Cross. The core of the research was to be a sample survey of residents and businesses in the locality, and then a repetition of the same survey with the same sample some years later, when the regeneration initiative had ended. The spacing was not long enough to capture many impacts, we thought, but it was the longest interval GOL could then embody in a contract. For respondents who remained through the period we would have been able to assess their experience of the 'regeneration'; where they had been replaced at their addresses we would have been able to compare the newcomers with those whom they replaced and we also hoped to track as many as possible of those who had moved out. We did the first round [link/ ref]. However the regeneration project, run by an appointed Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Board, terminated our contract before the re-survey could begin, arguing that results emerging after their organisation had ended its fixed-term life were of no value to them. GOL - which had been admirably supportive of the before-and-after approach - had by then been abolished and could not defend us. The new London Development Agency (LDA) declined to intervene. So that was that.

The only more recent evidence I can find which tracks the prior residents of a regeneration scheme is not academic research but an activist group's plotting of what happened to residents displaced by the emptying of the Heygate Estate, based on data extracted from Southwark Council by a FOI request. Perhaps this is a rich new data source.

Now I suggest that need for this kind of work is stronger than ever and I hope that people who have not yet retired who can devise such projects and seek funding for serious longitudinal panel research on responses to urban change in London. Such work would have to be thoroughly independent of interested parties, both governmental and private, and funding would be a major challenge since few sponsors would be keen on work whose results would flow only over decades to come. It's a challenge to universities and research councils. Will anyone do it?



The second map shows the destinations of the displaced council tenants rehoused within the Borough of Southwark.



These two boxes relate to the London Plan EiP

box 1: London Plan Examination in Public - [Panel report](#) - extract

§2.97 ...the principal points put to us by community representatives were that they:

- want involvement in the future plans for their areas;
 - oppose wholesale and permanent displacement;
 - want to contribute to, as well as derive benefit from, regeneration through new housing provision, local job opportunities and skills training, better environments and from improved community infrastructure of sufficient capacity and appropriate utility for all;
- and
- should be subjected to processes that are not unreasonably drawn out in implementation.

2.98 We do not see those as unreasonable aspirations

The panel made a number of related recommendations, including

Recommendation 2.9: Add at the end of Policy 2.14B “These plans should seek to achieve no net loss of affordable housing in individual regeneration areas.”

box 2: GLA [Economics Working Paper 48](#) *Culture and regeneration – What evidence is there of a link and how can it be measured?* by Nick Ennis and Gordon Douglass, May 2011, extracts:

" Since evaluations are generally carried out shortly after completion, there are none showing the long-term impact that really matters most for regeneration. This is very important because the indirect and chained impacts of schemes are not being recorded." p8

" Understanding the impact of any regeneration scheme requires an enormous amount of data. The evaluations that have so far been conducted provide a snapshot with which we have judged programmes that are intended to have a very long-term impact. As noted before regeneration takes time, often a generation or more. Therefore it would seem more appropriate to judge the success of a regeneration scheme on evidence gathered over a long period of time." p10

" To really understand the long-term impact of regeneration schemes, especially culture-led schemes that focus so much on people, it is necessary to find a dataset that follows people over time. The British Household Panel Survey is one such dataset. It follows a small sample of individuals over time, recording far more than basic demographics, including employment status, household finances, education, health and even opinions. But its sample size is far too small to investigate the impact of regeneration schemes. Without organising a special – and expensive – longitudinal survey, it is simply not possible to follow people and track changes in their quality of life." p12

"... Without data to do this it may not be possible to determine conclusively whether culture-led regeneration, or indeed any regeneration, works." p 12