Geographical knowledges and neoliberal tensions: compulsory land purchase in the context of contemporary urban redevelopment

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Structure of talk

1. Introduction
2. Background to case study
3. Symbolic, biopolitical and scalar knowledges
4. Discourses of urban modernism?
David Harvey’s injunction: to examine the “dialectical relationship between political-economic and socio-ecological change on the one hand and geographical knowledges on the other”

In the context of urban redevelopment, extensively addressed – particularly for the past three decades of ‘entrepreneurial’ or ‘neoliberal’ urbanism

Typically, capital accumulation and interurban competition = *market-oriented discourse*
- ‘Place marketing’
- Spatialized languages of efficiency ... competitiveness... productivity... opportunity... etc.
Urban redevelopment and very *different* geographical knowledges

- Based on a case study of recent plans for redevelopment of the south London borough of Croydon
- Focused on two major regeneration projects, each of which was to be private sector-owned and -operated
- Three principal sets of geographical knowledges identified
- In each case:
  - Such knowledges less about opportunities for capital, and more about serving a *public* – though ill-defined – constituency
  - Hence very unlike the market-oriented discourses that are more familiar in the neoliberal urban context
  - In fact – will argue here – closely reminiscent of *modernist* urban discourses: interventionist, Keynesian, even Utopian
Objective of the paper is to explain the materialization of such modernist discourse in contemporary urban context.

Does so by pointing to the specific legal process that both redevelopment projects necessitated: *compulsory purchase*

- The private developers leading each project were unable to secure all required land in the open market.
- Hence both called on the local authority to issue compulsory purchase orders to acquire the land on their behalf.

The argument: modernist geographical knowledges served to camouflage both the underlying neoliberal agenda and the contradictions that characterized it.
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   - Croydon

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4. Discourses of urban modernism?
What it is, and who has the power to do it

- Compulsory purchase means acquiring land against the will of the land’s owner
- In the US, this is called “eminent domain”; in Canada, “expropriation”
- In the UK, compulsory purchase is most commonly carried out by local authorities
- But they are not the only bodies endowed with compulsory purchase powers; others include:
  - Urban Development Corporations
  - Regional Development Agencies
  - The privatized utilities
Provisions are set out in numerous overlapping acts of parliament:
- Highways Act (1980)
- Acquisition of Land Act (1981)
- Housing Act (1985)
- Town and Country Planning Act (1990)
- Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004)

Different acts underwrite purchase for different end-purposes; e.g.:
- Housing Act – clearance of unfit housing and bringing of empty properties back into use
- Town and Country Planning Act – acquisition for land redevelopment or regeneration
What actually happens – a (very) summary overview

- “Acquiring authority” submits a CPO (Compulsory Purchase Order) to central government
- Notice served upon all parties with legal interests in the land, and advertisements placed in the local press
- There then follows a 28-day objection period
  - If there are no objections, the order is confirmed
  - If there are objections, a public CPO inquiry is held, following which the order is confirmed, modified or rejected
- If confirmed, transfer of legal interest begins, and those evicted are compensated – either monetarily, or through the provision of alternative accommodation
  - With the Lands Tribunal setting the level of compensation where it cannot be agreed voluntarily
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Croydon
Negative imagery, positive planning

**Bad press**
- “a tangle of concrete and tramlines [that] pioneered the vertical British brutalist architectural style” (*Times*, 2005)
- “a sprawling, somewhat soulless town packed with office blocks, department stores and fast-food joints” (*Financial Times*, 2009)
- “complete concrete hell” (David Bowie)

**Council plans... and plans**
- Croydon Unitary Development Plan (1997)
- Croydon Replacement Unitary Development Plan (2005)
- Croydon Metropolitan Centre Area Action Plan (2008)
Regeneration scheme 1: Park Place

Scheme developer

- Currently, none: Croydon Council terminated its agreement with the original developer (Minerva plc) in May 2009, saying it no longer offered a “viable scheme”

Scheme concept

- A 900,000 square-foot, retail-led, mixed-use development

Ownership of land for which CPO made

- Multiple – mainly small-business – ownership

Current state-of-play

- CPO was granted in 2007, but has not been exercised
- Council is drawing up a “revised strategy” for the site
From theory...  ... to reality
Regeneration scheme 2: Gateway Arena

Scheme developer
- Arrowcroft Group

Scheme concept
- A mixed-use development (offices, retail, apartments), with the centerpiece being a 10,000-seat arena

Ownership of land for which CPO made
- A partnership between the rival property developer Stanhope and the financial institution Schroders

Current state-of-play
- CPO was rejected in 2008
- Rival consortium hoping to start own development (Ruskin Square) soon...
From theory... ... to reality
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Symbolic geographical knowledges

The premise

- Croydon could – or indeed, had to – achieve a certain envisioned (and symbolic) geographical stature; only the redevelopment schemes in question (and hence the CPOs) would enable this vision to be realized

Examples

- Park Place was “required if the Town Centre is to perform its Metropolitan Centre function”
- ... and was “necessary, otherwise the Town Centre would fail in its function as a regional shopping centre”
The premise

- The proposed redevelopments were not necessarily more economic, or more productive, than existing or alternative land uses, so much as more *natural* – more healthy, sustainable, and alive

Examples

- “The Council considers that [Park Place] will promote the social, economic and environmental *well-being* of the Borough”

- ... and, offering the town a resuscitated “*green lung*”, it was “a vital component of the Council’s [overall] strategy for *revitalizing* and enhancing Croydon town centre”
The premise

- The benefits of redevelopment would accrue not only to the council or developers, or even ‘merely’ to those people living or working at the redeveloped sites; but rather to all the people of Croydon – to, in short, ‘the public’

Examples

- The council was “fully satisfied that the [Park Place] CPO is in the public interest”
- ... and saw a “compelling case in the public interest” for the Gateway arena
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Modernist overtones

Symbolic knowledges

- Envisioned enabling Croydon to fulfill a spatial function
- Here, the functionalism of modernist planers and architects is brought to mind: “form ever follows function”

Biopolitical knowledges

- Saw redevelopment as a natural – and naturalizing – process
- Here, echoes are of the modernist Chicago School sociology and its ‘natural’ laws of urban morphology and growth

Scalar knowledges

- Advocated redevelopment specifically in the public interest
- Again, the modernist overtones are clear – Robert Freestone labeling ‘public interest’ a “hoary modernist cliché”
What ‘work’ do these modernist knowledges perform?

- Intentionally or otherwise, they serve to *camouflage*

- Firstly, they camouflage the (neoliberal) nature of the redevelopments in question
  - Which may be state-enabled...
  - But which are property-led, accumulation-oriented, and private sector owned-and-operated

- And secondly, they camouflage the contradiction at the heart of these redevelopments
  - Redevelopments which are ultimately in the private interest
  - But which – through compulsory purchase – flout the central neoliberal bulwark of private property rights
There is a historical logic, however, to the materialization today of such discourses...

- These knowledges appear anachronistic
- But compulsory purchase has its roots – and its most widespread historical application – in a very different era of urban political economy
  - Early to mid-twentieth century
  - A Keynesian planning orthodoxy that saw urban modernization as part-and-parcel of welfare state
  - And which led to massive ‘slum clearance’ – and the construction of vast new housing estates – on the back of compulsory purchase
- Concepts of public interest, well-being and urban function were, or would have been, quite germane in that historical context