Negotiating urban change
Strategies and tactics of patrimonialization in Hackney Wick
East London

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Introduction

The heritage category function of building collective identity, condensing in specific goods, tangible or intangible, a set of locally significant values and practices, has been often pointed out to show its use in managing relations between the authorities and local communities (Simonicca 2015).

This happens nowadays with a particularly conscious approach in urban planning, not only in the practices and rhetorics of institutions, but also in the quotidian experience of people who develop their own informal planning. In this discussion, the heritage arguments become an appropriate tool to handle and shape the change, especially when these processes have a deep impact in the everyday lives of communities and territories, like in cases of gentrification.

A crowded field

Last stop of London's overground, *zone 2*. It is little far from the City, but the landscape suggests a much greater distance. Empty spaces and silence prevail; the former warehouses, one or two centuries old, stand out against the grey English sky. This first encounter with the district of Hackney Wick and Fish Island (HWFI), East London, could unlikely evoke the density of economic, political and cultural interests converged on this patch of post-industrial land. In fact, the people and the history of this territory have loaded it with various meanings, imaginaries and practices.

HWFI was born as a rural appendix of London, incorporated by the city during the industrial revolution. Heavily affected by WWII, this Dickensian district, peopled with workers and factories, deeply redesigned its material and social geography, hosting for a long time the last and vital cogs of London's secondary sector, but losing most of its residents. Geographically and socially isolated and away from the view of authorities, Hackney Wick became, therefore, a liminal zone that welcomed all those users and those uses less desired by the capital of neo-liberalism: squatters, travelers, the last worker of industries, ravers (Marrero Guillamón 2012).

With the outsourcing of manufacturing activities, the warehouses empty shells were reoccupied and resemanticized by an active and heterogeneous assortment of individuals, representing themselves as a creative community. Behind the walls of former-factories a group of

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people who, beyond their more or less professional and professionalized job (painters, musicians, designers, architects, deejays…), defined themselves as creative and nonconformist, has built a live-work community that considers itself as based on a widespread sense of sharing and exchange, whether of practices or goods or life domains (Hannerz 1980).

These dynamics have been shaken in recent times. The logic of *the growth first* (Imrie, Lees, Raco 2009), typical of London regeneration policies, has found a dynamo in the organization of the 2012 Olympics, focused on specific projects regarding the social, economic and cultural legacy of the Games. The desired changes were set up as products of a leisure and cultural regeneration (Tallon 2013), led by activities such as major sports events and their resulting international capital inflow. The requalification should have to go through the construction of new blocks of mixed-use buildings in the areas around the Olympic park and of whole new districts inside it, strongly reiterating *the growth first* narrative as the only solution to the chronic lack of jobs, affordable residences and appropriate skills for the inhabitants of East London.

It is in this frame of planning policies, economic interests and daily experiences that different tactics and strategies of patrimonializations of HWFI emerge (de Certeau 1980). These, starting from the same set of localized *precipitate* of materials and symbols, differ depending on the various selection processes carried out by the diverse actors taking place in an arena of conflict. The stakes of this conflict are the imagination of the neighborhood, that is not a mere intellectual abstraction, but a real social practice, through which a group builds, both symbolically and materially, the neighborhood.

HWFI is a very crowded field in which are positioned, according to the capital in their possession (Bourdieu 1972), different groups. By necessity of exposure, it is here chosen to select four of them, starting from the classic dichotomy between institutions and inhabitants, and decomposing again the two poles of this dialectic, in order to highlight the polyphonic use of the heritage concept in the gentrification process.

Heritage(s)

Around Hackney Wick act complex institutional assemblages (Imrie, Lees, Raco 2009) whose principal components are the LLDC, the Councils of Hackney and Tower Hamlets and various forms of local associations.

The London Legacy Development Corporation is the non-profit organization appointed to manage the legacy of Olympics Games. Led by the Mayor of London and a team of businessmen, developers and community builders, the LLDC holds the powers in the field of urban planning of the four Boroughs surrounding the Olympic park. Among the strategies used to redesign, control and tame this informal area, the organization has developed a peculiar image of Hackney Wick as the creative and productive heart of London, establishing a *tradition of creativity* as typical of the neighborhood.

This narrative, evoked and disseminated through media, urban planning and community involvement actions, is constructed by establishing a direct relationship between three neighborhood history moments: the industrial past, the recent settling of the creative community and the monumental and centralized venture of Olympic Games. The three spatiotemporal contexts are selected according to their embodiment of a supposed creative spirit, demonstrating its inseparable and natural connection with this space. These strategies appear as a local enunciation of Neil Smith's *myth of the frontier*. In fact, extrapolating the historical and

geographical qualities from events and people involved in the processes of urban change, such strategies bring them back in the natural and organic regimes, like physical phenomena governed by immutable laws. Naturalizing the requalification of Hackney Wick through the evocation of the heritage represented by the industrial past, allows the LLDC to switch from historically, socially and geographically determined causes to the vision of and inevitable civilizing expansion eastward, seen as the only way to redeem and formally reorder a chaotic and disadvantaged area.

Furthermore, constructing a *tradition of creativity* rhetoric as distinctive feature of the place, i. e. as heritage to preserve, ensures that it turns into an engine of requalification; this becomes clear in the *Local Plan* (2015), describing the requalification project as *heritage-led*. Thus, the cultural capital embodied in *creativity* can be used by LLDC to deeply transform the material and social landscape of HWFI, taming the territory and making it appealing to new investors and residents.

However, the institutions side doesn't seem uniform. Indeed, the local councillors develop a personal idea of the character of the area, based not so much on creativity, but rather on the physical and social sustainability of the space and on the heterogeneity of its uses, both residential and work. In order to safeguard this sense of place and, therefore, its typicality, in their official discourses the local functionaries counterpoise the radical transformation of the landscape to its improvement. At times, this planning line has been described by them as an *evolutionary approach*, a natural evolution to a higher level of urbanity of the human and physical components of the neighbourhood. This

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narrative adopts a mechanism of positivistic naturalization of the local change, not unlike the myth of the creative tradition constructed by the LLDC; nonetheless, the councillors represent in an alternative way the authenticity of the place, reshaping the ultimate object to preserve from the "natural" urban transformations. In this way, also through patrimonial rhetorics, the politicians negotiate their presence on the territory, interacting with the cumbersome LLDC.

Walking through the doors of the warehouses, some important distinctions have to be made. In fact, there is no monolithic planning agency within Hackney Wick, since the members of the creative community develop different answers to the urban changes, perceived as an imminent gentrification. They seem to show more or less formalized levels of civic commitment and interest in the heritage safeguard and transmission, conceiving it in a very different way from the institutions.

The CIG (Cultural Interest Group) is an authoritative local association, which developed a project/action tactic (Cellamare 2011) called *creative regeneration*. This form of planning, which formalize ex post the tangible experience of the neighbourhood, places itself as an alternative option to the scenarios designed by institutions, lacking of adherence to the dwellers' everyday experience. In the public rhetorics of the CIG, the area becomes a laboratory of creative regeneration, a growth medium in which make interact, in a tactically way, a number of stakeholders (residents, entrepreneurs, politicians). As in a chemical reaction, the encounter of these diverse elements won't produce nothing but the desired results, i. e. the ownership of the estates and, therefore, the improvement of the inhabitants' position on the

field, whose stakes are the construction and the imagination of the future Hackney Wick.

Creativity as heritage, in the discourses of the activists, doesn't correspond to the History of the place, but lies in the inventive practices of the community; this conception confers to its members the authority to pose themselves as essential interlocutors in the management of the cultural capital and in the planning of the area. Thus, the CIG can establish an exchange between local knowledge, possessed by the members of the creative community, and advantages in terms of agency on the territory, offered by the authorities (Herzfeld 2006).

On the other hand, many warehouses dwellers, though they don't formalize their commitment, conceive one more image of the future Hackney Wick, more connected to their forms of sociality. Those who have built a strongest and more intense relationship with the place, because of their cultural self-reflexivity or interpersonal relationships, seem to find two ways to preserve the local heritage from its "inevitable" transformation: by staying *in situ* or by discovering a new youth of Hackney Wick in another area of London, still untouched by the *gentrification wave*.

The patrimony built every day by the Wickers departs from the institutional heritage, used to reintegrate HWFI as a resource in local and global fluxes of urban competitiveness. The cultural baggage with which the Wickers collectively identify, and which the most involved of them try to bequeath, appear to be constituted by the dwellers themselves, or better, by their own social capital. The relationships tied in this highly flexible and intersubjective *locale* are the ultimate object of the community place attachment, and therefore the most authentic heritage to be safeguarded: not so much the warehouses as such, but rather the people who incorporate them in their habitus and who built collectively the deepest sense of place of HWFI.

Conclusion

Making heritage is a process which implies preserving; but what? In an urban space in tension between gentrification and regeneration, it has been observed how various agents, institutional or not, are giving different answers to the question.

The very selection of what to safeguard represents a pivotal element to negotiate the imagination of the territory and the legitimation to act on it. Representing the creative spirit as naturally bonded to the History of the place, symbolically authorize the metropolitan administration to address its changes; alternatively, describing this spirit as being embodied in the artistic and reciprocity practices of the community, permits to the latter to introduce itself with authority in the territory management.

Consequently, the heritage becomes at once an *object* of debate and a *language* polyphonically enacted, which makes interact (in terms of conflict, negotiation, alliance) different local agents involved in the construction of the urban space.

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