

A LESSON IN URBAN RENEWAL: THE TRANSVAALWIJK, HOLLAND

DIANA H. MAYNE

Diana Mayne teaches in the Planning School at the University of Cape Town and is a doctoral candidate at Cornell University, U.S.A.

Die agteruitgang en verval van die binne stedelike areas is deesdae 'n al hoe groter-wordende probleem vir beplanners. Swak beplanning en veral swak behuising word voorgedra as die grootste by-

draende faktore tot stedelike verval en gevolglike opstande.

Die veroudering van geboue is 'n normale proses, maar dit beteken nie noodwendig dat dit vervang moet word deur nuwe geboue nie. Restourasie en rehabilitasie tesame met bewaring van bestaande geboue kan grootliks bydra om die swak omstandighede wat die

binne stedelike areas kenmerk, op te los.

Die voorbeeld van die Transvaalwijk in Leeuwaarden toon hoe so 'n poging aangepak kan word. Die sukses van hierdie projek is die gevolg van goeie organisasie en bestuur asook die beskikbaarstelling van inligting.

Plaastlike entoesiasme en deelname het ewe-eens 'n groot rol gespeel.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the U.S.A., Europe and South Africa, recession, increased energy and building costs, inner and central city stagnation and the related physical decay have created major concerns for planners. Socio-political protest has made them urgent.

The naiveté of the physical emphasis of Urban Renewal Schemes and the injudicious demolition of residential areas in the 60s and displacement of population, have produced an unedifying legacy and heavy criticism of planners. Commissions in both the U.S.A. (Ribicoff Hearings, 1966) and Britain (Scarman Inquiry 1981), have determined that a major cause of urban riots is poor housing. Lord Scarman, then head of British police, emphasised in an address to the Royal Town Planning Institute, that it was not old housing but the housing estates of planners which had exhibited the "gross vandalism and disorder". He accused planners of not understanding the "whole problem of deprivation" and "creating problems and hostility in their blindly following blueprints". The newly appointed Secretary of the Environment for Britain, Kenneth Baker, stated in a television interview following his appointment (September 1985), that a major problem he had to confront was "the horrible building of the sixties".

Between 1980 and 1982 the Council of Europe launched a campaign to address "the urban crisis" and examine the problem of renewal and better urban management. Through participation by the

21 member countries in seminars, demonstration projects and heavy use of the media in schools, to professions and institutes, it hoped to promote an exchange of ideas and experience as well as an increased commitment to provide better social, cultural, economic and political (more genuine participation) opportunities for the urban citizen – now 70% of the European population.

The Transvaalwijk ('wijk' meaning neighbourhood) of Leeuwaarden, capital of Friesland in Northern Holland was one of the most publicised – and successful of these demonstration projects.

2. URBAN RENEWAL IN THE NETHERLANDS

Like many countries, the sixties was a time of economic growth in the Netherlands. About 73 000 hectares of land were absorbed by expanding cities. Construction, easiest in the suburban fringe, led to unprecedented urban growth and to a consequent decay of older neighbourhoods because they were seen as less desirable by the upwardly mobile. The decreasing pressure for inner city space (thereby reducing any but public initiatives or, in some instances, "gentrification") and the higher housing standards required, compounded the problem.

The Dutch came to realise that the decision to demolish old housing should not be taken too lightly. Not only, they

felt, did old buildings fulfill a function, they added to the diversity and attractiveness, of urban environments. They also, very importantly, provided relatively cheap housing. Moreover, public opinion had turned against the large housing estates and high rise housing of the sixties as well as the 'clean-sweep-of-the-old' view. Residents began demanding a greater role in decision-making and a less technocratic attitude. This 'overhaul' approach to renewal is now common practice.

An Amsterdam Council resolution of 1978 illustrates this attitude. It states: "As a rule, conservation and restoration are to be preferred to demolition and new construction . . . the renewal has to be carried out in stages and in close co-operation with the population concerned". For improved and new public housing, inhabitants participate in a 'building team'. A booklet informing them of the procedure is given out in advance. The entire team of officials, the principal architect and planner and residents formulate the proposal and allocate the resources. The Dutch call this participation 'Inspraak' – literally 'inspeak' which has a good, albeit Orwellian, connotation!

That participation by residents can be more than a policy directive or consultation, is well illustrated by the Transvaalwijk. In this neighbourhood, the low-income residents initiated and carried out their own strategy of renewal

with professional and technical assistance as they required. The results were so successful that the Dutch Government used it, together with a similar example in Enschede, as a national demonstration project for the Council of Europe's "Urban Renaissance" campaign.

3. THE TRANSVAALWIJK

Leeuwarden, the pretty, historic capital of Friesland, is probably better known as the birthplace of Greetje Zelle, or Mata Hari as she became known, than the place of an intensely waged campaign amongst the residents of one of its neighbourhoods to protect and improve their environment.

The Transvaalwijk dates back to about 1877 but development did not progress until 1890 when the South African Transvaal was referred to for the first time. Street names like Paul Krugerstraat, De Wetstraat, Bothastraat, appeared. Housing (privately built) was mainly grouped in rows "within the reach of people with modest means". By 1970, the Transvaalwijk had a population of 1 400 persons living in 407 dwellings; a density of 54 houses per hectare. Seventy percent of the houses were owner-occupied.

The saga began in May 1970 when the residents expressed growing concern over what they called the "silent demolition" of their district; the invasion of other uses, particularly the creeping expansion and increasing parking demands of the hospital within the neighbourhood. A letter expressing this concern was written to the local council. The latter, whilst acknowledging the anxiety of the residents, replied: "A district that is growing old loses its attraction as time goes by." Although the buildings were declared obsolete by modern standards, the Council did not believe they warranted immediate attention.

The residents' consensus was to go it alone. It was clear to them that although the town might have no plan for their area, the hospital did! With the help of professional and technical expertise and a grant from the government (with the proviso that the Town Council contribute equally), action started. The first step was to assess the situation and investigate resident co-operation. This culminated in a working paper which

outlined different scenarios of action. It also stated that some houses required demolition. Each resident received a copy for comment. After discussion and negotiation and consultation with the hospital authorities and Town Council, the residents plan was ready in August 1971. Throughout this period, the residents worked as an open neighbourhood committee. The committee did not represent the neighbourhood, it WAS the neighbourhood. The ballot taken on the plan showed a 90% approval and reflected the solidarity of the residents, even by those most affected. A few months later, the plan was approved by the Council and in March 1972, a Foundation Rehabilitation Transvaalwijk was established to implement the proposals. The Foundation included an observer from the Town Council, an executive committee of residents and a project leader (a Town Planner) appointed and paid by the residents.

Implementation involved all residents. Each inhabitant of the neighbourhood could take part in the rehabilitation through a choice of action groups co-ordinated by the Foundation. The most important was the Housing Action Group, but there were also the Private-Rented-Houses Group, a Street Improvement Group and a group providing support to the people whose houses were to be demolished.

Between 1970 and 1980, approximately R5,5 million was spent on the area and about R2 million on housing; about R6 000 per improved unit. The proportion of costs between citizen and government was 60:40. The costs were low because 75% of the residents improved the houses themselves. The prevalence of self-help and mutual help was striking. Many residents could only afford renovation if costs were spread over time and renewal gradual. For those least able to afford improvement, there were neighbourhood door-to-door action groups as well as a sharing of skills.

A notable feature of the renewal was the many meetings. About sixty meetings were held in each street) and the good attendance. The participation at meetings averaged a high 75%. The enthusiasm for the project was so strong that the Deaconesses' hospital, which had ignited the fuse of protest, was not only to stop its expansion programme but to move

out of the area. (On a Government arranged visit to the neighbourhood, we were told that some of the recent extensions to the hospital were to be demolished for more housing!)

In spite of the difficult beginning, there was no real conflict between the Town Council and the residents. The Council left most of the initiative to the residents – the idea being that enthusiasm would better promote rehabilitation. Later it was felt that the residents of the Transvaalwijk had appropriated a part of municipal authority and that a change in the structure of municipal organisation was needed.

Urban renewal in Leeuwarden is now part of Council policy with defined rules for participation. The town has been divided into 14 districts headed by an Urban Renewal Corporation. For each project undertaken, a project group of officers with a clearly defined task decide on priorities. They then hold regular meetings with a contact group of about seven residents in each area. Through local newspapers and informational meetings, participation is diffused. But it is feared that the same rules for all will deter freshness and enthusiasm in other projects and detract from the results that were achieved by the pioneers in the Transvaalwijk.

4. CONCLUSION

What lessons can be learnt from the Transvaalwijk? Specifically these lessons are:

- (i) The enormous contribution of 'grass roots' action and enthusiasm to the success of the project. The question needs to be asked: Can success be achieved without a popular mandate for change?
- (ii) The project, unlike so many urban renewal schemes, fostered confidence and a sense of belonging. Participatory action encouraged the growth of social contacts and community spirit.
- (iii) The importance of organization and management. The Foundation Board in the Transvaalwijk established clear and popularly agreed objectives, structured activities and co-ordinated a very commendable democratic, decision-making framework. It is noteworthy that

the Town Council elected only to have observer status.

- (iv) The importance of good information about the project prepared by the Dutch Government for the Urban Renaissance campaign, states that "The entire system stands or falls with good information." (Gemeente Leeuwarden, 1981.) Meetings (activity and street-based as well as neighbourhood wide), informational evenings, newsletters, were some of the methods used.

More generally, the example of the Transvaalwijk stands at the threshold of a different, more sensitive approach to urban renewal. It is not unique. Renewal carried out in the U.S. during the late seventies and eighties has also had a strong community imprint. The neighbourhood has become a tangible political platform for improvement encouraged by popularised awareness of urban issues and more 'greenlining' of deprived areas. Finance has come from Federal, Community Development Block Grants and local community development banks, both of which have reinforced citizen action and provided opportunities for improvement in areas 'redlined' by more conventional finance institutions.

But renewal in Europe, like South Africa, has generally suffered from bureaucracy and centralization of policy and action. There also exists a suspicion of more informal and more gradual methods of improvement – particularly those based on citizen initiatives. The Transvaalwijk shows a real possibility for improvement based on self and mutual-help with professional/technical assistance. Importantly, it offers a real alternative for low-income communities to rehabilitate their own environment. In South Africa there are too many examples of mass produced housing estates for planners not to heed the lessons learnt from the vandalism to the environments-no-one-wanted. Said Henk van Veldhuizen, the Town Planner appointed by the Foundation Transvaalwijk as project leader,

"... I got an enormous kick from the enthusiasm of the inhabitants of the Transvaalwijk... They conquered the space... that is exactly what I miss in urban renewal... For every problem, standard solutions have been thought

of with all the procedures and bureaucracy that is apparently connected with it. For that reason a lot of flexibility disappears, and with that also the space for groups of inhabitants to show up with their own creative solutions. And that is a pity..." (p. 17.)

REFERENCES

Gemeente Leeuwarden (in co-operation with the Government of The Netherlands) URBAN RENEWAL IN LEEUWAARDEN: PILOT PROJECT TRANSVAALWIJK. 1981 1st volume no. 3, p. 29.

Note: Apart from those references mentioned in the footnotes, the major source of material came from a variety of brochures and pamphlets handed out to delegates at the opening conference of the Urban Renaissance campaign held in The Hague during April 1981 as well as from notes made on a Government sponsored conference. For further information on the Urban Renaissance campaign, readers are referred to the Council of Europe's report; FINAL REPORT OF THE EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN FOR URBAN RENAISSANCE. Strasbourg 1983. Also; THE URBAN RENAISSANCE CAMPAIGN by Appleyard D. and Mayne D. H. in *Architecture S.A.* September/October 1985.

Readers concerned about the practicalities of community planning and the role of the profession should follow the current RIBA community enterprise scheme in the regeneration of towns and cities. Launched in 1985 it seeks not just to practice architecture in the community but to set new and higher standards in professional services for ALL members of the environmental professions. It has recognized that renewal is a very broad problem and one that must involve the community to succeed.