'They just look wrong': visualising 'crime' and grime in the post social city

Roy Coleman describes the coercive dynamic of regeneration policies.

Broadly speaking a form of social policing has come to permeate regeneration policy through which selective place making is coupled with a ubiquitous surveillance over a supposed safe, clean, and crisis-free space (Coleman, 2004). A consequence of social policing has been the reinforcement of a particular fixation with 'deviance' and the 'crime problem' (by who, where, and when it is enacted). Reclamation promotes behavioural performance criteria and hails consumer oriented and responsible citizens befitting of

imagery transmits the ideological ammunition of powerful class based coalitions whose attempt to talk-up the distinctiveness of place masks the reproduction of repetitive material spatial orders with a particular reinforcement of private property rights. Partnerships of new primary definers (local councillors, marketing specialists, police, property developers, university vice chancellors, and 'experts' on urban sustainability) have re-presented the 'competitive advantage' of particular cities and valorised some spaces and activities as more

Figure 1

certain representative spaces. What follows sketches these processes that muster symbolical authority for, and the coercive power over, the economic and political spaces of regeneration (Coleman, 2009).

The politics of visibility
The politics of visibility is exemplified in renaming, rebranding, and iconic land-marking as common manifestations of the 'new urban scene'. The playful

visually strategic, and advantageous to 'growth', than others. Within regeneration speak, idealised and selective representations of the city aim to create *visually pleasing space* (pitched to 'responsible' citizens, investors, tourists etc.) which extends a view of space where the appearance is tied to successful regeneration along with appropriate conduct and etiquette (Coleman, 2009). This is acutely referenced in the anxieties shown towards the

visibility of homeless persons whose 'nuisance and intimidation' is seen as a 'detriment to the very areas where environmental and social improvements are crucial' (Home Office, 2003)

Cultural renaissance and enforcement
Such anxieties framed within the desire for a cleansed visibility, encourage the performance of consumption and tourism along with the performed appreciation of 'culture' and 'art' in cities as signifiers of 'renaissance'. As cues for the 're-awakening civic pride', performances such as these must be 'supported by strong enforcement action against a range of anti-social behaviours' (Urban Task Force, 1999). Visually pleasing space and its marketing is significant in that it reinforces an awareness of dirt and disorder as antithetical to the current regeneration ethos. Dirt becomes fused with sullied materials, dishevelled bodies, and non-performing individuals in public space. The policing of social 'dirt' is not new but is has intensified in the newly envisioned landscape.

Importantly these processes have a material resonance that points to the increasing political clout and coercive power of market state forms, enhancing the power of capital through targeting the visibility of the poorer groups and spaces of the city. In particular the development of 'the business friendly city' sits as a notion against which ideas of crime, incivility, and risk are pitched. Take the example of Business Improvement Districts in the UK (established under the Local Government and Finance Act of 2003). Officially these bodies are thought to increase commercial activity, improve property values, and provide a source of civic pride. In many respects BIDs acquire aspects of municipal power and transfer them over to corporate consortia who have taken it upon themselves to re-construct the public interest as synonymous with the private interest. BIDs represent the self-imaging of capital in and through the built environment as well as through forms of social

Figure 2

regulation. Key here is, firstly, the process of image management aimed at facilitating a 'culture of cleanliness' to lure desired audiences into the commercial centre. This includes facade management – the placement, use, and maintenance of lights, public seating, shrubbery, water, and music, all have a role in attracting desirable investors and consumers. Secondly BIDs police that environment in a variety of ways; vetting licenses to street entertainers, checking the validity of *The Big Issue* vendors, prohibiting where the homeless can sleep, urinate, and eat; policing informal traders – in part through the private financing and management of radio security networks and CCTV systems (Coleman, 2009). If 'regeneration' is to be successful, creating 'safe places to do business' is a prerequisite. For example, European 'cappuccino culture' symbolises competent space whilst images pertaining to 'bargain basement economies', unregulated youthful activities and master-less homeless people pollute the required image. Business funded campaigns urging people to desist from giving change to street beggars; removing and fining skateboarders; the use of ASBOs to restrict movement in and around the city; and pressure on *The Big Issue* to clean-up its vendors along with a no-sell policy in the ultra-glam 'flagship' areas of regeneration – all testify to the marriage between the visual and socio-spatial control. Classificatory and coercive surveillance reinforces

hostility and violence towards homeless people by members of the public, some police units, and private security (as reported to researchers at the University of Liverpool).

'Seen' and 'unseen' space

Fuelling the post social city is the reconfiguration of the locally powerful: organising new forms of investment, market rules, surveillance, and policing, whilst dislocating welfare and social collective action. The prioritisation of the visual over the social acts to disqualify relatively powerless groups from full social acceptance (let alone a social understanding of their lives), while at the same time deregulating and opening up the spaces of

Figure 3

manoeuvre for the powerful (not only to define social problems, but generate them also). Higher up the social hierarchy the machinations involved in decision-making around the funding and resource allocation between city central prestige projects and outer estate service provision remains relatively inoculated from public view. Whereas the working class poor have to 'live up to' and attain competent behavioural standards, the business class has *the power to act*, the means and ends of which lie outside local democratic scrutiny. As the Crime Disorder Act (1998) gave businesses a central place in urban crime control, it reinforced the trend of moving scrutiny of powerful actions off the surveillance radar and fortified the notion of more 'business-like' ways of managing cities (including 'crime'). Social harms associated with routine powerful activities have become harder to see in the drive for crisis free imaginaries. If it chooses to do so, social inquiry can uncover the reductions in health and safety for workers involved in building glam centres and the curtailing of trade union activities as well as the use of casualised labour (Coleman, 2009).

Surveillance and scrutiny of the powerful is notionally possible, for example, under legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act (2000), but has been countered by a series of exemptions favouring powerful bodies who may argue that 'transparency will damage democracy' – as was the argument deployed by some British MPs in relation to their fees and expenses (Brooke, 2009). In the developments described here, all that is problematic in the city is not necessarily glimpsed and, if it is, it is likely to be circumscribed by entrepreneurial ways of seeing. Structural indicators of poverty, low pay, and poor housing estates (negatively labelled 'sink estates') are as much an object of marketing and promo-policing (looking into how and if they can be promoted as 'positives' or otherwise ignored) as they are the object of welfarist policy interventions. The visual cues of poverty are fore grounded and debated through a 'broken windows'

lens which provides justification for forms of zero tolerance intervention aimed at the superficial *appearances* of crime and disorder. Compared to the celebratory deference displayed to the representational spaces of capital, poor space is addressed in a language of the grotesque, 'anti-modern', and criminogenic (Coleman, 2009).

Structures of vulnerability and their urban reproduction remain relatively invisible in the selective traps ensconced in the politics of vision. But these structural power differentials remain pertinent to the unequal distribution of risks around environmental pollution, unsafe, and unhealthy working conditions, access to affordable housing and the sale and distributions of unsafe goods and services. A form of spatial control proliferates for the powerless and narrows for the powerful, but the costs of each descend disproportionately upon the most deprived groups (Coleman et al.,

2005). The politics of vision is creating what appear to be unseen spaces: those that are under-policed and which current crime control discourses seem unable to render visible. Meanwhile the kind of systematic, judgemental, and individualising surveillance reserved for some on the streets reinforces a form of abjection towards the offenders of entrepreneurial visualisation as well as disrupting a fully social debate on the right to the city. Although, 'dispelling the fictitious yet real world images and signs is going to take more than a magic formula' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 390), championing the right to inhabit the city – outside of, and as a challenge to, those rights associated with property and mere visitation – must be put at the centre of political and academic debate. ∎

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