

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF THE URBAN CORE

Christopher M. Lawin
in association with
E.K. Grime, C.J. Grundy, M.L. Senior
and J.N. Tuppen

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For Councillor Peter Scott

Preface

The last twenty years have witnessed considerable political and academic interest in the problems of the inner city. The term 'inner city' is frequently used in a vague way. Sometimes it refers to the areas of poverty which often surround the city centre. Because poverty is a problem, and one which infects the community, it is, therefore, inferred that there is an inner city problem. However, in other contexts the term may refer to the whole of the older part of the city, including the city centre and affluent districts as well as the poorer ones. The focus of this book is the older part of the city which we refer to as the core. All towns and cities have such a core but our interest in particular is the large city or metropolis which has more than one million people. There is nothing magical in the figure of one million, but we believe that the forces causing decline, discussed below and in Chapter 1, are significantly greater in large cities and, therefore, it is of more interest to focus on them. We are interested in this core area because it is subject to great forces of change, whether the area is rich or poor, successful or failing. Emphatically our interest is in the core as a whole and not solely in the poor areas within the core, as is the case with many inner city studies.

Sixty or seventy years ago this core area was the city, but as the metropolis has grown so it has come to have a decreasing share of the urban area and its functions. Long after the suburbs had grown it remained very important because it contained the main economic activities of the metropolis. However, the forces of decentralisation which first caused people to move out have also later affected economic activities. Whilst the core is still important for certain functions within the metropolitan area, it is no longer so dominant as it once was. These trends first affected cities in North America and later those in Western Europe. By the early 1970s the decay of central cities (as the core area is sometimes referred to) in the United States was clearly evident. Not only were people and activities moving out but areas were being left vacant and empty. Some commentators projecting this trend spoke of the (American ringed) doughnut city; that is a circular urban area with an empty core. As early as 1971 Sternlieb could write: 'The major problem of the core areas of our cities is simply their lack of economic value . . . The city as we have known it and the forms of economic and social

organisation which have characterised it are simply irrecoverable.'

Later, in 1980, when city officials in St Louis complained to the census bureau that the fall in population from 622,000 in 1970 to 453,000 in 1980 was too great they were advised to be more realistic. 'If they don't wake up and acknowledge the exodus they're going to lose it all. They ought to get out of their offices and drive through North St Louis. A lot of it looks like a ghost town. When we come back to count in 1990 it may not even be a city. It may be a village.' (Shirk, quoted in Mendelson and Quin 1985).

The principal aim of this book then is to examine the state of the urban core. Is decline inevitable? What is the future of this zone? After a period of decline in population and employment, will there be a stabilisation in the process? What future does the core have as a residential area? What kind of economic activities can flourish in this zone? What is the relationship between the city centre and the surrounding inner city zone? What role has planning played in the changes so far and how far could policy intervention stop decline and revitalise the core?

Our study relates to North America, Britain and continental Western Europe and, therefore, a second set of questions is concerned with the differences between these areas. Has there been a difference in the timing of decentralisation? How has the political system and set of social values affected the scale and nature of change in the core? What policy lessons can be learned from each of these regions which might be of general benefit for city revitalisation?

It is often suggested that trends first appear in North America and are subsequently replicated in Europe. This may be partly because, being a wealthier region, certain trends, dependent on income, will inevitably appear in North America first, and partly because of the innovative nature of American society. However, it is unlikely that spatial patterns first visible in North America will be exactly replicated in Europe because of different political institutions and social values. Consequently, policy initiatives are likely to be different.

The book begins with a general review of the literature on the changing internal structure of large cities, which provides a context for the problems of the core. Chapter 2 examines the various planning approaches which have evolved over many years to deal with these problems, followed by Chapter 3 which contains a brief portrait of the eight case study cities. The succeeding chapters take the ideas and material of the first three and examine it in more detail

by themes. By using these themes in a comparative framework it is hoped to obtain greater insight into the processes of change affecting the urban core. Chapter 4 is concerned with the core as a residential area; Chapter 5 deals with employment in general. The two key economic activities of the core, retailing and offices, are examined in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7, whilst Chapter 8 is concerned with transport in the metropolis. These topics are then brought together again in the Conclusion which attempts to suggest how core areas may develop in the future and what policies should be applied.

The origins of the study lie in a request from the former Greater Manchester Council for a comparative study of conurbations focusing on these themes. Manchester is a classic city of the industrial period, and, like so many others, its core has suffered from the rundown of economic activities and the increasing poverty of a reduced population. Yet the Greater Manchester Council was committed, through its Structure Plan, to maintaining the core area and regenerating its economy. At the beginning of the 1980s this appeared a very difficult task. Was decline inevitable? Were its policies wrong? Had other cities found a solution to this problem? We were encouraged to look widely. Clearly our first task was to review the literature on cities in North America, Britain and continental Western Europe where similar problems could be expected to be found. Secondly we decided to make deeper studies of a selected number of cities. In North America we chose Baltimore and Pittsburgh, both examples of cities with core area problems which were widely praised for their innovative policies. In Britain, in addition to our home base in Manchester, we chose Birmingham and Glasgow, two other cities which had risen to prominence following the Industrial Revolution. In continental Europe we selected Lille and Lyon in France, and Hamburg in West Germany. Through these eight case studies we hoped to gain an understanding of the problems of the core and of the similarities and differences between the three regions.

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We are also grateful to numerous officials in the various departments and agencies in our case study cities who supplied us with information and gave of their time to discuss the problems of their cities. We alone are responsible for interpreting the data, but hope our work will be of interest to all those who assisted us. Chris Law was responsible for editing the book and was involved in the writing of many of the chapters. He was assisted by Keith Grime (Chapter 4), Tina Grundy (Chapter 6), John Tuppen (Chapter 7), and Martyn Senior (Chapter 8). We are grateful also to Marie Partington, Moira Armitt and Julie Jones for typing the book and to Christine Warr and Gustav Dobrzynski for drawing the figures.

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