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Viewpoint

On the waterfront: Neoliberal urbanism and the politics of public benefit

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to the empirical and conceptual challenges concerning public benefit. In an era of neoliberal urbanism the waterfront has become a focal point of planning intervention; however, this raises important political issues concerning the distributional consequences of redeveloping large tracts of derelict land and dilapidated property. The central line of inquiry concerns what benefits, for whom and where emerge on the waterfront under neoliberal urbanism? In grounding the empiricism we focus on the neoliberal planning of Belfast's waterfront through a detailed discussion of Laganside (1989–2007) and Titanic Quarter (2001–present). Despite major transformation in Belfast city centre and on the waterfront, plus the ongoing peace process, the imprints of volatile identity politics and severe social deprivation are entrenched in other areas of the city. Given this, Belfast provides a unique and instructive case to critically explore the socio-spatialities of public benefit in a neoliberalised, politicised and polarised urban landscape. More broadly our research talks to ongoing debates on the conceptual merit and practical utility of public benefit as a central organising principle for spatial planning.

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1. Introduction

In an earlier issue of this journal [Murphy and Fox-Rogers \(2015, p. 231\)](#) argued “a considerable proportion of the debate on the nature of the common good¹ in planning lacks empirical grounding”. More recently [Lennon \(2016, p. 3\)](#) reiterated an established point of disputation in terms of “how the public interest is and ought to be understood”. Here we respond to the empirical and conceptual challenges raised by these authors through a study of the politics of public benefit. In an era of neoliberal urbanism the waterfront has become a focal point of planning intervention; however, this raises important political issues concerning the distributional consequences of redeveloping large tracts of derelict land and dilapidated property. The central line of inquiry concerns what benefits, for whom and where emerge on the waterfront under neoliberal urbanism? To answer this, our paper is underpinned by two research questions. One, how is public benefit constructed, understood and measured by local stakeholders? Two, what types of public benefit exist, and who is the waterfront ultimately for? In grounding the empiricism we focus on the neoliberal planning of Belfast's waterfront through a detailed discussion of Laganside (1989–2007) and Titanic Quarter (2001–present). Despite major transformation in Belfast city centre and on the waterfront, plus the ongoing peace process, the imprints of volatile identity politics and severe social deprivation are

entrenched in other areas of the city. Given this, Belfast provides a unique and instructive case to critically explore the socio-spatialities of public benefit in a neoliberalised, politicised and polarised urban landscape. The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section synthesises the literatures on neoliberalism and public benefit to provide the theoretical framework; then we discuss the research method; sections four, five and six form the analytical body of the paper; the final section draws together the key conclusions and contribution to knowledge.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Neoliberal urbanism and public benefit

Scholars argue we live in an era where the political economy of neoliberal urbanism is hegemonic ([Brenner & Theodore, 2002](#); [Jessop, 2002](#); [Mayer & Künkel, 2012](#); [Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009, 2013](#)). Neoliberal tenets include market rationality, deregulation, privatisation, individualism, competitiveness, entrepreneurialism and enterprise ([Castree, 2010](#); [Harvey, 2005, 2006](#); [Peck, 2010](#); [Peck & Tickell, 2002, 2006](#)). Since the 1970s these ideas have become embedded in the politics and praxis of governments, institutions and organisations - at all levels of spatial governance - around the globe. For [Harvey \(2006, p. 145\)](#) neoliberalism “swept across the world like a vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment”. Similarly, [Massey \(2014\)](#) argued it impacts significantly on every aspect of our material and cognitive being to the extent that we (as citizens, workers, consumers) consent (consciously and unconsciously) to a neoliberal mode of thinking and behaving. Neoliberalism exhibits a variegated geography around

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E-mail addresses: p.boland@qub.ac.uk (P. Boland), jbronte02@qub.ac.uk (J. Bronte), j.muir@qub.ac.uk (J. Muir).¹ We prefer public benefit; synonyms include public interest, public good, community interest and community benefit.

the world (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010; Harvey, 2006; Peck et al., 2009). For example, across Europe there is no uniform pattern rather various stages of 'roll-back', 'roll-out' and 'roll-with-it' neoliberalism (Olesen, 2013; following Peck & Tickell, 2002, 2006). Given this, focus is on the 'process of neoliberalisation' capturing its political construction, geographical nuances and place contingencies; it is not a 'realisable condition' but a process of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2012; McGuirk, 2005; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2010).

Since 2008 commentators have debated whether "the free market project is on the ropes" (Peck et al., 2010, p. 94). Notwithstanding rapacious economic turbulence neoliberalism is an 'adaptive regime' (Brenner et al., 2010, 2012), and recent crisis management is 'furthering not dismantling' (Aalbers, 2013a, 2013b) and 'repairing not replacing' (Peck, 2010) neoliberal practice. There is "no serious unsettling of neoliberal ideological hegemony" (Massey, 2014, p. 2034), and so "recent diagnoses envisioning the end of neoliberalism are premature" (Hendrikse & Sidway, 2010, p. 2037). The neoliberal model has not radically changed because 'market fundamentalism' is very hard to displace (Peck et al., 2013; also Mayer & Künkel, 2012; Oosterlynck & Gonzalez, 2013). Neoliberal theory is, however, criticised for its 'exaggerated hegemony' (Featherstone, 2015), 'narrow debates' (Featherstone, Strauss, & MacKinnon, 2015), 'promiscuity' (Newman, 2014), 'reductivism' (Hall, 2011), 'imprecision and overuse' (Watkins, 2010). We accept neoliberalism is not a universal concept capturing the entirety of socio-spatial change; however, it has explanatory value in relation to a paradigmatic set of core ideas connecting to public benefit.

Under neoliberal urbanism there has been demonstrable change to perceptions of 'the public'. Massey (2014, p. 2036) referred to "the denigration of the notion of 'public'" where emphasis is on the right of the individual consumer for 'privatised urban space'. MacLeod (2011) states contemporary urban governance is about protecting a neoliberalised economy and privileging economic interests and consumerist citizenship over community interests. Similarly, Sager (2015, p. 290) queries "another step away from public-collective values to private-individualistic values". With regard to our focus, Lloyd (2006, p. 4) argues neoliberalism has led to the "erosion, dilution and labile nature of public benefit", while Campbell and Marshall (2000, p. 307) identify "the displacement of public interest by customer satisfaction". In terms of location Sager's (2015) study of Norway shows a neoliberalised planning system shifting the civic ethos of public benefit in favour of 'neoliberal business logic'. In the Republic of Ireland Murphy and Fox-Rogers (2015) question whether planners can properly achieve public benefit under neoliberalism. Across the border the planning system in Northern Ireland is becoming an accessory to neoliberal competitiveness and powerful pro-market interests, rather than achieving wider public benefit (Boland, 2014).

Public benefit occupies the minds of planning theorists (Alexander, 2002; Campbell & Marshall, 2012; Lennon, 2016; Lloyd, 2006; Mattila, 2016; Morini, 2004; Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015; Tait, 2011), plus urban scholars (Oakley, 2011; Sandercock & Dovey, 2002), human geographers (MacLeod, 2011; Massey, 2014) and political scientists (McGovern, 2008). One dimension to the debate is conceptual in terms of what it means and how we understand it; the other is empirical in relation to how it is measured and who actually benefits. Understanding and measuring public benefit is problematic. Over time the concept has become 'layered, atomised and contested' to the extent that "there is little, if any, consensus on what [it] constitutes" (Lloyd, 2006, p. 6); it is "a concept that has been increasingly contested in the latter half of the 20th Century" (Mattila, 2016, p. 2). Thus, there are questions over whether it is 'grounded in reality' and a 'valid or usable concept' (Alexander, 2002; Campbell & Marshall, 2000, 2012; Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015). The issue is a lack of conceptual rigour and empirical clarity leading to "questions as to how public interest is understood, framed, and justified" (Tait, 2011, p. 159). An 'inherent fuzziness' (Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015) feeds 'different interpretations' (Sandercock & Dovey, 2002); as such the concept becomes 'difficult to define and assert' (Lloyd, 2006) and can 'mystify

rather than clarify' (Campbell & Marshall, 2000, 2012). Despite these shortcomings "it is not so easy to abandon the concept...as sometimes seems to be the case in contemporary political and planning theory" (Morini, 2004, p. 163). Some sense of 'the public' and 'benefit/interest' is required, however challenging that might be (Campbell & Marshall, 2000, 2012).

Planning is "an activity whose *raison d'être* is delivering the public interest" (Lennon, 2016, p. 14). In the UK it is a 'core driver' of the planning system and ethical justification for the planning profession (RTPI, 2015). Setting this in a neoliberal context "the rhetoric of "delivery" drives the need for visible signs of change, often with minimal focus on who benefits from the change and whether it is desirable" (Campbell, Tait, & Watkins, 2014, p. 48). For example, in Northern Ireland the Planning Act (2011), Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS)² do not define public benefit nor specify who benefits. Given this, we adopt a definition from the Planning Practice Guidance³ of the National Planning Policy Framework for England:

"Public benefits may follow from many developments and could be anything that delivers economic, social or environmental progress as described in the National Planning Policy Framework...They should be of a nature or scale to be of benefit to the public at large".

Clearly, reference to 'anything' that brings 'benefit to the public at large' is very generalised. Such a definition allows those involved in spatial planning, urban regeneration and economic development to argue that what they have provided is intrinsically beneficial to local people. It covers a wide spectrum of outcomes and outputs that can represent public benefit: job creation, housing provision, public realm, green space, cultural attractions, land reclamation, building renovation, civic pride, image improvement and tourist numbers. Thereby encompassing significant definitional and measurement breadth. On this, Lloyd (2006, p. 4) opines "the villain of the piece is not the land use planning system...it is the lack of a clear understanding and articulation of the public interest to which it is working". Citing the 'public at large' is also problematic because there are different demographics (e.g. age, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class) that reside, work and socialise in any geographical area. Thus, spatially integrative concepts such as 'the public' and 'the community' are notoriously contestable (Raco, 2000; Staeheli, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Young, 2002), particularly for planners (Mattila, 2016; Tait, 2011). This is especially true in Belfast⁴ with its 'segregated society' (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006) and distinctive 'territorial politics' (Murtagh, 2002) characterised by 'antagonistic religio-political geographies' (Cunningham & Gregory, 2014), 'ethnic differences' and 'opposing nationalisms' (Boal, 2002). This politics of difference sustained 'the Troubles'⁵ that scarred the city for decades. More generally, the diverse and conflictual nature of modern society undermines the existence of a singular 'public at large' and the ontology of public benefit (Alexander, 2002; Morini, 2004). Different publics have different needs, interpretations and experiences of the economic, social and environmental aspects of public benefit. Moreover, there exist exclusionary factors such as the inability to access jobs, housing and consumption spaces; this is especially true on the waterfront.

² The Planning Act provides the legislative framework for planning in Northern Ireland; the SPPS is a "statement on important planning matters that should be addressed across Northern Ireland" (DoE, 2015, p. 6); the RDS "provides an overarching strategic planning framework to facilitate and guide the public and private sectors" (DRD, 2012, p. 10).

³ http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/guidance/conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/why-is-significance-important-in-decision-taking/#paragraph_020.

⁴ The 2011 Census shows Catholics represent 49% of the population, Protestants 42%. In broad terms Catholic/Nationalists see themselves as Irish, Protestant/Unionists are British. In working class areas housing, education and wider habituation are highly segregated by religion and national identity; this is less evident in middle class areas where there is more social mixing.

⁵ Ethno-sectarian violence conducted by Republican (e.g. IRA, INLA) and Loyalist (e.g. UDA, UVF) paramilitaries; the former seeking a united Irish Republic, the latter defending Northern Ireland's British status and loyalty to the Crown. During almost three decades of violence (1969–1998) over 3500 lives were lost.

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