

RE-UNDERSTANDING CBDs: A LANDSCAPE PERSPECTIVE.

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Abstract:

The CBD is an urban model which emerged from the 19th century capitalist United States and then was diffused to the rest of the Western world, supported by the functionalist architectural ideal and state-led urban planning. Its demise began in the United States from the first half of the 20th century and it was threatened in Europe by the reconfiguration of the neoliberal state. However, there was a resurgence of CBDs in global cities, where they are directly embedded in the flows of global financial capitalism, embodying the new topographies created by the urbanisation of global capital.

The planning of contemporary CBDs has been branded as a strategic tool to foster growth, but they have often been built in isolation from their local surroundings, leading to the development of two-tier cities, where inequalities are growing, reinforced by the neo-liberal approach to planning. CBDs have become a very profitable model for developers and a very efficient system for multinational corporations of the FIRE sector – central and linked to traditional powers, connected to fast communication networks, accessible worldwide. However, the risks and, for some, the innate unfairness of this model has been clearly highlighted by numerous critical approaches of the city. In this essay, we have tried to follow a common thread running through these studies and show how CBDs are at the forefront of the demise of public realm and public ownership of space. Through what their private owners allow and forbid, as well as through their “ambient qualities” they do not sustain a democratic experience of the city, or a common social and spatial project.

The photographic essay gives an account of the extent of these processes in the main “global cities” but it also displays some processes of *CBDisation* in secondary cities, especially in the European context. We have illustrated how the landscapes found in central areas of globalisation became a standard for the design of cities, large or small, central or standing on the margins of globalisation. Thus, the pictures show not only the branding of major cities around the urban forms produced within the CBD but also how some distinctive features of the contemporary CBD, such as iconic architecture or tall buildings, are instrumented by secondary or minor cities to convey images of urban dynamism. In doing so, those distinctive features act as powerful cultural norms on the production of the current built environment.

Le CBD est un modèle urbain qui a émergé à partir du 19ème siècle et s'est diffusé depuis les villes Nord-Américaines dans le reste du monde Occidental, soutenu par l'architecture et l'urbanisme fonctionnaliste et l'urbanisme de l'Etat centraliste. Son déclin a commencé dans la première moitié du 20ème siècle aux Etats-Unis, alors qu'en Europe, il fut provoqué par la reconfiguration de l'Etat, dans sa forme néolibérale. Cependant, nous avons assisté à une résurgence du CBD dans les villes globales, où ces quartiers s'inscrivent dans les dynamiques de

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circulation du capitalisme financier globalisé, figurant de nouvelles topographies et paysages de l'urbanisation de ces capitaux.

L'aménagement des CBDs contemporains a été publicisée comme un outil stratégique pour stimuler la croissance économique, mais au prix d'un isolement morphologique des quartiers adjacents, amenant à la création de villes duales, où les inégalités s'intensifient, accentuées par une approche néolibérale de l'aménagement. Les CBDs sont devenus des modèles très profitables pour les promoteurs immobiliers et des systèmes très efficaces pour les firmes multinationales du secteur des FIRE (finance, immobilier, assurance).

Dans cet article, nous avons essayé de suivre un fil conducteur commun aux différentes publications relatives à ce sujet et de montrer comment les CBDs sont à l'avant-poste de la disparition de l'espace public et de son appropriation collective. A travers l'étude de ce que les propriétaires privés autorisent et interdisent, mais également à travers les "ambiances" qu'ils créent ces espaces ne permettent plus une expérience démocratique de la ville ou un projet socio-spatial commun.

L'essai photographique rend compte de l'extension de ces projets dans les principales "villes mondiales" mais montre également des exemples de CBDisation dans des villes secondaires, en particulier en Europe. Il illustrent comment les paysages construits dans les centres urbains de la mondialisation contemporaine sont devenus un standard pour la conception des villes, y compris des villes moyennes situées en périphéries des dynamiques du capitalisme globalisé. Ainsi, les photographies montrent à la fois la reconstruction identitaire des principaux centres urbains autour des formes urbaines propres aux CBDs et comment certains traits distinctifs de ce CBD contemporain, comme l'architecture iconique et les tours sont instrumentalisés par ces centres urbains secondaires ou mineurs pour transmettre une image de dynamisme urbain. Ce faisant, ces traits distinctifs agissent comme des normes culturelles puissantes pesant sur l'actuelle production de l'environnement urbain.

The central theme chosen for the festival was Central Business Districts, *i.e.* the unique area of massive concentration of activities and focus for the polarization of capital, economic and financial activities in cities. Writers have analysed these areas, also known as downtown or financial districts, in various ways. Its growth and delimitation have been studied by economic geographers such as R. Murphy and J. Vance (1954) whereas J. Goddard (1968) analysed the spatial organisation of the City of London. At the metropolitan level, urban historians (Jackson 1985; Fogelson 2001) assessed the competition between territories in urban America, stressing the importance of power relations between the downtown area and the suburbs, which gained more and more economic autonomy from the 1920s.

Being new landscapes of power³, CBDs embody the capital accumulation which took place in American city centres during the Industrial Revolution. Then, the American downtown area started to decline in favour of a polycentric landscape of economic accumulation embedded in the Los Angeles model, where the CBD became more diffused. However, globalization of

³“In the new era of capital reinvestment in the center, downtown emerges as a key luminal space. Institutionally, its redevelopment straddles public and private power. Visually, the redevelopment process eliminates or incorporates the segmented vernacular into a landscape of power” (Zukin 1991, 95).

financial businesses resulted in a rejuvenation of central business districts in global cities from the 1980s. It provided the opportunity for many researchers to examine the changes brought about by globalization in central areas of cities. Subsequently, S. Sassen (2008) challenged the landscape dichotomy inherited from the models of LA and Chicago and made the case for “reassembling the urban” through “repositioning both area-specific constraints and visual orders as intermediary variables”; in other words, she invites the reader to assess critically those dispersed and agglomerated urban environments through the study of the underlying economic dynamics which produce and support them.

Drawing on this stimulating approach, this paper and photographic essay attempt to assess the legibility of the contemporary central business district and the extent of its homogenisation. The purpose of the essay is to underscore some visual and social features of those unusual spaces in different global and not-so global cities. This paper also intends to investigate the current evolutions of CBDs which raise issues about how the contemporary city is developed along with its opaque understanding of who is eligible to experience it. In particular, it addresses the processes of displacement caused by the expansion or the creation of CBDs, the transformation of public space in European CBDs and what we have identified as a process of *cbdisation* in secondary cities and peripheral areas.

Planned and unplanned: a retro-manifesto for the CBD?

The origins of the CBD? Central Business Districts are now a very common feature of many metropolises throughout the world. It has developed rapidly over the last twenty years, and cities have witnessed a significant number of new business districts being built. Originating in industrial America, it is often associated with the generic space of the American downtown: a place which was first a business district, “highly compact, extremely concentrated, largely depopulated” (Fogelston, 2001) and valued at peak prices. This area attracted most of the American urban population either for work, shopping or entertainment.

What about Europe? After the Second World War, Central Business Districts became an essential feature of planning in many European cities. Modernist principles with the separation of functions in urban planning became highly influential. Contrary to its American equivalent, European CBDs were strongly supported by the central state, at a time when state-led

development of capital cities was common in Europe. *La Défense*, on the outskirts of Paris, is a significant example of this process: a state-of-the-art planned business district or “quartier d’affaires”. It was built in great respect of modernist architecture and functionalist urban planning: concrete *dalles* for pedestrian routes, concrete buildings to accommodate different state administrations, and a certain sense of monumentality through the staging of the *Grande Arche* which echoes the *Arc de Triomphe*.

The literature about the history of this district appears most of the time to be focused on the institutional framework and its evolution, or highlights the technical aspects of this bold modernist statement. However, the evaluation of the central state policies regarding the dwellers around *La Défense* tells a different story. As J. Gardin (2006) mentions it in its study of the western margins of the Parisian metropolis, the central state considered the slums of Nanterre useful as long as they were fostering the workers who were actually building *La Défense*. But when the National Liberation Front of Algeria, from where the majority of the residents of the slum originated, started to organise politically the slum-dwellers, a process that led to the demonstration of 1961. Not only did the state think of their relocation all over the metropolis and cleared the slums to provide better housing conditions to a population it had barely given attention so far, but it also helped to control and break the political links that emerged in these places.

What makes the CBD central? The Centrality of CBDs has resulted in the concentration of capital -economic, human and social- shaped by transports systems. This centrality has been the result of market forces and the play of political power. Without the huge amounts of public money poured into infrastructure development, areas such as Canary Wharf or *La Défense* could not have developed in the way they did. Another example of the role of political power in creating centrality to foster the growth of service industries within a purpose-built area is that of Stockholm, where political powers in place rebuilt the existing centre to make room for a CBD. The City Plan of 1946 brought about a time of extensive demolition of the inner city to increase vehicular traffic and helped the construction of the city subway, sparking a wave of protests among local residents who opposed the destruction of the existing local communities. Following the theoretical framework suggested by D. Harvey (1985), we can see these investments in urban infrastructure as both contemporary instances of a Keynesian system of debt-financed

infrastructural urban improvements and part of a strategy for infrastructure development required under the contemporary coercive regime of urban competition.

From the 1980s and onwards: CBDs in the global era of financial capitalism

Having been the result of a set of state-driven planning actions in Europe, CBDs in North America followed a different path after the Second World War. Challenged by the growth of edge cities, urban sprawl and a new spatial organization of urban labour markets within city regions (Scott 2001; Dear 2002), central CBDs declined between the Second World War and 1980s. The urban model *à la* Chicago was seen as specific to the growth of the centres of industrial America whereas the dispersed LA model was identified as the spatial outcome of the growth of services and knowledge-based economies.

Following the successive financial market deregulation policies, the growth of financial services, from the late 1970s led to the expansion of their spatial footprint within urban central areas during the 1980s. Various studies have shown the importance of proximity and networking in the exercise of these types of activity⁴; consequently, they tend to organise in spatial clusters. In this process of expansion of clustered financial activities, CBDs became central again. How did this process affect urban fabrics? The financial integration led to the expansion of FIRE (finance/insurance/real estate) industries in CBDs, either in purpose built developments such as Canary Wharf or the *Chamartin* area in Madrid, or historical financial, commercial or administrative districts rebuilt around those activities, such as the City in London⁵, the *Triangle d'or* in Paris or *La Défense*.

Securitization of debt and availability of capital over the last thirty years has led to massive investment in the built environment, described as “the urbanization of capital” by D. Harvey (1985), who developed H. Lefebvre’s theme of the “secondary circuit of capital”. According to D. Harvey, surplus of capital produced in the primary circuit of commodity production flows into the built environment. Therefore, investment in the built environment is undertaken not only

⁴ On the patterns of communication among elite bankers in the City of London and the importance of face-to-face meetings, formal and informal, in the circulation of information, see Aeron Davis, “Media effects and the active elite audience: a study of communications in the London stock exchange, *European Journal of communication*, 2005, 20(3), pp. 303-326.

⁵For a detailed account of the impact of the development of finance on the urban environment, see Budd and Whimster (1992) and Fainstein (2001)

for use-value reasons, but also for purely financial reasons. In this context, CBDs and their expanding office markets become a financial product. The predictable outcome of this evolution was a series of booms and busts since the 1980s resulting in a more volatile real estate market. Competition to service the world economy resulted in investment in global infrastructures to deal with material and immaterial flows of goods and services and allow capitalism to physically expand. Singapore epitomizes this association, acting as a node for both global finance and Asian financial flows – the island has three CBDs - and being one of the main hubs for container traffic.

CBDs and their urban context

Linkages?

In the first three global cities, CBDs are the heart of the working metropolis⁶. Shinjuku station, in Tokyo, is the busiest transport node in the world, where 500 000 commuters meet every day. In London, coming from the whole South-East region, 300 000 people commute on a daily basis to reach their workplace in the City, and this commuting population is growing, despite criticism coming from architects, planners and environmentalists who have shown the unsustainability of this pattern. Recent economic and demographic trends in Central London contrast sharply with the assumption of a dispersal of economic activities in the wider metropolitan region, even if we have witnessed over the last decades a process of decentralization of administrative procedures carried out to produce financial and business services. Therefore, although routine occupations have been decentralised to peripheral areas, concentration and clustering of top-level headquarters functions increased in many CBDs. S. Sassen (2008), among others, examined how “the evidence shows that globalized firms and sectors contain both agglomeration and dispersal moments in their spatial organization”, leading to an increase in the spatial concentration of certain activities in the CBD. As a result, even if we might agree with the claim that “we need a radical change from the assumptions on which the architecture of cities in the nineteenth and

⁶ To visualize commuting pattern to Wall Street in NY see: http://hairycow.name/commute_map/map.html#to:10005 [28 February 2011]. Manhattan’s CBD is still the heart of the working metropolis. In this case, 45% of the working population of the metropolitan area is located within 3 miles of its CBD.

twentieth century was based”⁷, we also need to bear in mind the current processes of agglomeration within CBDs and the built-up environment they produce.

Exclusion/replacement/displacement

Promoting international and then globalized corporate architectural style, these districts are often built without any sensitivity to the local architectural context. The *Chamartin* area, in the north of Madrid, is a prime example of this process. It fosters four new towers designed by architects of international fame, which echoes the style found in the two London financial districts⁸. But looking at CBDs from their margins, we can experience the stark contrast to their surroundings. The area of Spitalfields epitomizes this juxtaposition and the threat of the expansion of the CBD, especially if we bear in mind the future development of Crossrail and its consequences on the local urban, social and economic fabric. In this case, the arguments presented by the various groups heard during the campaign against the construction of Whitechapel station⁹ provide the basis for realizing how the local social networks built in marginalized areas are directly threatened when these areas are (re)connected to more strategic places; in other words, when exchange value outstrips use value. The building of this major infrastructure may eventually lead to the redevelopment of the sites surrounding the station and might bring about a new Docklands-like area, or at least, a new urban environment of built-in gentrification, something similar to what could be found in the redevelopment of the banks of the Thames, studied by Loretta Lees (2005).

The eviction of local communities caused by the expansion of the CBD is a controversial issue. The case of *La Défense* has proved emblematic in the last few years. Until recently, Paris second business district, located on the margins of the historical centre, was a relatively and a unusually

⁷This claim was made by the former head of the architecture firm DEGW, one of the main designers and thinkers of office space in CBDs. http://www.urban-age.net/10_cities/01_newYork/quotes/newYork_LM+WP_quotes.html [28 February 2011]. It was made on the assumption that “co-location and synchrony no longer correspond with the realities of these [global] businesses”, which is only partially true when we consider the current dynamics of agglomeration within CBDs.

⁸ Indeed, the City of London has consecrated a new local style from the 1980s that went global and became extremely influential: the corporate high-tech style, which is made of apparent structures, something that might be seen as metaphor for the role of the buildings as local infrastructures connected to the hyperspace of globalised capitalism.

⁹For a detailed account of the consequences of the new station see the audition of petitioners against the project, which can be read at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmcross/235/6012401.htm> [28 February 2011].

mixed CBD, boasting 180,000 workers with no less than 20,000 inhabitants, housed in both private et socially rented accommodations. The area, like many others in Inner Paris (Clerval, 2008), had experienced gentrification led by young professionals working in other parts of the capital, but social housing maintained a relatively diverse population. However, the recent inclination of the authority responsible for planning in *La Défense* (EPADESA) to revitalise the business district leads to a strategic revision of local land uses. The *Plan de Relance 2015*, based on the restructuring of existing towers and the redevelopment of prime sites to provide 4,7 million square feet of office space was launched with fanfare by Nicolas Sarkozy and political figures from EPADESA in 2005. Among the numerous skyscraper projects, one of the most iconic is the Foster designed Hermitage Towers, two twin high-rises to be built on the site of 250 socially rented homes. The project is highly controversial on two grounds: firstly, luxury housing and hotel rooms will replace accommodations for low income households and secondly, these very people are in the process of being displaced in other part of town. This is exemplifying a renewed planning and political tradition of the area where national ambitions are overarching local needs and conditions. On the opposite, in Brussels, the creation of a new CBD, around international political activities, did not lead to a massive eviction of the local residential population. In fact, M. Van Criekingem (2009) has shown how the gentrification and displacement happening in the inner city of Brussels was driven by young single professionals rather than members of the international elite working in the European District who rather reside in the old South bourgeois neighbourhoods. .

New spaces of consumption and the transformation of publicness

In Europe, the trend is now to encourage the diversification of CBDs, mainly with commercial and recreational functions. European CBDs are therefore not only spaces dedicated to work but also spaces of consumption. In *La Défense*, the CNIT, one of the landmark buildings which had been built during the first phase of the project to be an exhibition space for the French industry, was recently turned into a shopping mall, when the Parisian CBD was being rebranded as a “commercial district”. In Berlin, Potsdamer Platz has been hugely transformed around the Sony Centre and the commercial area of the *Arkaden*.

The accessibility and uses of open spaces in the metropolis has been an enduring issue of contemporary critical thought about cities. In this context, the redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz

in Berlin triggered a debate in Europe about the status of these kinds of new collective spaces and their degree of “publicness”. R. Sennett coined the expression “dead public space” (1974) after the study of street level plazas, a recurring feature of twentieth-century CBDs. This feature characterizes an ideal of efficiency within CBDs where public spaces are merely places to go through. Since the 1990s, the subject was elaborated by several studies on the politics of exclusion in public space (Mitchell 1995), its privatization and the intrusion of the market into the public realm (Davis 1990). The process of excluding some parts of the public can be obvious, through fences, barriers and doors, which are the physical signs of privatization and urban closure. But it acts as well in a more subtle manner. Space can be physically open but privately managed through specific rules and procedures which exclude certain practices. This subset of rules constrains collective behaviour in a more restrictive way than the laws framing the use of publicly owned spaces. Gatherings for protests and demonstrations, for example, are restricted¹⁰.

Moreover, as mentioned in the case of plazas by R. Sennett, architecture and planning can strongly induce distinctive uses of space. Drawing on the specific example of the Sony Centre, which stands on Potsdamer Platz, J. Allen (2006) explores the way exclusion is produced “not through electronic surveillance technologies or some rule-bound logic imposed from above, but through the *experience* of the space itself, through its *ambient* qualities”. He goes on to describe how, through the organisation of the open public space, its staging, the views it offers, planners and developers are shaping a public space that includes the part of the public that uses it for shopping and entertainment, as much as it excludes the rest of the public, which is denied any sense of ownership: “power works in less than obvious way, through a logic of inclusion rather than exclusion”.

Architectural stereotypes: mimicking the CBD and the process of CBDisation of urban places

One of the main features of the contemporary evolution of the built environment of the CBDs is the trend that has been called “iconic architecture”. Iconicity is defined as the characteristic

¹⁰ For a recent account of what is allowed in open and public space in London, see Dolan Cummings, “How public is public space”, *Blueprint*, 2009, 281, pp.44-52. The recent “protesting tour” of Tower Hamlets Uncut in Canary Wharf demonstrates that gathering for political purpose within the CBD is not forbidden within this area, but very closely supervised by the Police. Along with the case of the G20 protests, the example shows how the issue around public space in CBDs is twofold: first, we need to assess the extent to which the right to publicly show your discontent is allowed in these areas and second, there is a case for assessing the way those protesting marches are policed and how policing techniques such as “kettling” are a way to limit the right to demonstrate.

attributed to some buildings that are “both famous and have symbolic/aesthetic significance for those in and around architecture and/or some sections of the general public” (Sklair 2005).

Until the second part of the twentieth century iconicity¹¹ was, apart from the specific case of the United-States, related to civic and religious buildings, “largely driven by those who controlled the state or religion (often together)” (Sklair, 2005). From the end of the 19th century, although the creation of architectural icons was not restricted to central areas of CBDs and happened to be designed in various contexts, iconic high-rises are often to be found in the CBDs landscapes, first in America, then in Europe, culminating with the *Gherkin*, one of the most cited examples of iconic buildings. In the global era, as L. Sklair (2005) puts it, “iconic architecture tends to be driven by the transnational capitalist class in the corporate interest and much more in the context of the culture-ideology of consumerism than was previously the case”.

Cities are branding or re-branding themselves through iconic high rise architecture. This trend has been instrumented during the last ten years by city marketers, be they developers, planners, architects, or politicians to advertise promote of dynamism and change in cities. A visual companion to the global city rhetoric, this architecture has been widely supported in some cities, London being one of the most striking examples.

As Gutman (1988), quoted by Sklair (2005) illustrates, the commodification of architectural culture, of which the starchitect is a facet, is an important factor in extending the public of these architectural operations of mass communication:

“By the late 1980s, 25–30 museums in the US had important architectural collections, major publishers like MIT Press, Rizzoli and Princeton had expanding architectural programmes, and there were other manifestations of the commodification of architecture and architects...As Gutman concludes: ‘There has been a tremendous expansion in opportunities to consume architectural culture over the last few decades’ (1988: 93).”

This trend has been picked up by cities around the world, including secondary economical centres. We have noticed a process of *CBDisation* through architectural gimmicks echoing contemporary corporate architecture. The cases of Liverpool and Barcelona are very significant.

¹¹ This part is greatly indebted to the work of Leslie Sklair (2005, 2006) whose research focused on the relations between iconic architecture, globalisation and the emergence of the transnational capitalist class.

In Liverpool, the city has tried to rebuild its business centre around new office-like buildings. But they are actually residential developments that convey a rather different message than local business renewal: the West Tower developer delivered the project just before the property bubble burst in 2008 and has since struggled to sell the 123 flats of this 40-storey tower- Liverpool's tallest building. In Barcelona, local authorities are attempting to boost economic growth on the fringes of the metropolis, in the district of Porta Fira, l'Hospitalet de Llobregat, a former industrial district. In this case, the architecture the local authorities have encouraged directly draws on the architecture of the iconic high-rise building of the contemporary CBD in a rather striking contrast and a deliberate opposition to the local built environment.

Conclusion

The CBD is an urban model which emerged from the 19th century capitalist United States and then was diffused to the rest of the Western world, supported by the functionalist architectural ideal and state-led urban planning. Its demise began in the United States from the first half of the 20th century and it was threatened in Europe by the reconfiguration of the neoliberal state. However, there was a resurgence of CBDs in global cities, where they are directly embedded in the flows of global financial capitalism, embodying the new topographies created by the urbanisation of global capital.

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