

URBAN HISTORY GROUP MEETING

University of Reading 30-31 March 2006

Risks, Hazards and Urban Renewal: 1666-2000

By concentrating people and functions in specific places, cities create particular types of context in which risk is defined and "hazards" occur. The uncertainties of life arising from both extreme events, such as fires, floods, earthquakes or war, coupled with the ongoing risks associated with concentrations of population, such as disease, traffic, and pollution, are focussed and concentrated in urban places. Responses vary widely, depending on political, social, cultural, economic and environmental conditions, and differ depending on the relative strengths of collective and individual responses. Understanding how renewal takes place is central to an awareness of the specific issues raised by concentrated urban living and the nature of hazards and managing risks is part of that process.

What do we mean by "urban renewal" and should we term this "urban replacement" since it often reproduces the errors of one age on a larger scale in a subsequent era? Taking the long view of towns and cities can we talk of specific types of "urban" renewal? How is this understanding related to concepts of modernity and enlightenment? In the context of endemic urban poverty and social malaise, broken communities, housing projects with in-built obsolescence and high rates of physical and mental disease, is urban "renewal" itself a useful concept?

Some issues that the conference will consider include:

- What are the different types of risk inherent in urban life – fires, wars, earthquakes, flooding, pollution, epidemics and crime? How have those risks been interpreted and defined?
- Does the nature of disaster affect the character of redevelopment?
- What have the effects of renewal been on different urban communities over time? What evidence is there of its social, cultural, political and/or psychological impact? Are urban problems resolved by "renewal" or just moved on, like the residents?
- What examples are there of urban renewal as the result of grassroots or community initiatives?
- What political and institutional structures and arrangements have been created to deal with risks and counteract the hazards?
- How have renewal programmes been projected or 'marketed' politically? How has popular support been mobilised?
- How far has urban renewal been a result of social conflict and violence?
- What kinds of images and metaphors have been employed to understand hazards and learn about risks.
- How far is it possible to discern specific historical cycles of urban decline and renewal within or across societies? What is the historical relationship between urban renewal and economic regeneration?

The Urban History Group (UHG) conference committee seeks 1 page proposals on these and other themes related to the topic. The UHG has a record of encouraging comparative papers - thematically, chronologically, and geographically. Non-British perspectives are encouraged, as are papers that focus on the pre-1800 period and papers that straddle the early modern and modern. It is intended that the programme should have a strong international representation, and the UHG has consciously involved graduate students in the conference programme with modest contributions to travel expenses.

Please submit 1 page proposals by 1 December:

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