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Citation: Pugalis, Lee (2010) From renaissance to recession: maintaining urban quality. Urban Design Forum Quarterly, 89 (March). ISSN 0898-5049

Published by: American Planning Association

URL: <http://udf.org.au/udf-quarterly/udfq-89-march-2010...> <<http://udf.org.au/udf-quarterly/udfq-89-march-2010/article/from-renaissance-to-recession-maintaining-urban-quality/>>

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From renaissance to recession: maintaining urban quality

Paper should be cited as:

Pugalis, L. (2010) 'From renaissance to recession: maintaining urban quality', *Urban Design Forum Quarterly*, 89, March.

Drawing on evidence and experience from the UK, I present the case that *quality counts* in times of recession as well as times of renaissance. My brief foray into changing UK regeneration practice is intended to highlight some important lessons applicable in other development contexts, including parts of Australasia. Commencing with a swift review of the UK's urban renaissance agenda since New Labour came into power in 1997, I go on to examine the changing nature of renaissance programmes brought about by the infamous 'credit crunch'; questioning the wisdom of *cuts in urban quality*.

The Urban Task Force and the UK's urban renaissance agenda

As Tony Blair's New Labour gained national political control in 1997 they quickly set about reconstituting the Conservative's urban policy framework by implementing an urban strategy with a spatial focus on deteriorating city centres. Such political imperatives were supported by an Urban Task Force chaired by the internationally renowned architect Lord Richard Rogers. The Task Force published the landmark document; *Towards an Urban Renaissance* in 1999, which proposed over 100 recommendations to improve the future sustainability of urban spaces, and thus enhance quality of life.

Design-led regeneration

Whilst many of the Task Force's recommendations are yet to see the light of day, their quality counts stance espoused through design-led regeneration has had a

noticeable impact on the design and production of UK cities and city spaces, including:

- 'Brownfield' site redevelopments and urban densification
- Public realm and streetscape enhancements
- Provision of new urban public spaces
- The repopulating of city centres with residents, tourists and consumers
- Public transport and infrastructure investment
- Leveraging greater amounts of private capital
- Iconic development and mixed-use schemes

Many Northern – former industrial – cities provide tangible 'evidence' of such an urban renaissance, or at least in the case of their public facing city centres, gateway sites and other choice places. Notable examples include Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle.



Renaissance of Newcastle's Quayside

Yet such renaissance has taken place in the ‘good times’; riding on the cusp of urban prosperity and macroeconomic stability. During the good times, developers, investors and speculators, cherry-picked the best sites to regenerate, which are now hailed as beacons that an urban renaissance was delivered.

From renaissance to recession

Since late 2007 – with what began as a local phenomenon in the US sub-prime mortgage market – the credit crunch has impacted the *real* economy on a global scale. The UK has been in the grips of its worst recession since 1921, resulting in a whole host of socio-economic ramifications, including rising unemployment and homelessness, fuel poverty and significant business closures.

As it stands now the good times of urban renaissance are a distant memory. The pre-1997 highly-g geared regeneration model has been shattered with development viability called into question. Consequently, risks are now higher and returns reduced. This is impacting on the ability to complete current projects, to realise projects in the pipeline and to bring forward new schemes.



A mothballed housing development scheme

With many renaissance project now 'mothballed' for the foreseeable future and those presently being brought forward looking to cut costs wherever possible, there is an impending danger that the quality counts mantra – which recognises the value of design – is replaced by a short-term view that equates lower costs with higher profits.

Maintaining urban quality

Despite raising the design bar over the past decade and the steady progress made in educating different communities of practice that urban quality and good design makes commercial sense, the prevailing outlook in recessionary times risks undoing such progress. As built-environment consultants and public sector officials face redundancies alike, together with the complete dismantling of regeneration bodies and departments in the most extreme circumstances, there is a distinct possibility that design skills lost now will not be replaced once the good times return. The loss of skills refined over many years of practice could have severe repercussions for the design of cities over the next decade. I therefore end with the clarion call that whilst urban quality is not easily counted or quantified, it surely counts.