Assessing the discourses and practices of urban regeneration in a growing region

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Abstract

Most research on the discourses and practices of urban regeneration in the UK has examined case studies located in areas of relative socio-economic distress. Less research has been undertaken on regeneration projects and agendas in areas characterised by strong economic growth. Yet, it is in such places that some of the best examples of the discourses, practices and impacts of contemporary urban regeneration can be found. In some areas of high demand regeneration projects have used inner urban brownfield sites as locations for new investment. With the New Labour government's urban policy agendas targeting similar forms of regeneration, an examination of completed or on-going schemes is timely and relevant to debates over the direction that policy should take. This paper, drawing on a study of urban regeneration in one of England's fastest growing towns, Reading in Berkshire, examines the discourses, practices and impacts of redevelopment schemes during the 1990s and 2000s. Reading's experiences have received national attention and have been hailed as a model for other urban areas to follow. The research documents the discursive and concrete aspects of local regeneration and examines the ways in which specific priorities and defined problems have come to dominate agendas. Collectively, the study argues that market-driven objectives come to dominate regeneration agendas, even in areas of strong demand where development agencies wield a relatively high degree of influence. Such regeneration plays a symbolic and practical role in creating new forms of exclusion and interpretations of place.
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1. Introduction

Most research on the politics and practices of urban regeneration has concentrated on the experiences of deprived urban areas. The focus has often been on the redevelopment of estates, urban centres and dockland sites in contexts of local and regional socio-economic decline. Regeneration strategies are often criticised for failing to tackle the structural socio-economic problems of places. Their impacts tend to be relatively modest and a broad range of studies have pointed to their symbolic and political, rather than economic and material significance in many places (see for example, Eisenschitz and Gough, 1998; Turok, 1999). As Cochrane (1999) suggests, regeneration policy in the UK has often failed

in its own terms, so much so that new policies are often premised on the recognition that previous programmes would have failed. However, there have been relatively few studies which have focused on the discourses and practices of urban regeneration in areas of affluence and high demand. In such regions the balance between developers and planning authorities may be tipped towards the latter. This may provide regeneration agencies with opportunities to influence and shape regeneration agendas and programmes in a variety of ways not available to similar agencies operating in less buoyant regions. The discourses and practices of regeneration vary significantly in different places, reflecting the unequal distribution of growth, opportunities and place potential. Policy makers may adopt different imaginations and strategies of development to suit local circumstances. At the same time places are increasingly being encouraged to develop local solutions to local problems in the absence of broader macro-economic

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re-distributive regional policy frameworks, so that the significance of place politics and local strategies of re-generation is enhanced (Amin and Thrift, 1995; Turok, 1999).

This paper, drawing on a study of regeneration practices and discourses in Reading, Berkshire, presents evidence of the ways in which urban regeneration objectives and projects are established, constructed and developed in areas of relative socio-economic affluence. Reading provides a salient example of a place which has been transformed by new investments in the 1990s. Its regeneration efforts have been hailed as one of the finest examples of inner urban regeneration in the UK—exemplifying the potential of brownfield, centrally located development as outlined in the Labour government's White Paper for the Inner Cities (see The Guardian, 2000a; DETR, 2000). This paper explores two interrelated dimensions of local regeneration discourses and practices. First, it examines the construction of new place identities that have been developed in the town and the use and adoption of discourses and metaphors to construct particular, selective imaginations of place. Second, it interrogates the nature of regime formation in an area characterised by strong regional and local economic development.

The research suggests that local politics has become dominated by public sector agencies intent on promoting particular forms of middle class, consumption-based regeneration in an effort to take advantage of service-led investment opportunities and Reading's location in the broader South-east/UK economy. Discourses of sustainability and inclusion have been marginalised as growth becomes both the means and the ends of policy. Growth and investment are seen as sources of strength in an increasingly fierce climate of competition between places for hierarchical status and prestige.

Yet this market orientation has a price for local residents and businesses. As costs of living have rapidly increased, so more and more low paid workers and even those on moderate incomes face deeper exclusion from circuits of consumption such as housing. The paper concludes that local agencies and agendas play a key role in reflecting and reproducing particular forms of growth. In the absence of strong regional and national (re-distributive) planning frameworks, the inequalities and 'deep' exclusion perpetuated by this type of development may grow further, thereby undermining New Labour's broader political objective of enhancing urban development and social inclusion. The next section begins by discussing the significance of place-building and discourse construction in urban regeneration schemes. This is followed by a section which examines the practices of regeneration, which a particular focus on partnerships, regimes and networks of institutional action.

2. Place-building and urban regeneration: the links between places, spaces and economic development strategies

2.1. Place-building, image construction and regeneration

One key element in both reflecting and (re)producing the increasingly unequal social and economic geographies of the UK is the form and nature of *discourses of development* operating over a variety of scales. The labelling and defining of places as 'hot spots' or 'old industrial districts' instils particular *imaginary geographies* into popular consciousness so that, as Shields (1991) argues, places are ranked relative to each other in terms of positional superiority. Places jockey for position within wider league tables of indicators which highlight their success or failure in limited, specific comparisons so that for local policy makers (re)constructing discourses and perceptions of places becomes a key element in developing local development strategies (Paddison, 1993). The heightened significance of place images has occurred as a consequence of changing modes of accumulation. There is a growing detachment of urban areas from sites of industrial production and an associated growth in the significance of places as sites of consumption (see Lash and Urry, 1994; Jameson, 2000). Characterisations of the 'success' or 'failure' of places plays a central role in shaping the patterns of future rounds of investment and disinvestment, thereby perpetuating and exacerbating existing inequalities (Massey, 1995; Hudson, 2000).

As a consequence of these broader trends, place-building has become an increasingly important element in creating and establishing new discourses and practices of urban regeneration. Places are socially constructed, or in Shields' (1991, p. 18) terms, represent 'particular imagined spaces consisting of everyday actions, institutions, policies and political arrangements linked by discursive and non-discursive elements, practices and processes'. New forms of economic development are, therefore, increasingly dependent on the promotion of discourses of place, not only as centres of production but as centres of consumption (Allen et al., 1998, p. 72) As a consequence, places put greater emphasis on selling themselves as centres of success in the knowledge that attracting further, cumulative, investment will be made all the easier. Conversely, places with negative or declining images may find it increasingly difficult to attract desperately needed investment (Kearns and Paddison, 2000). In British urban areas it is flagship leisure and consumer developments that have played this key role, acting as 'trophies' for particular places and providing explicit links between the 'cultural value of architecture and the economic value of land and buildings' (Zukin, 1995, p. 45). They become 'liminal spaces', between the worlds of production and consumption, where populations can engage with various forms of consumption and

identify them with the 'success' and growth of particular places.

Rebuilding places in this way requires the (re)construction of discourses and imaginations of place. There is a dialectical relationship between the mobilisation of new imaginations of place and the urban forms which are designed to reflect and perpetuate these images and perceptions. In an effort to promote new market-driven agendas particular metaphors and discourses are used to (re)shape imaginations. In Wilson's (1996) terms, growth discourses and metaphors create new norms and meanings which legitimate particular forms of place-building and the selective re-interpretation of regeneration agendas. In his work on US cities, Wilson documents the ways in which market-oriented discourses have been used to underpin regeneration programmes. The 'success' of the place has been elided with its market 'success' and competitive metaphors are deployed to reinforce this message. Thus, places must avoid 'drifting' or becoming 'urban backwaters'. They must be competitive otherwise they will be disadvantaged when future rounds of investment and growth are made. Such language shapes the contours of local policies as the focus on market-driven forms of development marginalises alternative discourses, such as the promotion of social or environmental objectives. As places increasingly compete in real or imagined hierarchies, political discourses become couched in dualistic, marketised terms. Places either 'sink or swim', 'succeed or fail' or become 'winners or losers'.

These discourses have significant material effects on people and places. The consumption-driven, middle-class developments that underpin many urban redevelopment strategies bring new forms of inequality. In places that have experienced strong economic growth, exclusion can take on hidden and deeper forms. Whilst the problems faced by populations in major urban areas, such as Merseyside, Tyneside and Strathclyde are widely cited in academic and political discourses, the impacts on excluded communities in other areas, such as those in South-east England, which have experienced rapid development, are less frequently addressed. As Rose (2000) argues, marginalisation in modern societies takes on complex forms. Traditionally forms of inclusion and exclusion have been linked to an individual's (or community's) position within broader relations of production, primarily through paid employment. Social and economic changes mean that whilst such employment is still critical, forms of exclusion have become much more closely linked to circuits of consumption. Particular groups and individuals are denied access to certain markets and opportunities due to their lack of market power. In areas of economic growth, these new forms of exclusion are often at their most pervasive. Inadequate provision of affordable housing, increasing costs of living and worsening congestion combine to trap communities of lower paid and domestic workers in particular areas (The Guardian, 2001). Opportunities are limited and the social costs are borne by those who are least well positioned to challenge or contest the discourses and practices of development taking place.

Moreover, in areas of growth, large sections of the population, who often command significant political and decision-making power, are often included in new, profitable circuits of consumption (see Basset, 1999). Such groups have a vested interest in the promotion of further market expansion (see Cox, 1995). Indeed, the success of some forms of regeneration is dependent upon the existence of marginalised communities, without whose (cheap) labour, service-based development could not proceed or only take place at greater cost (Harvey, 2000). Whilst regeneration may bring new employment opportunities for local communities, these benefits need to put into a broader context of rapid and accelerating costs of living so that those who are able to access the new employment opportunities on the one hand, find themselves excluded from local circuits of consumption on the other. Given these circumstances, the politics of place becomes a critical location in and through which wider trends towards marketisation and exclusion are mediated and developed. How particular concerns become (or do not become) *problematised* is critical to the types of discourses of place and regeneration policy that are developed (see Rose, 1999; Dean, 1999). These, in turn, depend upon on the processes of governance and decision making that underpin the construction of discourses and it is to these that the paper now turns.

2.2. Regeneration practices, regime formation and the building of partnerships for regeneration

The form and character of regeneration programmes is critically dependent on the institutional structures that underpin agenda formation. During the 1980s and 1990s local governance has been undertaken by a growing range of agencies (alongside local authorities), each with their own agendas, funding and powers (see Rhodes, 2000; Stoker, 2000). Processes of local partnership development have therefore taken on growing significance. In particular, multi-agency governance is now promoted as a mechanism for 'getting things done in the face of complexity, conflict and social change... by [agencies] blending their resources, skills and purposes with others' (Kearns and Paddison, 2000, p. 847). Development agencies, usually local authorities, are increasingly encouraged (or coerced by funding regimes) to form development partnerships and networks with a variety of public, private and voluntary sector agencies. Partnership formation has become a mantra within central government regeneration agendas and this carries major implications for local policy makers and communities (Hastings, 1996; Peck and Tickell, 1994).

It is in this broader context of change that regime theory provides conceptual insights into the ways in which development issues are conceived and problematised. In essence, it examines which actors are involved in the development of local agendas, what their resources and objectives are, and the policy making processes in and through which their agendas are operationalised (Harding, 2000; Stoker, 1995). In Gibbs and Jonas' (2000) terms, it examines the discursive practices and material social structures through which regulations, decisions and policy outcomes are formulated, interpreted and implemented. It seeks to explain why coalitions of interest form, what factors determine their policy focus and what factors lead either to their fragmentation and displacement or to their survival (see Ward, 1996). Regime theory, therefore, promotes individual agency in identifying the important role that local leaders can play in developing coalitions (Stone, 1995). As Whelan et al. (1991, p. 1) comment 'the essence of the regime idea is that dominant coalitions, over periods of time, decide policy and provide a vision of the city'.

The nature of these visions and the types of interests that take a lead in processes of agenda setting vary from place to place and issue to issue. Whilst regime theory can be criticised for privileging agency over structure and the urban level of analysis (see Jessop et al., 1999), it does point to the significance of local actors and networks in reflecting and reproducing broader social, economic and political processes. It can, in particular, highlight the ways in which problems and opportunities are defined at the local level and by whom. Local political agendas are established which are characterised by 'particular ways of thinking about the kinds of problems that can and should be addressed by various authorities' (Miller and Rose, 1990, p. 3). These 'ways of thinking' or 'processes of problematisation' become the norms and aspirations that underpin policy agendas and regime formation. They focus attention on the 'problems' of particular groups whilst marginalising those of others. The politics of place is, therefore, significant in that regimes promote particular types of development which carry significant material and (discursive) political implications for the socio-economic character and composition of place.

Regimes are a geographically variable phenomenon. In some circumstances, they are dominated by corporate interests, whilst in others, public and voluntary sector bodies are the lead players (Harding, 1995). In the UK it is local authorities, working in and through central government funding regimes and policy programmes who usually take the lead in constructing local regimes, agendas and partnerships (see Harding, 1991; Jonas and Wilson, 1999). Local authorities are often characterised by those on the political Right as being slow to act, bureaucratic and lacking in entrepreneurial dynamism. Other commentators, particularly from the Left, see

them, instead, as legitimate democratic agencies who are increasingly undermined by central government restrictions and growing corporate power (see Imrie and Raco, 1999 for a fuller discussion). In practice, many local authorities have, in Atkinson and Wilks-Heeg's (2000) terms, developed the capacity to be 'creatively autonomous', in that they are able to maintain and forge links with a range of public and private agencies to fulfil their own agendas of change. They can act reflexively to the situations in which they operate so that they are not simply constrained by broader government programmes and agendas but are able to mobilise and develop their own networks and priorities of action with a range of different organisations and communities (see Cochrane, 1993; Imrie and Raco, 1999). Place-building and regime formation may be a particularly appealing strategy for a creatively autonomous local authority to pursue as place can become the focus for a range of projects, partnerships and new bonds of association.

In areas of strong economic growth the balance of power between developers and development agencies, such as local authorities, may also enable the latter to pursue policy agendas in line with their wider objectives. Dependence becomes dialectical in that private investors depend directly on the decisions taken by planning agencies for investment opportunities and returns, whereas the latter require investment from private developers to fulfil their ambitions for place-building and the broader expansion of political legitimacy and support (see Kantor, 1995). Basset and Harloe's (1990) work on Swindon, a prosperous town between Reading and Bristol on the M4 corridor, exemplifies many of these processes of policy formation and their impacts on places. With the decline of its traditional industries, Swindon promoted itself as a 'new city' or a counter-magnet of development to London during the 1960s and 1970s. Local agencies promoted the town as a place of locational and environmental advantages and during the 1970s it experienced steady growth, driven by incoming firms mainly in software and financial services. These agendas were driven by public sector agencies, particularly the local authority and able politicians and officers who worked locally. However, during the 1980s, the town experienced new forms of rapid and more market-oriented development. Housing restraints in the wider South-east made Swindon an attractive place for people and investors and house prices, congestion and land prices rocketed. As local authority powers were simultaneously eroded, local agencies 'could not constrain the growth [they had] worked so hard for so many years to promote' (p. 54). The particular forms that growth took were a consequence of local agendas and imaginations and wider socio-economic processes of change within which the town was situated. What the Swindon example demonstrates is that local agendas, regime formation and institutional practices need to be understood within

broader regional and national contexts of institution-alisation and policy action. Local regimes and policy actors have developed growth strategies over time which have sought to tap into broader socio-economic trends. Growth has become a self-fulfilling discourse and as new forms of uneven regional development have taken place across the UK, the town has found itself in a position where new rounds of growth have brought new problems concerning sustainability and socio-economic marginalisation to the fore. It is in linking together these different scales of activity that regeneration discourses and practices in any given place need to be understood.

Regime theory's main limitation is that it focuses on *horizontal* modes of co-ordination between agencies. Whilst these may be significant, it is often *vertical* relations of power and responsibility that underpin the development of local agendas. In the British context, where local business mobilisation and local authority autonomy have traditionally been weak, these vertical relations are particularly salient. As Basset (1999) argues, the language of *policy networks* in which relationships are established between different agencies and groups through partnerships and the establishment of policy communities can be used to capture the dynamic and relational nature of regime formation (see also, Smith, 1993; Peck and Tickell, 1994). In certain contexts 'marked by strong leadership and the dominance of one network or ideology, different networks [can] cohere into a recognisable urban regime under one overarching ideology or discourse' (p. 192). Regimes are, therefore, relational and amorphous political formations that form in different ways, in a variety of spatial–temporal contexts.

The paper now examines the ways in which these processes are mediated through a study of one of England's fastest growing major towns, Reading in Berkshire. It begins by examining the history of local social relations before turning to a discussion of the discourses and (institutional) practices of that have underpinned urban regeneration in the 1990s and 2000s. Reading has become a high profile example of a location that has grown rapidly during the 1990s (see The Guardian, 2000a,b, 2001; BBC News, 2001). Regeneration discourses and practices in the town have tended to focus on the promotion of new, consumption-based forms of development with the result that questions are now being raised over the sustainability of development and the implications of this for local businesses and communities. The paper argues that the politics and practices of regeneration agendas in growth areas are significantly different from those in declining areas. They tend to be more regional in focus and place public sector-led development regimes in a stronger position to influence the form and character of the development that takes place. Moreover, place-building has taken on new political and economic significance as local actors

have implemented regeneration strategies which tap into new opportunities for middle class consumption-led growth. The paper concludes by suggesting that in such places growth can be used as a focus for the formation of regimes and partnership networks of action. Alternative discourses which promote sustainable development or slower growth are, conversely, sidelined.

The paper draws on a research project which examined urban regeneration practices in Reading, carried out between October 2000 and May 2001. The research involved the interview of 35 individuals including local policy makers, Members of Parliament, representatives of community organisations, local businesses and the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce, the local police, the commission for racial equality, local training organisations and others involved in the politics and practices of regeneration in the town. These interviews were supplemented by the analysis of policy documents, correspondence, council minutes, accounts, policy briefings and party records to provide a detailed picture of the discourses and practices of regeneration and how and why they have developed.

3. The history of local social relations in Reading

3.1. Urban growth and development

The history of socio-economic development in Reading has been one of great diversity and change. Originally a small, agricultural town, Reading owed much of its expansion and growth in the 19th century to its location as a central node on the Kennett and Avon Canal (and its connections with the River Thames and London) and the Great Western Railway. During much of this period a range of industries developed, mainly in the sectors of heavy manufacturing and transport distribution (see Phillips, 1999). Reading became the location for major companies such as Sutton's Seeds and Huntley & Palmer's biscuits and also emerged as one of the biggest brewing centres in the south of England as well as a major producer of construction materials. Unlike many other towns in the Home Counties, therefore, Reading became a centre for blue-collar manufacturing trades. Consequently, its manufacturing capacities underwent many of the changes experienced by other industrial centres, booming in the post-war period and then falling into decline from the mid 1970s onwards.

Despite this Reading has experienced rapid economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s reflecting both its internal strengths as a location for economic activity and its location within the wider London and South-eastern regional economy. Far from representing a manufacturing town, it has undergone a transformation, so that the service sector now accounts for 86% of employment, employing approximately 74,000 people with

manufacturing employment continuing to shrink, falling by 41% over the period 1991–1996 to only 7.5% of the labour force (RBC, 2000a). The concentration of service employment has also been in areas of strong growth. Thus, producer business services employ 17.6% of employees (13% is the British average), financial services 9.4% (4.3%), wholesaling/retail 19.6% (16.9%) and transport & communications 10% (5.9%). Recent estimates expect employment in Reading to grow strongly (16%) over the period 1996–2006, increasing employment numbers by 15,000 mainly in the banking and financial sectors. Unemployment in Reading is generally low, with an unemployment rate of only 1.2% in April 2000, although the town has experienced the negative externalities of rapid growth such as house-price inflation, traffic congestion and skills shortages (RBC, 2000a,b).

Much of Reading's growth has been related to its wider regional position within the fast growing South-east of England. The South-east region and London combined command 37% of England's GDP. They contain, by far, the largest concentrations of population (≈18 million), economic activity and wealth in the UK (SEEDA, 2001). Reading has benefited from its proximity to the West of London, the M4 Corridor and Heathrow Airport which has meant that a variety of relocating firms, either decentralising from London or moving into the South-east region have located in the town. Reading has also attracted major multi-national information technology firms, such as Oracle and Cisco Systems, and associated spin-off firms, many of which have moved to the area to take advantage of local opportunities and Reading's position within wider spatial divisions of labour. However, the emergence of Reading as a 'hot spot' of development is also a reflection of wider discourses of place-building that have been constructed in the town. There is nothing inevitable in the growth of places such as Reading as the experience of other less successful places in the South-east such as the Medway Towns, or seaside resorts such as Hastings and Folkstone, demonstrates (see Allen et al., 1998). In Reading during the 1990s there has been a conjunction of strong local political agendas, new economic opportunities and the establishment of high-profile local development projects. It is in this context that urban regeneration agendas have developed in order to further growth and to reconstruct local urban spaces in a manner 'more fitting' with the town's economic revival.

3.2. Local political relations and urban development

Traditionally, local politics in Reading has been adversarial in nature. Pinch's (1989) study of local political relations reveals that during the 1960s and 1970s politics in Reading became increasingly focused on broader ideological differences between the local political parties, rather than on (both divisive and consensual) local issues. During this period Reading became a political 'barometer' for national trends, given its marginal (representational) political balance and national orientation. Voting trends in the town consistently reinforced this perception by closely mirroring wider trends across the whole of England. Pinch suggests that this reflected a number of factors. Reading increasingly became a dormitory town for London workers during the 1960/1970s with local politics seen as irrelevant by incoming populations. Even national newspapers, such as *The Times* in 1972, characterised Reading as the 'town without a heart and soul', a non-place condemned by its position within wider networks and social and economic relations. The local press, similarly, derided the town as 'Dragsville' during this period—a place of relatively little social activity or local associational culture.

Alongside this sense of placelessness, political relations had become characterised by opaque decision-making processes, structures and systems (see also Alexander, 1985). During the 1970s RBC's leadership fluctuated between Conservative and Labour, often resulting in hung, majority controlled councils. The impact of this instability was twofold. On the one hand, local political agendas were deliberately kept low key to avoid doing anything that may have upset the delicate political balance in the town. Political paralysis became associated with local politics making Reading 'more famous for non-decisions than positive actions' (Pinch, 1989, p. 185). On the other hand, the role and power of chief executives and officers increased so that by the mid-1980s commentators in the town were openly talking of the chief executive's office as the local 'fourth political party'. [1] As in other places, local politics, therefore, became committee-driven, with decisions made through opaque, intersubjective deals between chief councillors and officers (see Cochrane, 1993). This internalisation and isolation of decision-making processes further eroded the role of place in local socio-political relations. The creation of a second-tier local authority, Berkshire County Council, in 1974 with responsibilities for strategic planning, further reduced the perceived significance of local politics, with powers and decision-making shifted to broader scales. With the loss of its major manufacturers in the 1970s and 1980s, local politics was also characterised by limited private sector involvement (see Alexander, 1985). With the expansion of the service sector in the 1980s and 1990s and the in-migration of national and global investors, local business agendas have become more fragmented and issue specific. As the Chair of the local Chamber of Commerce commented in interview,

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[1] Alongside the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties.

"local politics here is dominated by the Council and has been for a long time. The business community is very divided... The big companies don't really get involved in local politics, except for the odd planning matter that directly affects them. They are not *local* companies. The smaller companies do have lots of concerns and we express them on their behalf. But, to be honest, there is no one agenda but many".

The lack of strong local business representation exacerbated the traditional perception that the politics of Reading lacked dynamism, connections with local people and businesses and effectiveness.

It was in this local political context that during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Reading's urban centre underwent significant, although piecemeal and ad hoc modernist redevelopment. The landscape, whilst maintaining areas of traditional, vernacular red-brick architecture, had failed to generate large scale investments or general popularity. As with other urban centres it underwent a significant change in form with the construction of functionalist, modernist public spaces. Retailers and commercial investors saw little opportunity to invest in the area and for existing actors new, higher quality premises, were difficult to find. Moreover, the commercial weaknesses of the centre were reinforced by negative perceptions. For example, national surveys of retail areas, which rank centres by their commercial success and a range of quality indicators, consistently placed Reading in the lower bracket of locations. One survey in 1992 even put the town at the bottom of recommended places to shop in the UK (see Reading Evening Post, 1992). The closure of major industrial sites around the town centre in the early 1980s, had also left a scarred, derelict landscape.

However, in the 1990s a combination of social, economic and political changes took place which provided a platform for new regeneration initiatives. Strong economic growth made Reading an attractive site for private developers, keen to tap into development opportunities. Whilst the economy of the town and the broader region was growing rapidly, Reading's town centre had shown little signs of change. Alongside this growth, the 1990s also witnessed the emergence of local political stability. In 1991 Reading Borough Council (RBC) came under the control of the Labour Party group and remained so during the 1990s. Political stability has allowed for the creation of consistent policy agendas over a period of time, which have not been hampered by the continual changing of party control during the 1970s and early 1980s. RBC became a Unitary Authority in 1996, when Berkshire County Council was abolished, again creating possibilities for the emergence of new local political agendas. It is to these agendas of urban regeneration that the next section now turns. The first part examines the broader rationales for regeneration that existed within local policy-making agents. This is followed by an examination of the mobilisation of specific place discourses and a following section of the practices of partnership building and regime formation which have underpinned new developments.

4. From Average Town to Venice of the Valley—transforming the discourses of Readings urban spaces in the 1990s

4.1. The rationale for regeneration

The rationale for embarking on urban regeneration in Reading reflects a combination of economic circumstances, political opportunism and discourses of place development. The main instigator and lead agency in the process has been the local authority, RBC which, since 1991, has been dominated by the Labour Party and a new generation of younger, more active and ambitious politicians, keen to reconstruct Reading's image, wider reputation and urban form. RBC's Leader succinctly summarised the underlying rationale for change in interview,

"In the 1970s Reading sold itself as 'England's average town'... RBC wanted to bring about new developments which reflected the different ways in which Reading was thinking about itself and was perceived by others".

Thus, from the early 1990s, RBC initiated a series of proposals designed to take advantage of Reading's vacant land development opportunities and its wider geographical location within the UK's strongest economic region [the South-east]. A development rationale was established in which specific attempts were made to recast the town's external image, generate new property-led forms of development to re-capitalise the area and at the same time tap into wider networks and markets. Reading's position and its extensive road and rail links presented a clear opportunity to develop the town as a central, attractive location for inward investors and visitors. It also possesses a catchment area for retailing (i.e. those within a 25 mile radius) approximately 1.7 million people. The purchasing power of these residents is considerable—indeed it is the fourth most prosperous catchment area of any retailing district in the UK (see Quin, 2000). It is this focus on the investment potential of Reading as a place which has been central to the formation of a local RBC-dominated growth regime.

To underpin and legitimate its regeneration strategy, RBC initiated a series of studies which indicated that the town was failing to achieve its retail, leisure and visitor potential. RBC's Chief Planning Officer at the time

noted in interview that, "these surveys indicated that Reading was under-shopped. Space for development was identified as the main restriction... so developing more spaces became the basis of regeneration policy". In essence it was argued that supply side constraints had restricted the town's ability to service potential markets—particularly those from wealthier backgrounds. For example, one of the consultant's reports to RBC stated that,

"Reading has the potential to sustain a substantially greater level of retail floorspace than currently exists when considered against its potential catchment area and its position in the retail hierarchy... Significant qualitative changes to the town centre... will meet the requirements of the upper and middle class shopper".

Such discourses drew upon particular geographical imaginations and hierarchies in which local actors stressed the opportunities for local growth in a wider, competitive but buoyant socio-economic context. They provided the platform around which other players could be drawn into new development partnerships and networks to facilitate new forms of regeneration.

The regeneration of Reading's town centre, therefore, became a priority for politicians and local planners over the 1980s and 1990s. A discourse developed through which it was argued, in the words of RBC's Leader, that Reading was consistently "punching below its weight" in economic terms unable to attract levels of investment and visitor numbers that reflected its status as the largest town in the Thames Valley area. For example, the former head of RBC's planning committee commented in interview that,

"it was clear that Reading was under-shopped and that the whole image of the town needed an uplift... You can do that through marketing and we have taken that seriously but the best way is to make the place look attractive and provide the kinds of public spaces people want to be in... [so] we wanted a lively space with cultural dimensions to make the town feel better about itself".

Or as a development brief (RBC, 1997, p. 4) noted it had,

'to be a case of re-branding Reading—moving it up in people's estimation and elevating its position as a shopping and visitor destination'.

For policy makers, Reading's size and location meant that in some normative sense it *should* have been a central location for service provision and an attractive location for the population living in the wider region to visit and spend money in. This discourse was extremely influential in shaping attitudes and perspectives amongst policy-makers and played a significant part in framing new relationships between the public and private sectors in the town. One frequently cited rationale for development was the fear that failure to invest in a new urban centre would lead to the shifting of economic and service functions to other centres in the Thames Valley, such as Bracknell and Oxford. In response to criticisms from environmentalists, [2] for example, a planning officer at RBC (1995, p. 1) wrote that,

'in order to retain Reading's role for the future the sort of space that is available in the town centre needs to be improved to accommodate retailing and leisure needs... incremental movement towards sustainable development must be balanced against other [needs] that important to the town of Reading'.

Similarly the Town Centre Manager noted in interview that,

"It is essential for Reading to be seen in a different way from its major competitors—Oxford, Bracknell and Guildford... continued investment in the town centre is essential for the town's future success".

The justification put forward in the original planning submissions for regeneration indicate that Reading's perceived problem was that despite being a 'county town, its retail facilities had been unable to keep pace with other developments in Berkshire' (McCauley, 1995, p. 2). On one level this competitive discourse parallels growth agendas and rationales taking place in other urban contexts (see Kearns and Philo, 1993; Harvey, 2000). Investments are sought through which particular types of regeneration take place—primarily by service sector industries and geared up to middle and higher income groups. However, rather than focusing on attracting investors and visitors from a distance, as is often the case for regeneration projects in larger cities, Reading's focus is much more *regional* in scope. It is the opportunities created by this strong regional demand for consumer services that has helped to drive local regeneration agendas.

These scale imaginations, in part, reflect the wider socio-economic regional geographies of the UK in which demand within the South-east region is able to sustain and enhance further growth, often at the expense of more peripheral areas (see Allen et al., 1998). What

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[2] Friends of the Earth had criticised Reading's regeneration plans for the environmental damage that they would cause and the lack of sustainability in the development proposals.

becomes critically important to the effectiveness of agendas is not the generation of greater demand, primarily through raising incomes and employment opportunities, but the freeing-up and promotion of new supply-side resources to match growing demands. However, it is only particular 'problems' and 'needs' that are identified in such discourses. Affordable housing, for which demand has outstripped supply to a significant extent, has not found its way onto urban regeneration agendas, for example, neither has the costs of congestion and environmental damage caused by the associated growth in traffic that redevelopment would bring. Market-driven imperatives have formed the basis of new imaginations of Reading in the 1990s and 2000s and have represented both the means and the ends of regeneration policy (see Wilson, 1996). This section has outlined the rationale for regeneration that has developed amongst policy makers within Reading. The next section now examines the ways in which particular imaginations of place have been mobilised and articulated as the basis of regeneration policy and some of the counter-discourses that have emerged.

4.2. Regeneration and discourses of place

From the outset, linking the regeneration of urban spaces to broader associations with Reading was seen as critical by RBC. The place provided a focus for investment and private sector interest and involvement. In 1980 an urban brewery, owned by Courage Plc., closed leaving a site of dereliction, public inaccessibility and decay juxtaposed to the town centre. As the Leader of RBC commented in interview, "rebuilding the town centre was the key to re-establishing a sense of civic pride". The re-capitalisation of this site, therefore, became the focus of RBC's strategy to regenerate the town and to re-invigorate a sense of local pride and place association. A discussion paper written for RBC in 1990, for example, highlights the concern amongst local politicians that the effect of the derelict site 'has destroyed any sense of identity or spatial network for the people of Reading and has, in effect, created a void area in the town centre' (Haskoll & Company, 1990, p. 3). Consequently, as the design architects for the regeneration project argued, 'the design concept... is to create buildings with a strong character which will enable it to be immediately recognised and associated with Reading... like Harrods is with London' (Haskoll & Company, 1990, p. 4). In so doing, it would avoid criticisms of modern centres 'which all seem to look similar and have no individuality' (Haskoll & Company, 1990, p. 5).

Central to this re-branding has been the emergence of a major retail, leisure and shopping complex named *The Oracle*, located immediately south of the existing urban centre on the formerly derelict site (see Fig. 1). In many ways, The Oracle development reflects wider trends in
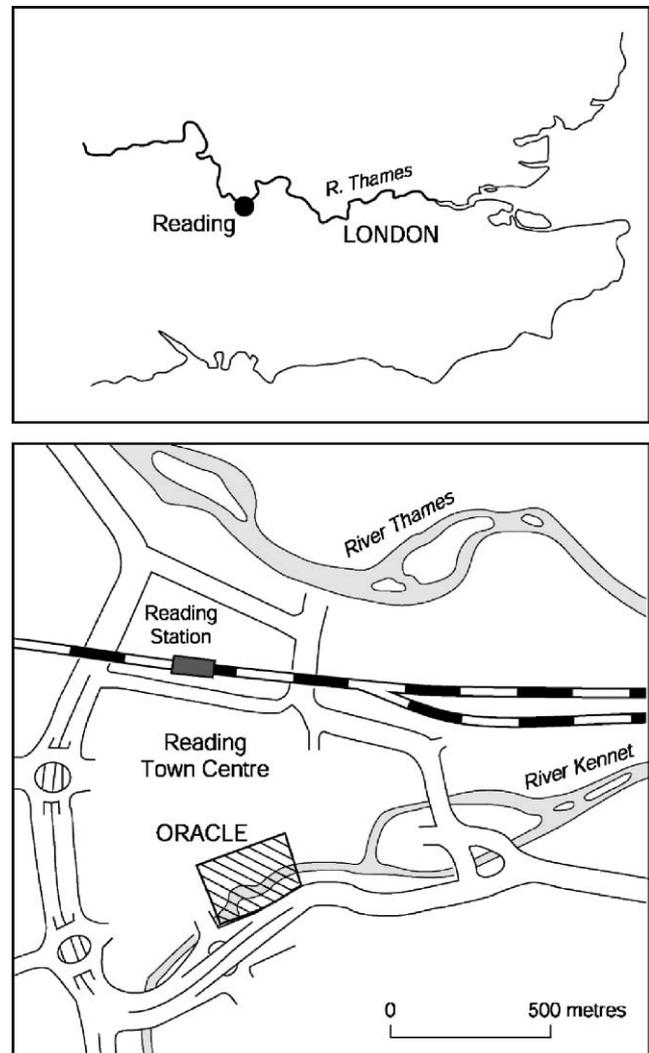

Fig. 1. Reading and the regeneration area.

urban regeneration schemes across the UK. Built by the developer Hammersons Plc. at a cost of £250 million, the centre comprises of 700,000 square feet of retail space (primarily located in a major shopping mall), a waterside public space, a cinema complex and other outlets for retailing and leisure activities. In keeping with other projects in the UK, the regeneration sought to redefine and make use of existing historical social relations. Particular imaginations of the town's history have been drawn upon to link the development to particular meanings and understandings of place. The name of the regeneration project, The Oracle, for example, is taken from the original clothmakers' warehouse that was established on the site in 1628, although it had not existed on the site since the mid-19th century. The naming of footbridges and other structures after former councillors and historical places has also sought to provide a sense of place to the modern architecture— with local residents even encouraged to vote for some of the names. Other initiatives have included the setting up

of a local heritage trail for tourists, the upgrading and reopening of the symbolically significant old Town Hall in the town centre and the opening of local museums, such as the Museum of Reading. This use of historical artefacts is a recurring feature of regeneration projects which by their very nature transform the material and discursive bases of places, whilst at the same time seek to create new attachments to them that will make them more marketable and legitimate (see Harvey, 2000).

This is also reflected in the focus on water-side regeneration in the town. Water-side projects have the potential to encourage new associations between urban spaces and what are (re)defined as 'their' natural waterfronts. Regeneration areas such as London Docklands and Cardiff Bay have been amongst the highest profile examples of this in the UK (see Imrie and Thomas, 1999; Brownhill, 1999). In Reading, on a much smaller scale, similar processes have been evident. The River Kennett, a tributary of the Thames and source of the historically important Victorian Kennett and Avon Canal, had formerly been an inaccessible, heavily polluted and unnavigable waterway. Flanked by derelict industrial land and warehouses the river was hidden from general view. However, the regeneration of the town centre provided an opportunity to use the river as a marketable asset. From the outset the designers of The Oracle and associated projects saw the rejuvenation of the river as both a potential source for leisure-driven commercial opportunities and a platform re-branding of the image of the town. As the original architectural brief noted, 'the river will provide a new civic space which will become the new centrepiece of Reading' (Haskoll & Company, 1990, p. 5). Similarly RBC's chief planning councillor noted in interview that,

> "the space around the re-claimed river was key to the whole regeneration of the town. It made the development different, it made it stand out from others in the region, if not the country. We could say this was Reading's project... In terms of selling the development to local people it was also important. We were giving them back their river".

This view was reflected in a local Labour Party (1988) document entitled 'Giving the Kennett Back to the People of Reading' in which the links between the physical and environmental landscapes of the town are explicitly drawn.

This re-claiming of the river site and the desire to be 'different' from other places not only assisted in the legitimation of the project to local residents but also tied in with RBC's broader objectives of creating a new regionally competitive space. As Allen et al. (1998, p. 74) suggest, within the South-east region, places such as Reading are often fiercely competitive in their outlook, acting as Edge Cities which in trying to distance themselves from London, 'find elements of distinctiveness which aid their pursuit of autonomy and challenge the idea of them as non-place, places' (see also Garreau, 1988; Auge, 1998). Such discourses of competition are reflected in RBC's Planning Committee Chair's response to environmentalist concerns over the regeneration which stated that 'in order to retain Reading's role for the future, the sort of space that is available in the town centre needs to be significantly improved [by the new development]' (Punter, 1995, p. 1). There is a clear sense of competitive fear, in that perceived possibilities and opportunities for the town will be lost if there is a failure to embark upon significant regeneration.

The river, therefore, plays a critical role as a marketable source of identity and difference for the town. Retailers' entrances, cafes, restaurants and other consumption-based forms of development have been established alongside it. At the same time there has been a doubling in the number of licensed premises from 30 to ≈60 as RBC seeks to transform the discursive and material base of the new urban spaces, making them more attractive to young, high spending groups. At its most extreme this has led to the mobilisation of broader comparative imaginations in which Reading has been linked to other canal and river based tourist locations in Europe, such as the campaign which sought to redefine the town as 'The Venice of the [Thames] Valley' (Reading Chronicle, 1999a). Or the Town Centre Manager's vision, given in interview, that Reading could become the "Barcelona of Britain". Whatever the realities of such comparisons, RBC has hired consultants and is embarking upon a major marketing campaign in which visitors, in a radius of 100 miles of the town, are being targeted. Using The Oracle as its focus, the campaign is designed to attract shoppers and younger people.

The propagation of such developments in Reading not only seeks to re-brand the town's image but also, in the longer term, change its very status from that of a 'town' to a 'city'. Across the UK frequent competitions are held to grant towns 'city-status'. The official re-designation of a town carries with it no change in resource status from central government. However, for towns such Reading, the opportunity to become a city is perceived to have marketing and place-building advantages. As an RBC planning officer noted in interview, "city status is where this is all leading... Being, acting and thinking like a city is what the long term success of Reading requires". Consequently, the town has initiated, as a development priority, an action plan known as *City 2020* in which it has sought to establish Reading's place as 'capital of the Thames Valley... providing the highest quality range of shops, leisure, educational and sporting facilities for residents and businesses' (RBC, 2000b, p. 2). This recreation and re-designation of place draws on particular geographical imaginations of the role and function of Reading in a broader regional,

national and international context. The City 2020 proposals emphasise the possibilities of place and the need to 'modernise the town with due respect to the past' (p. 2). Hence, Reading should build on its 'hard' and 'soft' assets, such as its infrastructure, labour force and community structures, to become a *regional* capital and a *Gateway to Europe*. Drawing on Reading's location as a transport hub and its growing socio-economic vitality, RBC agues that as a city it could play a major role as a regional centre for the prosperous South-east. City status is seen as central to this as there is a tendency for towns in the shadow of London to seek new identities around which processes of socio-economic place-building can coalesce. Consequently, as the town 'continues to grow in regional importance, so will the need for the town centre to expand and become a true city centre' (RBC, 2000b, p. 7). The significance of this vision goes beyond discursive practices. RBC's development plans, including The Oracle development, have been geared up to the City 2020 strategy. In particular, a number of interviewees argued that to be a 'real' city, Reading would require a range of facilities, providing visitors with a number of interrelated and complementary activities. As the Town Centre Manager commented:

> "we are aiming to create a European city like Bilbao—a high quality, small city with multiple centres and districts... making Reading a truly lively and cosmopolitan place".

From the outset regeneration discourses and practices have been underpinned by this broader strategy of using place as both the means and ends of policy—i.e. programmes that reconstruct and re-brand Reading as a place are used to reconstruct and re-brand Reading as a place. On the one hand, this involves the transformation of physical space, in terms of architecture, landscaping, and the creation of new consumption-based facilities. On the other hand, it also requires the redirecting of the mentalities of those being governed (Dean, 1999). As the Leader of RBC noted in interview,

> "to become a city people in Reading need to feel that they live in a city... For us it is a coherent process of making the city grow and making people feel proud, confident and ambitious. It is about asserting the position of Reading as capital of the Thames Valley as a place on the move, not standing still, of looking to the future but taking account of the past".

This is reflected in the City 2020's claim that,

> 'everyone will have the opportunity to benefit from all the city can offer. Everyone has a part to play in shaping the future of our city. It will truly be a city for all' (p. 2).

It is in towns such as Reading, therefore, that we see evidence of the close relationships between place, politics and regime formation. Regeneration in the town has not only involved the reconstruction of buildings but also the adoption of new mentalities of association amongst the population, shaped by new discourses of place.

However, the discourses that have underpinned this regeneration have been deliberately selective. Processes of problematisation in the town have focused on the realisation of market potential as though a failure to achieve this in the past had been the source of the town's problems. Yet, this type of regeneration has created new social and economic problems whilst obfuscating others. In seeking to re-brand and re-shape Reading as a place, other identities and other groups have not been given significant priority. In particular, the young, the elderly, the socially excluded and those from ethnic minority backgrounds have not been the targets for the new commercial developments. Community representatives were particularly critical of the regeneration in interview. RBC's consultation mechanisms included representations from selected community groups and individuals. However, for some, their incorporation was relatively partial and ineffective. As one representative of the Afro-Caribbean community commented in interview:

> "The Oracle is seen as very much an elitist development. It represents nothing from the Reading community, it is only for businesses... It is good for Reading but not for [excluded] communities within Reading".

Place-building inevitably involves the selection of particular images and discourses of place (Beauregard, 1993; Wilson, 1996). For instance, the needs and concerns of local teenagers have not been central to the regeneration plans. Instead the focus has been on designing new public spaces from which such groups, perceived as a threat to security, are monitored and excluded. Moreover, given the focus on marketing Reading as a centre of high quality consumption, the needs of local entrepreneurs and less well-off consumers and communities have not been central to the plans. Only one of the eighty or so commercial outlets in The Oracle centre, for example, is used by a locally-based, independent firm.

Counter-discourses have been in evidence, although their impacts on agendas have been slight. A combination of environmental organisations (such as Friends of the Earth), heritage bodies (such as the Reading Civic Society) and local politicians, drawn primarily from local Liberal Democrat and Conservative Parties have mounted critical campaigns (see Reading Evening Post, 1995). The nature and character of new places and

spaces have been the target of these counter-discourses with changes criticised for their lack of environmental sustainability and local sensitivity. More significantly, challenges have been made to the very types of globalised, capitalised places now being established. Local, vernacular architectural styles have been replaced, it is argued, with 'placeless' modernist architecture in an internationalist style. As the Leader of the Reading Liberal democrats commented in interview:

> "What is Reading about the new Reading? Where in the new developments across the town do we see any evidence of Reading's traditions? Reading is famously a 'red-brick' town, yet we see nothing of this. Developers and the council seem hell-bent on getting rid of our past in the pursuit of their own ambitions".

Similarly, the Reading Civic Society have criticised the regeneration for its creation of 'Twilight Zone' spaces in which investments have been crammed into the smallest possible space with little regard for their aesthetic appearance or the needs of local people. As a spokesman commented 'this new Reading is not user-friendly and we don't feel that this is our Reading' (quoted in Reading Chronicle, 1999b, p. 1). Criticisms have also focused on the pollution and congestion that the site has generated for local residents as well as the lack of 'meeting places' for local people and the limited efforts to connect local people with the place (see Evening Post, 1999). In the latter half of 2001, the local press has also been increasingly critical by, for example, highlighting the town's chronic housing shortages and the problems that communities and individuals are facing (see Reading Evening Post, 2001).

However, such criticisms have tended to come from middle-class interests, intent on retaining selective (and not necessarily inclusive) conceptions of what Reading 'should be'. What has been conspicuously absent has been a strongly articulated counter-discourse from excluded communities and groups within the town. This partly reflects the traditional lack of politicisation within local communities. With Reading continuing to experience an in-migration of population this may be an increasingly important factor. However, it is also a consequence of the power of discourses of growth and development to shape agendas and limit the space for alternatives. Growth brings employment, ostensible consumption and increased 'opportunities' for local people. In Reading the interests of the town and local communities have been elided with market-led growth so that criticisms of the regeneration are seen as criticisms against the wider community and the concept of 'progress' and 'modernisation'. Developing discourses of growth limitation and management has proved extremely difficult given the perceived lack of benefits for

local people in reducing levels of market activity. In this sense, the experiences of Reading mirror those of other regeneration areas (see Colenutt, 1999). Growth also creates large and powerful groups of 'winners' for whom further growth consolidates the value of their investments, further weighting local discourses towards more and more development. In order to implement these agendas urban regeneration programmes also require the mobilisation of particular actors and policy agendas and it is to these that the paper now turns.

5. Building places—the practices of regeneration in a growing region

Alongside the construction of a new set of discourses and visions, urban regeneration in Reading has also required the mobilisation of partnerships and networks. The centrepiece projects in Reading town centre have sought to re-capitalise former derelict spaces, turning an area of loss into one of profitability. Private sector resources have, therefore, been an essential component in this place transformation and this section examines the ways in which a development regime emerged in the town and the partnership arrangements that have underpinned it. It illustrates the links between place-building political discourses, the initiation of regeneration projects and the character of private sector involvement in urban regeneration. The study also assesses the processes of partnership-building and regime formation in a buoyant regional socio-economic context. It shows how RBC has, in Atkinson and Wilks-Heeg's (2000, p. 2) terms, acted as a 'creatively autonomous' agency which has established a wider regime by forging 'relationships with actors and institutions, both locally and internationally, which operate outside of the direct control of central government'. In so doing, it highlights the spatial variability of such processes and their significance for broader urban regeneration policies.

The experiences of Reading indicate that partnership formation is a highly contested, negotiable and contingent process. As a local MP pointed out in interview, "the only reason that regeneration has taken place in Reading is because of the strong political will on our part... Building partnerships here has been a long and turbulent process, even with opportunities such as those in Reading". RBC's key strategy for encouraging developers to invest in the town has been to elide the interests of private developers with those of RBC and local communities. There has been an attempt to persuade developers that there is a dialectical relationship between their commercial interests and the reconstruction of Reading's social and environmental fabric. Major 'trophy' investments represent an opportunity for Reading to re-brand and market itself, thereby acting as

a magnet for further investment and enhancing the competitiveness of existing firms.

The political processes evident in the development of the town centre illustrate the contested and constructed nature of partnership formation and the role that local planning authorities can play in promoting particular projects and amending them to suit their own political objectives. Through the 1980s and 1990s a range of development ideas were proposed by various development companies. Most of these schemes involved the construction of new commercial office blocks which would provide additional space for the town's growing service industries. However, from an early stage RBC had a very different vision for the direction the development should take. Given the negative perceptions and discourses of the town that existed, RBC was unwilling to promote forms of development that would further isolate the town centre from the wider population. As the Leader of RBC commented in interview:

> "RBC had a vision for a mixed development, not the single office-type of project favoured by private developers at that time [the 1980s]... If we were serious about our broader commitments to Reading, making it a green city, social inclusion, multi-cultural then property developers had to realise this... RBC was tough but clear in this commitment".

This stand off was indicative of the relative strength in negotiating position of RBC. During the property boom of the late 1980s property developers in the South-east were keen to access investment opportunities. RBC was in a position to place pressure on developers to accept its conditions for development, something planning authorities in less buoyant areas have far more limited scope to do.

However, during this period, RBC lacked a consistent position of its own around which the regeneration of the town centre should proceed. As the Chief Executive commented in interview, "there is a retrospective rationality about RBC's plans... It would be fair to say that initially there was no clear strategy for what needed to be done with the town, only a sense of what we didn't want". In response to this, RBC appointed a project manger, in 1990, whose responsibilities involved establishing RBC's own criteria for regeneration, developing partnerships with private developers and co-ordinating the activities of RBC's various departments to ensure consistency in approach. It was from this period that a new set of development agendas emerged in which RBC took a more proactive and substantial role in shaping the very terms and conditions of regeneration and acted, in Atkinson and Wilks-Heeg's terms, in a 'creatively autonomous' manner. Using its technical expertise and regulatory powers it began to build a regime through networks and contacts with private sector and other organisations, to facilitate particular forms of regeneration (for other examples of similar processes elsewhere see Imrie and Raco, 1999).

A new strategy was developed in the early 1990s in which it was decided that in approving any project, RBC would insist upon a mixed use development, accessible to local residents with housing and leisure facilities a key element. RBC wanted a flagship development, which would create a new image for the town and foster new forms of place attachment and economic activity. Derelict land alongside the river Kennett had to be assembled and prepared to create a suitable site for such (private-led) development to take place. RBC, which owned the site to the south of the river, including a major bus depot and some of the land on which the former derelict brewery had existed, became a key player in facilitating any development project. Moreover, alongside this direct influence, RBC as planning authority, also possessed the powers and resources required for compulsory purchases to relocate the scattering of small businesses that also operated in the area. [3] Consequently, the local authority played a pivotal role in the regeneration practices that took place. As the Leader of the Council commented in interview:

> "the key decision for RBC was that it became a development partner in its own right. Once we said that the bus depot had to move and that some of our land was essential to the project we became key players in the shape of what took place".

By becoming a development agent, RBC acted as a focus around which new partnerships and regimes could develop.

The broader context of economic growth had a major bearing on the public–private relationships that emerged. As RBC's former head of planning commented in interview:

> "Reading is a growth location. We can't stop development taking place but we can mould it to what we want it to be and that is what we came to realise in negotiations with the private sector".

From this position of relative strength, negotiations took place with a number of private developers during the 1990s. From the beginning RBC laid down a set of conditions to developers which reflected its desire to create a new, accessible centre. These included a requirement that whatever development took place it must retain some status as accessible, 'public' land at all times;

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[3] In all 25 Compulsory Purchase Orders were made relating to the development.

that development should not be a monolithic structure; that there should be provision for non-car-based modes of transport; that listed buildings alongside the river Kennett should be retained and developed; that all waterways should be made accessible to the public; and that the site must include a broad range of uses, including some social housing. As RBC's Chief Executive noted, in interview:

"When RBC started in this process it didn't appreciate the power it had. Once the development proceeded apace, we quickly realised that, in Reading, we had an asset... We gained the confidence to be proactive with our partners rather than reactive".

A central element in being proactive, it was suggested was "setting our a clear set of proposals that developers should follow".

Regime formation in the town, therefore, took on particular forms in response to local agendas, institutional relations and local circumstances. The central agencies in the regime have been RBC and property developers intent on redeveloping the town centre. However, in order to operate effectively other agencies and their particular resources have had to be mobilised at particular times to resolve potential difficulties and problems. In many ways the propagation of growth strategies has required the development of relatively amorphous networks and relationships between agencies which change their shape and structure in response to perceived problems (see Basset, 1999). For example, the developments faced significant recruitment barriers which had the potential to undermine their market potential. In the short term up to 3500 employees were required to run and service the new facilities. Yet, registered unemployment in Reading in 2000 stood at only 1949 persons (2.1%) and a number of industries, including existing retailers, were experiencing severe, ongoing, staff shortages (RBC, 2000a). Local workers have been essential to the viability and profitability of the regeneration. As a community worker involved in running a community training shop noted in interview, "from the outset worker shortages were a key concern for those involved in redevelopment... difficulties in filling vacancies and using local labour was a potential brake on [its] success". Establishing and maintaining links with local (regime) partners was, therefore, a key consideration both for RBC and private developers intent on making significant investments in the town.

In response to these development concerns a number of programmes were developed. For example, in tackling labour market issues a wide ranging partnership was established which included the Oracle developers, RBC, retailers, the local Employment Service, community Training and Enterprise Shops, local Further Education colleges and the Reading Business Education Partnership. A recruitment strategy was devised in which community organisations and partnerships across Reading were identified as key actors in obtaining staff to fill the emerging vacancies. In particular, a range of measures were identified to boost recruitment, particularly from the large potential pool of female labour that existed in the town. These included the provision of child-care facilities and transport; the establishment of a new computer database system in the town, known as the Reading Skills Register, which sought to match up vacancies with the unemployed; the setting up of training and advice centres in some of Reading's poorest communities; and a major publicity drive, including recruitment fairs and a recruitment bus. Recruitment has also been a key consideration for SRB funded projects operating in some Reading's most deprived communities where RBC funded staff highlight vacancies or training programmes for local people. Approximately 1000 job vacancies within the new Oracle development have been filled as a consequence of their activities (Reading Training and Employment Advice Shop, 2000).

This positive attitude to recruitment was reflected in the responses of community organisations. An Employment Case Worker at the Reading Commission for Racial Equality, for example, described the lengths to which the developers were prepared to go to attract workers:

"The Oracle's recruitment manager contacted us, which is unheard of, and volunteered to come over and speak to a Muslim-women's self-help group that we were running... They came and were very positive, they even offered to develop support for transport and child care for the women".

This type of positive attitude was backed up by an RBC-inspired employment *Concordat* in which the developers, RBC, the local TUC and other community groups signed an agreement to employ as and train as many local people as possible for the emerging vacancies, particularly in the construction and retail industries. Such experiences differ markedly from those of community groups in other regeneration areas, where efforts to incorporate local people into vacancies have often been limited and piecemeal in nature (see Raco, 2000; Colenutt, 1999). Once again, the links between place and regeneration are of central importance. Developers have had to find ways of accessing employment in a broader context of rapid economic growth and skills shortages. With the emergence of new employment opportunities, employees had to be actively sought out. This involved the establishment of networks and links with local communities and training organisations as well as formal agencies such as the Employment Service. In developing growth agendas, regeneration regimes

have had to expand their networks of interest in particular ways as and when required in order to fulfil their ambitions.

Issues of securitising space have also been prominent in creating the conditions for successful regeneration. New urban spaces have had to be marketed and legitimated to local and regional consumers. As such, they had to be made 'safe' and be seen to be safe to make sure that potential visitors were not lost. Redevelopment has brought new problems to Reading with the number of visitors, particularly those seeking out evening entertainments, increasing rapidly. Perceptions of low rates of crime are a key factor in maintaining visitor numbers for attractions and in reducing the costs of insurance and criminal damage to existing businesses (see Fyfe, 1995). RBC (who are obliged to develop crime prevention measures under the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998) and development companies have established a range of partnerships and measurers aimed at reducing crime rates within the town centre and regenerated spaces. Central to these has been the establishment of a town centre partnership, known as the Town Centre Liaison Group, in which policing strategies have been developed with the local police force (Thames Valley Police). Town centre policing now focuses on particular forms of crime, which are seen to have a detrimental effect on the success of the regeneration (Thames Valley Police, 2001). As a town centre Inspector commented in interview:

"our main drive is to keep the streets safe to attract people. That is our first priority. Our focus is to keep the fear of crime down, that means dealing with graffiti, displacing beggars and so on... RBC are trying to attract businesses to invest in Reading. It obviously doesn't look good if they see a ghetto outside of the window which might dissuade them".

In practice, keeping the streets safe has meant the establishment of an extensive, police controlled CCTV system; extra high visibility police patrols; rigorous design measures to prevent areas in which groups can congregate; the hiring of a large number of private security guards; and limits on areas accessible to the public. Policing place has, therefore, become a central issue, illustrated by a police inspector's comment that, "it is clear that for the town to be successful, Reading must be—and that includes crime reduction". In this sense, the significance of place to the success or otherwise of development projects is critical. In investing in Reading, developers themselves have become dependent on the wider local socio-economic relations in which they operate, exemplifying the processes involved in the necessary spatialisation of capital investments (see Cox, 1995). Once again, particular networks of institutional interaction have been established as a key element

in ensuring the overall market success of the regeneration.

These processes of partnership construction and reconstruction highlight the contextual and contingent nature of regime development. The politics of urban regeneration has been characterised by a particular form of local authority-driven regime. Other actors and players, from public and private sectors, have been drawn into regeneration agendas as and when required. In the absence of well organised interest groups, such as the local business community and local residents, it is the local authority which has acted, in Bassett's terms as a 'strong leader' which has been able to establish agendas 'around which different networks cohere into a recognisable urban regime' (p. 192). It has tried to expand its influence and 'bend other policy areas towards their aims' (p. 192) as and when required, such as with training programmes or security strategies. As Harding (2000, p. 69) notes, implementing regeneration agendas involves 'careful political management... to justify giving priority to development programmes'. This has been much in evidence in Reading.

These regeneration programmes have had a major impact on the town centre. During the late 1990s, retail floorspace increased by more than 30% and annual investment in the town centre exceeded £100 million per annum. Reading's position in the UK retail rankings rose from 26th in 1998 to 9th in 2001. Alongside this, from being a place in which visitor numbers were low, the number of visits to the town have increased significantly following the regeneration, with over 10 million visitors attracted to The Oracle development in its first 6 months of opening—a figure that looks set to rise in 2001. Reading's broader image has been changed significantly so that in one business survey it is now ranked the 'fourth best place to do business in the UK' (Quin, 2000). However, growth has not come without a price. Pollution and congestion have been exacerbated by recent developments, so that Reading now, for example, has some of the worst air quality of any town in the UK (Reading Chronicle, 2001). Alongside this, growth has pushed up the cost of housing and living expenses, so that during the period March 1998–March 2000 house prices increased on average by 28.1% (with the average house price in 2000, £114,117), squeezing lower paid and public sector workers out of the housing market. Similarly average gross annual earnings exceeded £24,500 in 1999 (Hicks, 2000). Such growth has attracted in-migration so that over the period 1999–2006, the population of the town is expected to grow from 147,300 to 158,000, putting further pressures on housing markets and the environment. Local welfare services are increasingly under strain as recruitment difficulties impinge on key services. Ironically, the 'success' of Reading as a hot spot has begun to attract negative publicity for the town on a national scale (see

for example, The Guardian, 2001; The Daily Express, 2001).

As Allen et al. (1998) note, rapid, unsustainable growth in the South-east of England is beginning to undermine its own conditions for success. In places such as Reading the tensions involved in promoting development, whilst maintaining broader services and environmental quality (factors which are essential to the continued competitiveness of the place) are becoming acute, yet discourses of growth and market-driven urban regeneration are still promoted as the solution to the town's socio-economic problems. Whilst, developers have been dependent on the support of RBC and its networks in implementing their (profitable) projects, they have begun to apply their own pressure to emerging regeneration agendas. Affordable housing, in particular, has been an area of on-going conflict with The Oracle's developers unwilling to embark on schemes which, in the short to medium term, will yield fewer market returns. Housing development in the town centre has lagged behind other, more commercial, developments as a consequence and as in other regeneration areas, high value housing has been the first to be constructed. At the end of 2000, only 42 new residential flats had been constructed as a part of the town centre renewal, despite initial promises from developers of hundreds of cheaper homes.

Whilst urban regeneration agendas in Reading have only been a part of the broader changes that have occurred in the Reading area, they have nonetheless played a practical and symbolic role in exacerbating growing socio-economic divisions. Symbolically, the regeneration of the urban fabric has created new imaginations of place, focused on middle-class consumption norms and requirements. Reading has become a more aesthetically attractive location for visitors and investors encouraging further investment and market-driven growth. It is now dominated by national and multi-national investors so that the re-making of Reading as a place has, ironically, involved the 'globalisation' of its spaces and economic activities. In practical terms regeneration has also been linked to profit-making and market growth. Whilst Reading has been hailed as a model of urban regeneration (see The Guardian, 2000a,b), much of what has taken place has not tackled the significant problems of exclusion afflicting growing sections of the town's population. Indeed, in promoting particular types of development it has exacerbated them (see Regan and Patrick, 2001). Some traditional middle class groups, particularly public sector workers, have found themselves increasingly excluded from circuits of consumption, something which happens to a much smaller extent in less rapidly expanding locations. In the longer term Reading, may therefore become a victim of rapid and increasingly unsustainable local growth in the broader context of growing regional and social inequalities across the UK.

6. Conclusions

The New Labour government's Urban White Paper calls for the wide-scale redevelopment and marketisation of Britain's inner urban areas (DETR, 2000; see also Urban Task Force, 1999). Brownfield redevelopment, it is argued, plays a key role in reinvigorating urban areas through the re-population of urban spaces and the attraction of new forms of investment. New forms of growth are encouraged as a 'positive' thing, with the (re)marketisation of urban spaces characterised as a prerequisite for urban regeneration. Most research on regeneration has concentrated on programmes in major urban areas, often in contexts of regional and local socio-economic decline. This paper has sought to broaden the scale of research on this topic by focusing on the discourses and practices of regeneration in a context of rapid economic growth. Growth presents different opportunities and problems for policy makers and other actors. A 'setting of success' can provide a focus for further market investments, with growth becoming self-perpetuating and cumulative in nature. There is a temptation for local agencies to promote market-led strategies to enhance political support and legitimacy.

The research has highlighted the significance of creating new discourses and imaginations of place. Discourses provide the frameworks within which new agendas are developed and specific issues 'problematised' or marginalised (see Wilson, 1996). In Reading, place-building has been a critical element in the mobilisation of new urban regeneration strategies. Particular visions of how the place 'should be', in a normative sense, have been constructed and promoted in an attempt to justify and underpin new forms of market-led growth. Perceived problems have been identified as problems of 'market failure', requiring the re-marketisation of place to solve them. With regional economic growth taking place at a rapid rate, policy-makers in Reading have not wanted to 'miss out' on the possibilities for new development, fearing that its position within real and imagined regional and national urban hierarchies would be damaged if it failed to do so. Alternative discourses in the town have been relatively muted and the research has highlighted the power of market growth as a dominant discourse.

The study has also provided evidence of the processes involved in partnership and regime formation in an English city. Agendas for regeneration have been led by the local authority, with businesses and other interests playing a secondary, yet supportive role. The findings, in many ways concur with Basset's (1999, p. 192) depiction of local regime formation as a coherence of different networks under a recognisable 'overarching ideology or discourse'. The operationalisation of agendas at the local level has involved the formation and reformation

of bilateral and multi-lateral networks which have been brought together at specific times to facilitate regeneration. A situation has developed where 'some networks may expand and try to bend other policy areas towards their aims (Basset, 1999, p. 192). This has occurred in respect to issues such as training and policing policies which have been re-aligned in order to support the town's wider regeneration strategies. Whilst the local authority has been *the* key player, other interests, particularly property developers and service providers have played a major part in promoting their own, market-driven, interests. The redevelopment of Reading's urban spaces has resulted from a combination of local agenda setting and market opportunities, many of which reflect Reading's wider position in socio-economic networks.

The research has also highlighted the critical role of *place* in the mobilisation, articulation and implementation of regeneration programmes. The physical and imagined place provides a platform for the bringing together of a variety of social, political and economic objectives. Place-building projects also provide a catalyst for regime formation and development. Projects can be established which bring together a range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations in the pursuit of economic growth. Particular interpretations, discourses and practices are promoted at the expense of others. In Reading, the absence of a strong place identity in the 1970s and 1980s was partly responsible for the failure to develop an effective agenda for regeneration. In the 1990s a combination of local changes have brought new agendas to the fore, with place-building a key element. Consumerist forms of regeneration have sought to create new identities, subjectivities and associations for those living in and visiting Reading. The rebuilding of public spaces to facilitate both new forms of association and new modes of economic development has important implications for social identities and social control (see Sennett, 1990; Glennie and Thrift, 1996). As Zukin (1995, p. 259) argues, 'public spaces are an important means of framing a vision of social life in the city', something that policy leaders in Reading have sought to do by creating new public spaces focused on water-side, aesthetically pleasing developments, historical associations and the construction of a new image for the town. Inevitably, in establishing such spaces particular visions, discourses and social groups are excluded (politically and even physically) to enable the 'right' types of development to take place.

Place is also an essential element in understanding the geographies of uneven in the UK. As Allen et al. (1998) argue, even within regions such as the South-east, some areas develop much more quickly than others, calling for new geographical imaginations which reject a view of regions and places as bounded and homogenous units (see also Crang, 1999). Instead, places must be understood in a relational sense, in that development is dependent on the broader networks of relations within which places operate and of which they are a part. Reading's urban developments and those of other places, are a consequence of its place within such networks and the ways in which local actors have been able to reflexively adapt and respond to emerging opportunities. In the longer term, development may, for example, be undermined by the unsustainability of investment taking place within Reading and the broader regional and national geographies of economic development in the UK. The pressure to develop high-return, market-driven programmes has the potential to undermine more socially oriented agendas, so that development pressures are deliberately generated to promote profitability at the expense of excluded communities and (increasingly) middle income, mainly public sector, workers. In the absence of a commitment from the New Labour government to establish strategic, re-distributive regional policies to spread growth, the problems of unbalanced development now afflicting towns such as Reading will have a significant impact on their long term competitiveness. Problems faced by locations in the South-east, as the UK's most competitive region, will also have wider repercussions for the national economy and standards of living more generally.

Acknowledgements

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