

**The Experience of Diversity in an  
Era of Urban Regeneration:  
The Case of Queens Market,  
East London**

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This batch of papers has been presented at the Third Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls”

## **The Experience of Diversity in an Era of Urban Regeneration: The Case of Queens Market, East London**

### **Summary**

This paper explores the relationship between ethnic diversity, public space and urban regeneration by considering the redevelopment of Queens Market in the multiethnic borough of Newham, East London. In 2004 Newham Council announced plans to demolish the market and relocate it within a new shopping and residential complex. In response, local people have campaigned to halt the scheme and have called for the refurbishment of the existing structure. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Newham, the paper examines the conflict that has arisen between local people's attachments to the market and the Council's vision of creating a "safer and cleaner" environment aimed at attracting higher income users. Within this frame, the paper attempts to unpack the contested significance of diversity, from the everyday experience of interaction and a resource that is mobilized by campaigners, to the gentrifying trajectory that is inherent in the market redevelopment scheme and reflective of a more general process in contemporary urban regeneration in Britain.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Diversity, Urban Regeneration, Public Space, Street Markets, Collective Action

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**EURODIV Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls” 11-12/09/07.**

**Nick Dines, Kings College London**

## **The experience of diversity in an era of urban regeneration: the case of Queens Market, East London \***

It is a blustery but sunny Saturday afternoon in early December. Queens Market is packed with people going about their weekend shopping trips. The smells of fish, meat and coriander waft through the air as the solitary cries of traders are drowned out by a multilingual babble. Four Black Caribbean men in their sixties hanging outside a kiosk taunt a fruit and veg trader about West Ham United’s latest plight in the Championship. Groups of Asian and African women chat as they rummage through rolls of material on a stall tended by two young white men. In front of the canopy a few people are collecting signatures to “save Queens Market”. One of them, a middle-aged Asian man, is relaying information in Hindi through a megaphone. Discarded empty boxes are littered around stalls and a number of plastic bags eddy in the aisles. In a quiet square adjoining the market, a few people are milling around a caravan belonging to a property development company. An exhibit has been erected displaying designs for a new complex featuring a superstore, a new market, shops and apartments. Leaflets are being handed out to the few passers-by, asking for their thoughts on the plans. Printed on the front of them are the words: “The New Queens Market. Towards a Safe, Clean, Vibrant and Lively Shopping and Living Environment”. [Field notes, December 2004]

### **1. Introduction**

Queens Market, a general street market selling foodstuffs and household goods, has operated next to Upton Park railway station in Newham, East London for just over 100 years. Since 1968 the market, which currently consists of 80 stalls as well as a series of permanent shops and kiosks, has been located underneath a purpose-built open-ended steel and concrete structure [**fig. 1**]. Queens Market has always also been a focal point for minority groups, from East European Jews and Germans at the beginning of the twentieth century to the Caribbean and South Asian groups who started to arrive after the Second World War to more recent migrants such as West Africans and East Europeans.

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\* I would like to thank my former colleagues at Queen Mary University of London, Vicky Cattell, Wil Gesler and Sarah Curtis, with whom I worked on the JRF-funded project ‘Public Spaces, Social Relations and Well-being in East London’. While some of the fieldwork conducted for the project forms the basis of this paper, the arguments contained here within are entirely my own.

The London Borough of Newham (LBN) is one of the most diverse local authority areas in the United Kingdom. According to the 2001 census, it had the highest non-white population in the UK: 60.6% of its 237,900 residents were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, compared to 7.9% nationally and 28.8% in London. In contrast to neighbouring boroughs such as Tower Hamlets with its large Bangladeshi population, the minority ethnic composition is extremely diverse. The principal ethnic groups are: Black African (13.1%); Indian (12.1%); Bangladeshi (8.8%); Pakistani (8.4%) and Black Caribbean (7.3%). The borough's dense web of social and ethnic networks and relatively cheap housing has meant that it remains a first point of arrival for refugees and migrants, which have recently included Sri Lankan Tamils, Somalis, Congolese, Albanian Kosovars, Poles and Lithuanians. As one commentator has recently described: "the area as a whole has changed from an area of substantial minority settlement to a rainbow majority of minorities" (Smith 2006, p.28). Although Newham has had some of the highest levels of reported racial harassment in the country (Prasad 2000), it did not experience the disturbances that occurred between Asian and White groups in northern England during the summer of 2001. Moreover, the borough has a strong anti-racist tradition (for example the Newham Monitoring Group, set up in 1980 to counter, among other things, racism within the police force, was the first organization of its kind in the country), while the extreme-right British Nationalist Party has been very weak in Newham compared with the neighbouring borough of Barking and Dagenham where it has a number of councillors.

Locally, Queens Market is often considered to be the "multicultural heart of Newham" on account of its particular history, the variety of produce and items on sale, the mix of people who trade and shop there, and the fact that it is situated at the geographic centre of the borough. The label also reflects a popular tendency to identify the market as a site where difference is encountered and negotiated (Young 1990), and as a more 'open' (Wallman 2005) and less rigidly defined (Sibley 1996) social arena than other local places. Street markets have traditionally played a key role in British towns and cities as sites of commerce, consumption and social interaction. However, in recent years there has been a narrative about their decline as they have found themselves competing with

superstores and out-of-town shopping malls (Watson and Studdert 2006). This decline has been recently checked by the growth in popularity of specialist and farmers' markets, although these have tended to attract a particular, middle-class public (ibid). In contrast, Queens Market remains a very busy and popular market; attracting customers from across London and beyond. Since 2004 it has become a major focus of public attention as a result of plans drawn up by the local council and private developers to demolish the market and relocate it within a new shopping and residential complex. In response, a group of local people has campaigned to halt the scheme and to call for improvements to the existing market. During this period, Queens Market has come to encapsulate, both in Newham and more widely (e.g. Muir 2005), a series of interconnected conflicts surrounding urban regeneration; from questions of consumer identity and architectural design to class composition and local democracy. Here I want to focus in particular on the issue of ethnic diversity; how this is bound up with local experiences and representations of the current market as a public space, and the ways in which it is recuperated within the plans for redevelopment.

This paper draws on a Joseph Rowntree-funded research project that examined the social and therapeutic role of public spaces in Newham (Dines et al. 2006). The research employed a series of methods: open-ended discussion groups that examined people's uses and understandings of public open spaces; observation of selected sites (two main streets, two parks and two markets); and in-depth individual interviews with residents in an area of central Newham reflecting a broad cross-section of the population in terms of ethnicity, age, gender and housing tenure. During the preliminary stage of research the redevelopment of Queens Market became a major public issue and this was closely followed through local and national media coverage and through attendance of public meetings and exhibitions about the redevelopment as well as committee meetings of the market campaign group (who also formed one of the discussion groups). The issues explored in this paper build upon previous work that analysed the relationship between migrants, public space and regeneration in the historic centre of Naples, Italy (Dines 2002). A focal point here was the legal status of migrants and their marginal role in urban renewal projects and public debates about a 'new' Naples. In the case of Queens Market,

questions of status and exclusion are less immediately pertinent. East London presents a very different context to Naples: while immigration in Italy is a relatively recent phenomenon and access to citizenship highly restrictive, London has a long history of ethnic minority settlement and, while there has been a recent surge of government and media interest in contemporary immigration to the UK, the city is home to a large, multi-generational population of non-white British citizens. The ethnic diversity of Queens Market has, itself, not been a matter of controversy. Rather, discordance has arisen between, on the one hand, grounded experiences of a diversity that both constitutes and is constituted by the space of the current market, and, on the other, a top-down, decontextualised vision of diversity that is projected onto a redeveloped setting (Lefebvre 1991).

The paper firstly provides a discussion of urban regeneration in Newham and connects this with the New Labour government's urban agenda and recent politics of 'multiculturalism'. Ethnographic fieldwork in Newham is then drawn upon to examine local people's discussions of Queen's Market and how a perceived threat to its existence has enhanced reflections about the market as a public space. The paper proceeds to describe the redevelopment scheme and the campaign to save Queens Market before analyzing the disparate ways in which the market has been publicly represented and how particular understandings of diversity cut across these discourses. By doing so, the paper attempts to unpack the contested significance of ethnic diversity, from the unmediated everyday experience of interaction and a resource that is mobilised by campaigners, to the gentrifying trajectory that is inherent in the redevelopment scheme.

## **2. Urban regeneration in the London Borough of Newham (LBN)**

"One of Newham's great strengths is its diversity, but one of its weaknesses is the unequal opportunities and level of resources available to its citizens." (London Borough of Newham Community Strategy, LBN 2004b)

"[Regeneration] can be physical, social and economic, achieved through building new homes or commercial buildings, raising aspirations, improving skills and improving the environment whilst introducing new people and dynamism to an area." ("What is regeneration?", London Borough of Newham website, [www.newham.gov.uk](http://www.newham.gov.uk))

'Urban regeneration' is a term used to describe a range of policies and initiatives that seek to resolve actual and perceived structural problems of British cities. In contrast to the property-led regeneration of the 1980s and 1990s, urban policy during the New Labour government has sought a more socially inclusive approach that speaks of community involvement and neighbourhood renewal (Imrie and Raco 2003). At the same time, there has been great emphasis on private-public partnerships in carrying out improvements to the built environment and infrastructure of neglected parts of cities with a view to encouraging economic revival. The plethora of schemes and action plans over the last decade has coincided with a discussion about a putative 'urban renaissance'. An influential figure in this debate, the architect and head of the government's Urban Task Force Sir Richard Rogers, has repeatedly underlined the fundamental role that high quality design plays in revitalizing what he sees as the drab public realm of British cities. Design, for Rogers, is "the foundation for public interaction and social integration [which] provide the sense of place essential to engender civic pride" (Rogers 2005, p.5).

Newham is currently at the centre of one of the most extensive regeneration programmes in Britain. This has been overseen by the New Labour-controlled LBN council (at the time of writing, 54 out of 60 councillors were Labour Party members) which is run by a mayoral and cabinet system. Projects range from large-scale 'showcase' developments on brown field sites that include the new commercial and residential 'Stratford City' district as well as major developments around the Royal Docks, to neighbourhood renewal schemes such as the West Ham and Plaistow New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme. New and refurbished public spaces have played a key role in recent projects. These range from the prestigious Thames Barrier Park designed by French architects, which won a Royal Institute of British Architects Award in 2001, to the community-led refurbishment of a park in the NDC area. Many of these schemes have focused on providing high-quality design and opportunities for social interaction, and have been accompanied by measures aimed at improving the management of the local environment and at curbing social disorder.



The overarching aim of urban regeneration in the borough is “to restore Newham to its former position at the centre for trade and commerce in the heart of East London” and “help to change the income, prosperity and quality of life for [its] residents” (LBN 2004a). This ambitious agenda is captured by LBN Council’s vision statement: “By 2010 Newham will be a place where people choose to live and work”. The presentation of regeneration and the ‘vision’ itself have drawn heavily on the language used by the Urban Task Force (Rogers 1998) and the Government’s Urban White Paper (DETR 2000). Indeed, if Docklands in the neighbouring borough of Tower Hamlets can be considered a classic example of the property-led regeneration of the 1980s, Newham is perhaps paradigmatic of the ‘neo-liberal communitarian’ (DeFilippis 2004) agenda under New Labour with its focus on social cohesion and promotion of public-private partnerships. The most visible signs in Newham, as the council itself admits, have been to land and property, but urban regeneration is also seen to have long-term social benefits such as improving educational standards, creating new jobs and reducing crime. However, while underlining improvements for the local community, the council has also been eager to attract more affluent residents to new residential developments, particularly around the Royal Docks and to increase the desirability of other areas through new building and refurbishment of existing social housing stock. In the council’s promotional pamphlet “The Regeneration Tour: Welcome to Newham”, information about luxury apartments in a riverbank tower development sits alongside details about proposals to regenerate the social housing area of Canning Town. While these various developments all fall under the umbrella term of ‘regeneration’ and are accommodated within the council’s 2010 vision, there are nevertheless underlying tensions between concerted efforts to transform the image and demographic composition of the borough on the one hand and attempts to build social cohesion and consolidate local people’s existing place attachments on the other. Much concern has been raised by academics and commentators about the gentrifying tendencies within the current urban renaissance agenda and the potential displacing effects that these have on local communities (for an overview of debates, see Imrie and Raco 2003). Loretta Lees (2003), for instance, argues that while the Government’s Urban White Paper (DETR 2000) tempers the excessive elements of what she calls the ‘cappuccino vision’ of the Urban Task Force report (Rogers 1998) through

its addition of the Social Exclusion Unit, it remains a pro-gentrification document in so far as it seeks to promote market-led gentrification as an instrument of both urban regeneration and social and economic policy.

Newham's regeneration vision received a boost in July 2005 when East London (and Newham in particular) was chosen as the venue for the 2012 Olympic Games. Nationally, the Olympics were seen as providing an opportunity to regenerate "one of the most deprived areas of Europe" (Gillan 2005). At the same time East London's ethnic diversity was seen as a key winning ingredient in the capital's bid. The diversity of many of Britain's major cities within the context of regeneration policy has been both a challenge – to involve and benefit minority groups that have traditionally been excluded from urban processes – and a resource; for instance, in reimagining urban areas as 'cosmopolitan' and therefore attractive to new residents (Young et al. 2007). This celebration of diversity has sat, often uncomfortably, alongside an official discourse of 'community cohesion' (Worley 2005); the lack of which was seen to have been a major motivating factor in the social unrest among British Asian and White groups in northern English cities in 2001 (Cantle 2001, Amin 2002). The Cantle Report, published in response to the disturbances of 2001, called on local authorities to draw up a 'local community cohesion plan' which would include 'the promotion of cross cultural contact between different communities at all levels, foster understanding and respect, and break down barriers' (quoted in Worley 2005, p.487). As well as preparing a community strategy that emphasised building "an active and inclusive community" (LBN 2004b), Newham Council has actively promoted its multiethnic heritage; for instance in marketing the 'Asian' Green Street as a tourist attraction (Carey and Ahmed 2006). A key goal of regeneration in the borough, however, has been to encourage *socially mixed* communities, which makes no direct reference to ethnicity. The initial redevelopment scheme for Queens Market notably shifted attention away from the market's renowned diversity to concentrate on issues of poor design and perceived anti-social behaviour. Diversity would later re-emerge in revised plans which proposed, *inter alia*, public murals that would "reflect the area's heritage and international feel" and "enhance [the market's] appearance" for both its current and future users (St Modwen-LBN 2006).

### **3. Local experiences of Queens Market**

The JRF research in Newham explored people's uses and experiences of a wide range of public open spaces, from parks, high streets and markets to 'non-descript' neighbourhood places such as forecourts and street corners. Prior to analysing the everyday significance of these spaces, the research provided an insight into the different ways in which people *talked* about public spaces. The term '*public space consciousness*' was coined to indicate the varying levels of discussion about public space and the circumstances in which this took place. This was not intended as a value-laden concept, like 'class consciousness' in orthodox Marxist discourse, but rather as a way of describing the degree to which people reflect upon their experience of public space. 'Public space consciousness' is never fixed but may be low where a space is perceived purely in terms of the function it provides (for example, the street as a space of transit), it might increase when a particular space is considered fundamental for a particular activity (social or otherwise), and might develop further when, for some reason, this space faces transformation or elimination.

More than any other place that figured in the research, Queens Market emerged as a key public space that captured a series of features valued by informants. Firstly, it was a source of many people's attachments to their area. It was deemed to be a key attraction that not only provided cheap fresh food and 'ethnic' produce which was not readily available elsewhere, but also provided the area with a lot of its character.

Secondly, it was viewed as a vibrant social arena. One White British man in his fifties, who had recently moved onto a nearby housing association estate, likened it to a "Roman forum". Its spatial configuration – the lines of stalls, aisles and series of openings set back from the busy pavements of the adjacent Green Street – turned the market into a sort of surrogate town square that provided the setting for routine, unexpected and new encounters. An Indian woman in her forties recounted how she had met a White British woman at the fabric stall in the market and had invited her to an embroidery class at her nearby day centre. While the trade in the market provided a common basis for people's visits, it was also a place where older people in particular felt comfortable to linger. A

group of Asian elders, for example, described it as a place where they could “hang-out” without necessarily having to buy anything.

Thirdly, the market played an important role in contributing to some people’s sense of well-being. It was described as a “fun” and “uplifting” social environment and was also a source of fond memories of growing up. A Black British man in his thirties, who had continually used the market since childhood, recalls how shopping trips would transform into major social occasions involving members of his extended family:

“You used to play ‘Spot the Black Guy’ as you’d walk down there. [...] Once you hit the market you knew that is where you’d see a lot, because that’s where you’d know your mums, your aunts and your uncles would go and shop and you’d always be meeting them. [...] They’d start to socialise there.”

It also provided respite to those people who felt uncomfortable in some neighbourhood spaces. A 13-year-old Afghan boy who had been bullied by white teenagers in his local park saw the market as a sort of safe haven where the same individuals (who sometimes worked on the stalls) no longer posed a threat.

Finally, people’s sense of comfort in the market was often tied to their appreciation of it as a multiethnic and multilingual space. Queens Market was considered by many people to be the most “multicultural” place in the borough, if not East London, and was often contrasted to the adjacent shopping parade of Green Street with its predominantly Asian-owned jewelry and clothes shops<sup>1</sup>. The “multicultural” epithet was not simply the result of the diversity of traders and shoppers or the range of products on sale but because the market was also seen to enable and encourage casual encounters between different ethnic groups who would otherwise not come into contact. According to a female member of the market campaign group, this applied both to shoppers and traders:

“Next to the Bengalis selling biscuits is a Jewish guy selling curtains. They would never have met a Jewish bloke [...] It’s most unlikely that they’d find themselves in a colleague situation where

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent survey, the ethnic composition of customers in Queens Market was found to be noticeably different to the almost exclusively Asian section of Green Street: 27% were ‘Black’, 16% were ‘White’, while the remainder were ‘Asian’ (Rubin et al. 2006).

they can ask questions, they can joke with him. [...] And he could ask them about their religion. I can't see another space where that could possibly happen. You could set up a society to bring Jews and Muslims together: he wouldn't turn up and they wouldn't turn up, because these sorts of outfits attract special people.”

In a similar way, a British Pakistani woman explained how the market provided a rare environment where she would find herself speaking to strangers.

“We meet different cultures. I might be buying vegetables that I don't know how to cook, and the lady from another part of India will tell me how to cook it. Normally I would never talk, I would never know such things. And you could hear the same story for many market users who go regularly.”

Such exchanges were seen as part of an unmediated everyday experience. It was the mundane nature of diversity – resonant with the “liberating ordinariness of race” contemplated by Paul Gilroy (1987 [2001]) – which was considered to be one of the most valued aspects of the market. Most people who discussed the market professed a more open understanding of public space where difference was not only tolerated but was integral to its identity. Recent research on a market in South London has suggested that indigenous white residents and traders possessed nostalgic views about an ethnically ‘authentic’ market that had been lost through waves of immigrants (Watson & Wells 2005). However, people’s views of Queens Market indicate a more complex situation. Firstly, the market was commonly understood to have never been an exclusively “English” space. During the first half of the twentieth century, many of the traders and customers were East European Jewish, Irish and German immigrants<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, the market remained a key place where people encountered, negotiated and reflected upon the demographic changes in the area. In contrast to some narratives about residential streets, people were less likely to perceive the market as being ‘defiled’ by a changing public.

Not everybody liked Queens Market. A few disliked it because they were generally not keen on busy places. Many younger people and children were amongst its most

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<sup>2</sup> Some older white people’s narratives about Queens Market and Green Street were nostalgic about a different “cosmopolitan” mix rather than an ethnically homogenous past.

vociferous critics, variously describing the market as “rubbish”, “too noisy” and “minging”<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, younger people were far less interested in Queens Market as a social space. Their meeting points were often independently established in quieter or underused places. For a 24-year-old White British man, the market had only really been a meaningful place when, as a teenager, he used to hang around there with friends at night. Many of those who disliked the current market nevertheless criticized the redevelopment scheme, largely because they appreciated the market’s advantages as a social resource for other people. A 22-year old British Pakistani man for instance exclaimed:

“I don’t like the place, but I do understand why people are upset, that it’s not going to be there in a couple of years time. If it’s going to disappear, where else are they going to go? [...] There was a market in Canning Town as well, it wasn’t as big as Queens Market, I mean it has just gone now [*nb. following regeneration*], it’s been taken apart.”

The attention surrounding redevelopment had contributed further to people’s reflection upon the market’s significance as a public space. Most thought that the general conditions in the present market needed to be improved but were very critical about the plans to redevelop the market around a superstore (which, at the time of interviews, was a key proposal: see below). Significantly, nobody imagined how the future site would function as a public space if the scheme went ahead. At most, a large supermarket nearby could be convenient. Many instead believed that regeneration would remove part of the local area’s history and destroy a fundamental social space. For example, the Black British man who had continually visited the market since he was a child commented:

“I don’t think they should get rid of it because it is tradition, it’s been there for so long. As I say, people gather there, it’s like a communities place; like, “I’ll meet you at the market”. It’s like a landmark [...] and to take that away, I think you’re taking a bit of history away.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A youth slang term meaning ‘smelly’ and/or ugly.

<sup>4</sup> There is a rich and long-standing literature that explores the negative impact of neighbourhood renewal schemes upon the social arenas and networks of residents, from Young and Willmott’s classic study of post-war reconstruction in Bethnal Green, East London (1957) to Fried’s study (1963) of the displacement of inner-city communities in Boston, USA, to Mindy Fullilove’s recent work (2001) on “root shock” amongst African Americans in Philadelphia.

#### **4. The proposed redevelopment and the campaign to save Queens Market**

During late 2003 and early 2004 reports in the local press and rumours in the community abounded about the imminent demolition of Queens Market and the arrival of a major superstore. In response to calls to have the matter discussed, LBN Council publicly announced in September 2004 that it had appointed the property developers St Modwen, specialists in urban regeneration, to redevelop the site. The initial plans – revealed at the local Green Street Community Forum on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2004 – envisaged the replacement of the existing structure with a new shopping and residential complex fronted by a small plaza. At the centre of the redeveloped site was a large superstore. This was flanked by retail units, blocks of flats and a small-gated market hall relocated to an adjoining space. During the presentation, the Deputy Mayor of Newham emphasised that the retention of Queens Market was central to the council’s plans for the site and that the major investment and subsequent management (on a 150-year lease) by their appointed private partner would insure the market’s long-term future. Regeneration, it was argued, would improve the quality of shopping facilities that would enable the area to compete with new retail developments elsewhere in the borough, while new housing units in front of Upton Park tube station would increase the residential mix in the immediate area by attracting buyers who would otherwise not normally consider living in central Newham. Following consultation commissioned by LBN at the end of 2004 and a series of meetings with market traders and shopkeepers, St Modwen produced a revised plan in 2005 which saw the supermarket reduced in size and its food section moved to the first floor, the number of independent shops increased and a larger open-sided market hall that retained all the stalls currently operating in the market. The new scheme also included the planned relocation of Green Street Library and a service centre into an “iconic building” that would be built over the market. Further alterations were made to the scheme after the superstore pulled out of the project in June 2006, largely as a result of the adverse publicity surrounding their inclusion in the scheme (Balakrishnan 2006)<sup>5</sup>. A third plan was revealed in October 2006 in which the market was expanded in size to take up the

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<sup>5</sup> The redevelopment of Queens Market was also featured in the US documentary *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, premiered in the UK in April 2006, which increased national public attention around the scheme.

whole ground floor of the development<sup>6</sup>. This plan currently awaits planning permission (to be decided probably at the end of 2007).

Since early 2004, an umbrella group called 'Friends of Queens Market' (FoQM), consisting of shoppers, traders, community organisations and local political parties, has coordinated opposition to the redevelopment scheme and has instead called for refurbishment to the existing structure and a different approach to management<sup>7</sup>. Campaign members have insisted that Queens Market in its present form is one of the most popular and successful general street markets in London which not only provides an important facility for the different local ethnic communities but also attracts customers from across the capital and beyond. The chief concerns are that regeneration would destroy the market's popularity and unique appeal and jeopardize the livelihoods of traders and shopkeepers as well as the low prices of produce on offer. The majority of traders were sceptical about reassurances from St Modwen that all market stalls would be retained and rents would remain frozen for five years, because unlike the council, the developers were a private company whose priority was to maximise financial returns (and, as such, the housing and new shops were far more commercially important than the market to the overall scheme). Although the superstore was removed from the most recent plan, Queens Market would still change in definition from a "public highway" to a privately-run "market-in-a-mall". Since 2004 FoQM has had a regular presence in the market; collecting 12,000 signatures for a petition to save the market<sup>8</sup> and distributing newsletters about the redevelopment and campaign activities. It has also criticised the political process surrounding the scheme through frequent letters to the local press and deputations at LBN council meetings. In particular, it questioned the legitimacy of the consultation<sup>9</sup> and attacked the lack of access to information and the unwillingness of

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<sup>6</sup> For details of the plans and the development agreement between LBN and St Modwen, see LBN web site: [www.newham.gov.uk/Services/RegenerationProjects/AboutUs/queensmarket.htm](http://www.newham.gov.uk/Services/RegenerationProjects/AboutUs/queensmarket.htm)

<sup>7</sup> From 2005, FoQM worked in tandem with the Queen's Market Traders Association that grouped together shopkeepers and stallholders opposed to the redevelopment but who nevertheless sought to negotiate with the Developers.

<sup>8</sup> This petition was delivered to the Mayor of London at the Greater London Authority in September 2005.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, campaigners pointed out that consultation occurred after LBN had already appointed private developers and that there were no alternative options to redevelopment in the questionnaire [see weekly editions of *Newham Recorder* and *Stratford Guardian* between December 2004 and March 2005].



councilors to voice an independent opinion regarding redevelopment. At the end of November 2005, FoQM publicly presented its plans for a refurbished market (FoQM 2005) which included setting up a trust comprising traders, shoppers and the council to develop and manage the market, substantial renovation of the existing environment, an improved cleaning regime as well as advertising and new signage aimed at capitalising on the market's success and promoting it as a tourist attraction. During the last three years, campaigners have built up a network of allies locally and across London, including national organisations such as Friends of the Earth and the New Economics Foundation (which subsequently produced a report on the market, Rubin et al. 2006).

## **5. Contested notions of public space and diversity**

LBN Council and St Modwen recognized the uniqueness and popularity of Queens Market. However, for the most part, the existing site was negatively portrayed. In its preliminary consultation leaflet, St Modwen stated:

“Queens Market is largely a covered, architecturally undistinguished box with open ends and lacking in modern facilities. It has acknowledged problems relating to crime, hygiene and waste disposal. It suffers from a proliferation of certain uses such as meat sales and fruit and vegetables. [...] The new market will accommodate permanent stalls and market shops in a design that gives a more coordinated appearance to the market” (St Modwen-LBN 2004)

The council acknowledged more readily the market's popularity and its importance as a source of cheap and fresh produce but argued that the present space needed to be improved in order to safeguard the market's future:

“We have a good market, but we have bad use of space. That space is just poorly designed, poorly structured, poorly maintained and we need to relocate the market”. (Deputy Mayor, Green Street Community Forum meeting 14/09/04)

According to promoters of the redevelopment, the current market had no aesthetic or design value. Rather it had “wasted” and “disorderly” space which could be reorganized more efficiently. The market was almost exclusively conceived as a retail site. Crucially, there was little reference to the current market's non-commercial role. When the social aspects of the market were considered these were again invariably negative. During the

initial presentation of redevelopment plans to the public, the council sought to delegitimize the market by presenting it as an unsafe and dirty place where prostitution and petty crime took place unabated<sup>10</sup>.

As public consultation about the initial designs was carried out, official descriptions of the market as a site of anti-social behaviour became less dominant as the discursive frame switched from a focus on the present environment to what the future developed site would look like. The demolition of the current market was not perceived in anyway to be a loss because as a purely commercial amenity, it was seen to be eminently replaceable and improvable. The new market would be part of a cleaner, safer and more organized environment. The addition of what the developers described an “iconic building” (Green Street Community Forum 15/11/05) and public space elements such as the plaza at the front of the development would render the shopping experience more inviting and pleasant.

Significantly, it was only after the present market had been sufficiently discredited that the ethnic diversity of Queens Market began to be acknowledged. LBN’s first public newsletter about the redevelopment in November 2004 had juxtaposed St Modwen’s plans with two photographs of the present market: one displaying an empty aisle during a non-trading day and the other showing rubbish behind a staircase. By its fourth and last newsletter in August 2005, the visual focus had shifted to close-ups of smiling shoppers and traders. These facial portraits convey a multiethnic milieu that is at the same time disconnected from the spatial dimension of the present market; thus rendering diversity readily transposable into a future, regenerated setting. In the redevelopment plans themselves, the question of diversity was initially absent. In fact, St Modwen had to hastily alter the drawings of its first plan after it was noted at the presentation that all the people in the initial designs were inconspicuously white (in the subsequent version some

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the Deputy Mayor of Newham wrote a letter to a local newspaper prior to the official announcement about the future of the market, complaining: “I live opposite Queens Market and have for years shopped there. But these days, with two small children, I don’t feel comfortable trying to squeeze through rotting fruit and veg on the floor, with prostitutes appearing to openly ply their trade at the front of the market and the roads at the back piled high with trade waste.” (Newham Recorder 25/07/04)

figures were redressed in headscarves and shalwar qamizes [fig. 3]). Rob Imrie has argued that architects have tended to conceive the human body as “presocial, fixed, and beyond culture”, which is often merely a reference point to convey building scale (Imrie 2003, p.63). In this case, St Modwen went one step further: it presumed the public to be culturally homogenous. By its third and final plan, St Modwen had instead started to play up the “international feel” of a market that “provid[ed] an opportunity for people of different cultures and backgrounds to meet and communicate” (St Modwen-LBN 2006), and even confidently included photographs of Green Street and Queens Market alongside its designs. The new computer-generated drawings also communicated a clear discursive turn: the pencil-outlined figures of the first plan had been replaced by actual photographs of people (again, ethnically distinguishable by their garments) and had been brought off the street into the bright and uncluttered environment of a new market. The achromic, multiethnic crowd that had previously provided contrast to the colour and scale of the project was now transformed into an orderly assemble of participating consumers.

The Friends of Queens Market gathered a broad range of people from different social and ethnic backgrounds and as a result there were many different relationships with the market as a public space. There was, nevertheless, general consensus on a number of key issues. Queens Market was more than just a retail site: it was a unique and important amenity for the local community both as a shopping centre *and* as a social place. It was acknowledged that the market in its present state was run down, although it was argued that this was mainly due to years of council neglect and ineffective renovation in the past. However, campaigners were particularly angry about what they saw as a willful misrepresentation on the part of the council and the developers of what was an extremely popular and vibrant market. While many recognized that the building was, in the words of one trader, “not the prettiest place in London” (deputation to LBN council, 20/09/04), this did not detract from its success and vitality. In contrast, the redevelopment scheme would “sanitise” the market and transform the area into a “clone town” consisting prevalently of chain shops which, it was argued, was already the case of nearly every other shopping area in the borough. In the FoQM’s printed material the market was frequently dubbed “the jewel in Newham’s crown”, while during public meetings with

the council and developers, local people not involved in the FoQM campaign, spoke about how the market was a source of local pride.

From the outset, the market's unmediated diversity was seen as a key resource in mobilising support for the campaign. FoQM capitalised on St Modwen's lack of knowledge and insensitivity to local context (exemplified by the faux pas in its first drawings) and in doing so questioned the reasoning behind the council's decision to appoint them as developers. During a deputation to a council meeting, a White British trader described the market as a continually evolving place that provided a window on the demographic transformation of London. This risked disappearing if the market were redeveloped:

“When I first began working there 15 years ago it was almost purely Asian with some Caribbean people and then we saw more African people come in and now, more recently, we've seen many more Eastern European people coming in. [...] Places like Queens Market are a first base for people. People travel from all over London to come to Queens Market, from Southall, from outside of London. They won't travel to come to ASDA or Waitrose or Sainsbury's. They've got one locally. We're not short of supermarkets and as much as they may give you the highest revenue, and they may provide you with the cleanest, sanitised environment with which to present Newham, it doesn't mean it will offer the best for the people of Newham.” (20/09/04)

In its refurbishment plan, FoQM made a point of articulating the particular diversity of the market, for instance remarking, “like a coral reef this multi-layered and multi-faceted community is a fragile form, easily destroyed, yet near impossible to replicate” (FoQM 2005, p.24). Hence, it was not diversity per se that was threatened by redevelopment but a diversity contingent to time and space.

### **Conclusions: (Dis)placing diversity**

The two 'sides' appear to hold diametrically opposed ideas about diversity in Queens Market: for the campaigners, it is an integral element of an irreplaceable social environment; for the redevelopers, it is an appendage to a new retail and residential complex. The major fault line runs not between interaction and distance, or tolerance and discrimination, but in between the embodied experience of diversity on the one hand, and a disembodied, supra-quotidian vision on the other.

Many of the local informants interpreted Queens Market as a flexible, multi-layered space that accommodated a range of attachments. Regardless of the market's actual physical state and aesthetic qualities, no other local space was seen to play such an important role for so many people. The uncompromising late-60s Brutalist architecture was but a shell, as one FoQM campaigner put it, "to the heart that is throbbing beneath". In contrast, supporters of the redevelopment assigned unambiguous, peremptory definitions to the market: it was dirty, badly designed, a site of anti-social behaviour and incompatible with their particular view of regeneration. Ultimately, Queens Market was a redundant space that evoked the 'old' (Fordist and welfarist) Newham. From the outset, there was no concern to understand and build upon people's attachments to the present market. This was instead conceived as a replicable series of shops and stalls. Nor was there any evaluation about the market as a place of interaction between different people. Instead, an overarching regeneration agenda that spoke of urban renaissance and mixed communities took precedence over everything else. While the council insisted that the scheme would evolve to meet the interests of the existing community, it also pronounced a desire to attract new residents, as was spelt out by an LBN regeneration officer during a meeting with FoQM:

"It's not just a market development: we're very keen to build a newer community there. [...] The council clearly are interested in housing people who need to be housed but we're also interested in introducing to areas a mixed tenure type where people want to buy. We want areas to become – if I can be blunt about this – like any other area where you want to buy, rent, come in and come out. We've got areas which are just all rented or all...you know, it's just not good." (Newham Housing Services, Stratford, 26/10/04)

Leaving aside the fact that the area around Queens Market was already characterised by a mixture of housing tenures, the words of the officer underline an ambivalence inherent within the council's vision that "by 2010 Newham will be a place where people choose to live and work". Queens Market, presumably used at the moment more through constraint than out of choice, should become "like any other area". Indeed, the 2005 public consultation questionnaire stated that one of the possible side effects of redevelopment would be that "the cultural mix/atmosphere of the market may change" (LBN-Mori 2005,

p.100). This is instead recuperated in the developers' final plans through public art murals and new surroundings that provide "opportunities to meet and communicate" (St Modwen 2006). Diversity itself has undergone a process of gentrification: having been dislodged from the temporal and spatial context of the old market, it is now also amenable to a different type of higher-income user. The notion of 'community cohesion' has been reformulated by being subsumed under the dominant agenda of 'urban regeneration'.

The campaign to save Queens Market has frustrated the council and developers by challenging all aspects of the redevelopment while continually questioning its *raison-d'être*. It has also effectively maintained local and national media attention on the market, which was instrumental in forcing the withdrawal of the superstore from the scheme in 2006. The promoters of redevelopment have tended to deride the opposition or consider it simply irrelevant. Campaigners were accused of "refusing change". Like the market, they too were seen to be part of a bygone era. During a deputation to council in September 2004, the Deputy Mayor told the chamber (and an astonished public gallery of shoppers and traders):

"It is a hard-left agenda that is skewing the whole process. [...] I had this stuff way back in the eighties, way back in the eighties in Liverpool, way back in the eighties in this borough and we've had enough of it! It's about regeneration and about making Newham a better place".

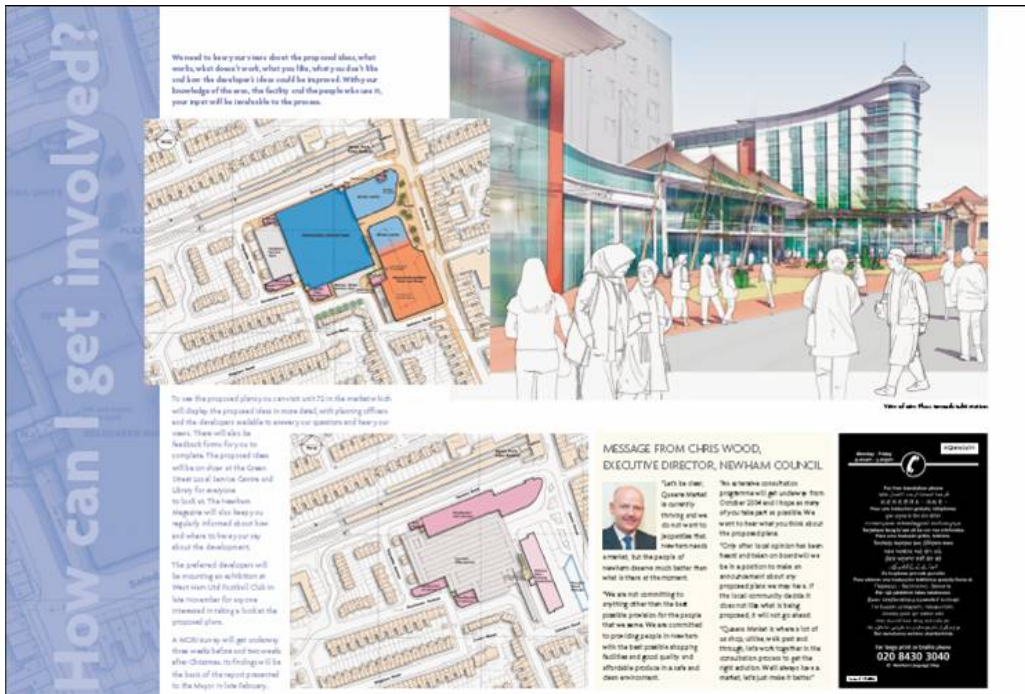
And yet the 'old' Queens Market was important exactly because it provided an arena in which social and cultural change was experienced and negotiated. Moreover, the campaign itself has played its own part in 'community cohesion' by forging and consolidating ties between different groups of people. Whatever the final outcome of the redevelopment scheme, both Queens Market and the politics of diversity have already been reconfigured by grassroots struggle.



**Figure 1: Queens Market (2005, photograph by the author)**



**Figure 2: Queens Market (2004, photograph by Dan Sayer)**



**Figure 3: First Redevelopment Plan for Queens Market (St Modwen-LBN 2004)**



**Figure 4: Third Redevelopment Plan for Queens Market (St Modwen-LBN 2006)**



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