

Liverpool Biennial – review

Liverpool's neighbourhoods, blighted in the name of regeneration, are now being helped by the city's art Biennial



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The legacy of housing market renewal (HMR) in Venmore Street, Anfield, with Liverpool Football Club's stadium looming in the distance.

Can art save a city? Probably not, at least not in the way usually put forward by proponents of "culturally led regeneration", the idea that some wacky sculptures and purposeless Kunsthallen can raise places from the mire. Then again, in Liverpool, a city that over decades has been punched in the face and kneed in the groin by politicians, two small initiatives by artists are creating rare alternatives. Together with the efforts of Save Britain's Heritage, they offer glimmers of hope where there has not been very much.

Most recently Liverpool has been subjected to housing market renewal (or HMR), an invention of the Blair government at the besotted peak of its love of the magic of the markets. The big idea was to spend billions of public money buying up perfectly good houses, remove their inhabitants, demolish them, and build new houses in smaller numbers. It was done in poor, northern areas where values were low: the theory was that the laws of supply and demand would push up the prices of the survivors and, as rising house prices were considered the engine of economic and social salvation, happiness would inevitably follow.

It resembles older wrong-headed policies, from which we had supposedly learned, like wholesale slum clearances – "They keep doing the same thing," says Save's Jonathan Brown, "when it has manifestly failed." Earlier versions had at least some idea of a better future in mind, but with HMR there was only economic abstraction, opportunities for the construction industry, and nihilism. It gave zero value to existing neighbourhoods, community networks, personal memories or attachment to place. If you had inherited your house from your grandmother, or spent a lifetime of weekends improving it with DIY, or had childhood memories of playing in the street, or had friends round the corner, it all counted for nothing. You would be subjected to a compulsory purchase order and given a cheque often insufficient to buy a replacement.

If you ran a chip shop, or a pub, or a church, your customers or congregation would disappear, and – often without compensation – you would be forced to close. Worse, the recession came along, and the sunny forecasts on which HMR was based proved false. Then came the Coalition government, who rightly tried to stop the programme, but without offering much by way of repairing the damage.

Many millions were set aside to ease the transition but, scandalously,

much of this is still being spent on demolition. Last June the then housing minister Grant Shapps proudly posed in front of Ringo Starr's birthplace, which he had rescued, in a PR moment that obscured the continued destruction around the Beatle's crib. This absurdity – that the money provided by Shapps is being spent on the precise opposite of his stated aim – is being legally challenged by Save. Last week the high court agreed that they could take their case further.

In Anfield, around the stadium of Liverpool Football Club, giant images of millionaire footballers look down on streets where lead flashing and iron railings have been stripped and replaced by the tin shutters that keep intruders out of empty properties. One or two residents cling on, surrounded by havoc and waiting their turn to be moved out.

Bulldozers are still crunching through brick terraces, while large rectangles of empty grass memorialise vanished blocks, awaiting the sometime-never when the market might permit housebuilders to put up fewer, meaner, trashier, costlier replacements of the houses lost. Purple signs, sinister in their mock optimism, say "Welcome to the Anfield & Breckfield Regeneration Zone". They add, using the mendacious gerund beloved of such projects, "creating neighbourhoods for the future".

Around Liverpool, it is easy to spot the zones blessed by HMR. They are the wrecked ones, the hopeless ones. Those left alone, even in the poorest areas, have coherence, and functioning ecologies of high streets and homes. Some show signs of self-initiated renewal: flowerpots outside houses, new businesses opening up. It is all the worse for the fact that Liverpool was, and partly still is, a wonderfully constructed city. It has magnificent parks, beautiful topography, and handsome streets. Many of the houses being destroyed would sell for a million or more if they were in London.

Meanwhile the city holds an art Biennial, the latest edition of which has just opened. It could be an all-too-familiar stunt, the use of art as a front and a distraction. Except that at least some of the artists invited by the Biennial have realised that the most significant issue in Liverpool is the devastation caused by public policies.

In Anfield, the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk has used her Biennial funding to get together a group of local residents, and reopen a bakery closed by the effects of HMR. The idea is both to recreate what was a social centre, and make a place where people can get decent food. They are also planning to rebuild houses in the same block: at this point it goes beyond being art, but something with business plans and funding proposals.

During the Biennial Van Heeswijk has set up bus tours, modelled on the tourist trips around Beatles and football sites, that take you around the devastated zones. They include heartbreaking meetings with victims, and stories of the effects of "managed decline", which is the official term for the Grozny-like landscape they have made of Anfield. They tell of fires, floods, rising crime, and of a man who watched as a digger "took out the face of my friend's house", so as to make a photo opportunity for a local politician.

A little distance away, in Everton Park, there is another attempt to work with local people to counter the effects of official devastation, led by the Los Angeles-based artist Fritz Haeg, and James Corner, who helped create the prodigiously successful High Line park in New York. This place has been twice erased by earlier incarnations of the HMR mentality: in the 1960s Victorian terraces were replaced by tower blocks which, rapidly named "The Piggeries", were themselves expunged by a large patch of green. Which, despite the fact that it commands the best views in and of Liverpool, is underused and not greatly loved.

Here they chose a large hollow, and arranged that it should no longer be mown to municipal length, such that it could become more meadow-like. In the centre they planted a "forage spiral" of wild and edible plants. In the opening weekend of the Biennial a temporary dome was erected, under which conversations were held between locals and professionals about the future direction of the park. The idea is that the spirit of the spiral, whereby people are actively engaged in the business of growing things, will inform the rest of Everton Park. Until now, users of the park have been invited to do little more than stare at grass.

It is a strange situation. On one hand there are the vast budgets wielded by national and local governments, deployed under the heading of "regeneration", whose effect is to crush the city. On the other hand there are the artists, often from other countries, with comparatively tiny cultural budgets at their disposal. And there is Save, which has bought houses in threatened terraces to obstruct future destruction.

The hope is that these small, community-based projects will be the model for many more, which will collectively counter the effects of HMR. There are precedents: in the 1970s residents of Liverpool fought the blighting and clearance of their neighbourhoods by forming trusts and co-operatives. They had some success until planning policies of mass destruction took over again. Is it too much to hope that this grim cycle of history won't repeat itself again?



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