

Urban Renewal: Social Aspects in Planning

Summary

Urban renewal in Israel today is being promoted by parliamentary legislation and by a number of different strategies initiated by the Ministry of Construction and the Ministry of the Interior via the planning institutions. We can identify two main components of urban renewal: an economic component and a social component. The economic logic behind urban renewal strategies currently prevailing in Israel encourages urban renewal which is funded by the private sector. However, this economic logic does not take into account the social problems associated with urban renewal, particularly the phenomenon of gentrification which results in exclusion of existing residents of neighborhoods and the entry of new, more affluent tenants, in their place.

A challenge in the discourse on urban renewal is that various groups define urban renewal in different ways. We define urban renewal as a process of rehabilitation and improvement of the existing built fabric using a variety of tools, while examining both the physical condition of the buildings, and the social condition of the residents. These planning tools may include, inter alia: renovation of existing buildings without additional floors or units (as was done in Project Renewal¹); expanding existing apartments; densifying by adding floors and units to existing buildings; new construction in open spaces between buildings; demolition of existing buildings to make way for new construction (raze-and-rebuild schemes); and renovation of public infrastructure and upgrading of public areas, shared spaces (such as yards, parking lots or lobbies of buildings), and public buildings.

Addressing the social issues must begin with a social survey of the existing population of each compound, which will serve as a database for the municipality when it outlines its urban renewal policy, and for the planners and professionals implementing this policy.

¹ Project Renewal was an effort instituted by government decision in 1977 to rehabilitate neighborhoods/communities which were both socio-economically weak and physically rundown. The project was multidisciplinary, involving rehabilitation of buildings and infrastructure along with social assistance to residents.

In addition, on the basis of the survey results, social tools may include community work² with the existing population, public participation in planning, providing access to health care and education, vocational training and help in finding jobs.

Urban development must integrate treatment of the individual building with a wider urban vision. The goal is to create a social mix over a wide area; to identify lands throughout the area for transference of building rights³; to balance the added residential construction with added sources of municipal income (such as industrial zones), which will finance the construction of necessary public buildings; and to locate land for the public spaces and public buildings required to serve the additional population.

In Israel, the planning authorities encourage urban renewal projects that focus only on the physical aspect, with the goal of densifying existing urban space and adding residential units. The approach currently used by the Israeli planning authorities gives priority to raze-and-rebuild schemes, meaning the demolition of old buildings and construction of new ones with significantly larger building rights in their place. This track is often seen as an appropriate response for rundown neighborhoods built in the 50s and 60s of the 20th century, and for the contemporary need to increase the urban density in existing cities. However, the prevailing tendency to present raze-and-rebuild as a “win-win” scenario is problematic, since it ignores potential long-term physical and social implications of such schemes. It is therefore vital to understand the social complexity of urban renewal processes prior to any intervention in the existing fabric.

In addition to raze-and-rebuild schemes (of two types: raze-then-rebuild, and build-then-raze-then-rebuild) there are other types of urban renewal in Israel today, such as expanding existing buildings, and National Outline Plan 38 – a country-wide plan for strengthening buildings against earthquakes⁴. These tracks all provide new apartments in older neighborhoods, leading to higher densification. There is also, to a very limited extent, the Neighborhood Renewal project, which does not include the addition of new housing units.

² Work with the community to acquaint residents with the urban renewal process and its implications, and to learn the needs of the population.

³ Under the present strategy, the units added to a complex are sold to offset the cost of renewal and to provide income for the developer, who therefore requires large building rights to ensure financial viability. The suggestion here is to compensate the developers with building rights in other areas, thus lowering the density in the areas for renewal.

⁴ Similarly to other renewal schemes, developers are able to add units for sale to offset the cost of strengthening the building and to provide additional profit.

Researching cases from around the world has shown us that urban renewal is one of the most important issues on the planning agenda of many countries. In most cases, urban renewal is carried out in socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhoods whose social and physical condition is poor. However, there is a public and professional debate about the fine line between renewal which serves the residents, and renewal that leads to gentrification; that is, forcing out weaker residents while stronger residents move in.

A surprising conclusion of our international review was that the vast majority of raze-and-rebuild projects are carried out for buildings belonging to public housing. In many countries, razing and rebuilding a complex in which the majority of apartments are privately owned would not be considered. Moreover, the case of high-rise residential buildings (other than luxury apartment complexes) in which apartments are privately owned, is relatively rare in Western Europe. Raze-and-rebuild projects in other countries are regarded primarily as a means to upgrade and improve the quality of public housing and are considered from that perspective. In Israel, the percentage of public housing apartments in urban renewal projects is very low. Most of the apartments are privately owned, and therefore the improvement of public housing is not considered at all.

How might urban renewal be carried out without excluding the existing population? Is it possible to encourage the transition of "strong" families into areas with "weak" populations while creating a social mix, in such a way that existing residents can stay in the renewed neighborhood? This goal is difficult to achieve in practice. Improvement of these neighborhoods ought to primarily serve the existing local residents. Cases of demolition and rebuilding ought to include mechanisms for moderating gentrification, for instance by building low-cost affordable housing for existing residents. Low-cost housing would provide a solution for people who do not own their apartments, and who are therefore not entitled to compensation as part of urban renewal projects, particularly renters and public housing residents.

This report also includes recommendations for carrying out socially conscious urban renewal. There are two types of recommendations; "principled recommendations" and "practical recommendations". The principled recommendations concern fundamental change in the agenda and policies of planning for urban renewal. Such a policy change would allow the entire population to benefit from the improvements of urban renewal. It means giving urban renewal a social goal, which stresses upgrading the living conditions of existing residents and ensuring that they be able to enjoy the benefits of that upgrade.

To ensure reaching this goal, it is crucial that a survey be carried out before any urban renewal plan is undertaken, to examine the socio-economic situation of the existing

residents, their needs and desires, and the impact of the future construction on them, according to a variety of parameters (and not only the economic parameter). This survey would allow local authorities to choose appropriate planning solutions, which in some cases should be complemented by multidisciplinary projects to deal with the residents' other needs. Projects carried out in such a manner may also be consistent with the densification of urban space and the addition of residential units, but the aims will be different from those practiced today, and the results are therefore likely to be different in different communities.

Changing policy would also require a change in how such projects are funded. Meeting the needs of the existing population, including in matters not related to planning, will require public funding and will thus reduce the power of the market in determining the character of the construction. Reducing the strength of the market would allow other actors to express themselves, particularly the existing residents. Today, in many cases, the residents are neither informed of, nor aware of, the consequences and implications of the projects in which they are involved, and do not participate in decision making processes. The change being proposed here thus requires significant public participation.

We recommend the following measures to implement planning policies for socially responsible urban renewal:

- Requiring the local authority to make an assessment of the housing needs
- Requiring preparation of a social/community impact study
- Requiring implementation of in-depth public participation in the urban renewal project
- Implementing integrated urban renewal through multi-disciplinary intervention
- Adoption of a combined approach - a combination of renovating existing buildings and demolishing the old to make way for the new
- Encouraging public-private cooperation, and setting up non-profit housing organizations
- Providing incentives to homeowners to renovate and expand existing buildings.

Our practical recommendations concern the various ways to integrate the residents' needs and desires into the proposed planning. Sometimes these needs are not in line with the proposed plans, especially when those plans propose radical change to the existing buildings. The recommendations presented here concern the possibility of adapting the proposed change to existing tenants, whether by a more moderate densification of the proposed construction, or by providing practical solutions to be formulated after learning the needs of residents, and in partnership with them.

The premise of these practical recommendations is that even in the current situation, when a change in policy seems unlikely, it is still possible to improve existing urban renewal strategies. The guiding rationale is that plans with less extreme changes will be more considerate of existing residents, and will reduce the level of gentrification. However, even in cases of razing and rebuilding, it is still possible to improve the social success of the project by taking these measures:

- Conditioning the right of developers to build on State land (for sale on the open market), on their involvement in rehabilitating rundown areas.
- The possibility of transferring building rights (see above, footnote 3).
- Implementing "integrated projects" which combine urban renewal and new construction.

Even in raze-and-rebuild schemes requiring high-density new construction to offset costs, it is still possible to introduce mechanisms to lower the levels of densification, in order to lessen the social difficulties involved in such projects:

- State funding of projects, using part of the development costs that would be invested for a similar number of units if they were constructed on un-built land.⁵
- Provision of additional incentives to reduce construction costs.

In summary, in order to implement urban renewal, which also meets social goals, the planning must be derived from the social goals. The building style, height and density should be determined in relation to each compound's unique characteristics. It should be taken into account that high-rise construction means high maintenance costs, and measures should be taken to enable existing tenants to be able to afford the costs of remaining there. We therefore recommend that urban renewal projects combine buildings of different heights, including some whose height does not exceed nine residential floors.

Instead of determining the density of urban renewal projects only on the basis of economic feasibility, accepted planning criteria should be considered in proposing adequate public buildings and public spaces; upgrading existing infrastructure; and prevention of excluding the existing population in favor of a more affluent population. Urban renewal ought to be part of a strategy of strengthening communities in general,

⁵ Research has shown that the cost to the government of establishing infrastructure for a new project (on open land) is about 153,000 NIS per unit, while the cost in existing neighborhoods is only 38,000 NIS. We recommend investing part of the money thus "saved" in funding the needed renewal, lowering the need to increase the density to cover costs.

disadvantaged communities in particular, and integrating them into the renewed urban fabric.