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The renewal of Niddrie, Edinburgh

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By the late 1980s the situation in Craigmillar was so dramatic that some residents of Niddrie House tower blocks were setting fire to their houses in the desperate attempt of ensuring a prompt transfer. In 1987 the Council decided to improve the situation of Niddrie area, and started a series of activities that began a process of regeneration still in progress. Today the area of Niddrie – unpopular since its accomplishment – boasts of a long history of regeneration initiatives that illustrate very well different trends characterizing British and, specifically, Scottish policies. Initially major investors, and foremost actors of the regeneration, were the just about established Scottish Homes (later on Communities Scotland, the national agency for social housing and regeneration which invested in Niddrie 20,6 million euros in the period 1990-1998), the Council (7,4 million) and the private sector (7,6 million). The major part of the investment (84%) has been directed towards the refurbishment, towers demolitions and new construction of housing association (semi-private organizations for social housing) homes for rent. Until 1998 the regeneration was mainly concentrated in Niddrie House, while the 2000s saw the refurbishment of Niddrie Marischal, as parts of a wider strategy that includes other areas in Craigmillar and has been funded mainly thanks to national funding (New Housing Partnership Funding) channelled for a Voluntary Stock Transfer programme (the transfer of properties to housing associations and their consequent refurbishment).

The Council never had a precise strategy, and the regeneration occurred in a piecemeal way, however it is possible to identify some major objectives that characterised this first stage:

1. Density reduction (through high reduction of 5-storey buildings; demolition of the tower and multi-storey blocks; and redevelopment at a lower density)
2. Tenure diversification (channelling part of the properties to private ownership - Right to Buy and low cost home ownership - and transferring another large part to housing associations namely Hunters Hall, Edinvar, Manor Estate and Canmore)
3. Re-development following a traditional design and “Secure by design” measures
4. Development of community facilities and re-design of external spaces.

In 1986 a group of local residents established the Niddrie House Planning and Rehabilitation Group (NHPRG), which supported active tenants involvement in the process and was also active in promoting some social and economic regeneration that led for example to the provision of a community centre, play areas and the first 30 km/h speed limit in a residential area.

One of most peculiar aspects in Niddrie regeneration was probably the setting up of Hunters Hall Housing Co-operative, being this body born from utter initiative of tenants. In fact the HHHC works similarly to a housing association (refurbishing and managing properties that were previously council houses) with the difference that the steering group can be formed exclusively by residents (no external professionals) and that legally all tenants as a group own their properties.

Craigmillar regeneration

The process of renewal of Niddrie so far illustrated must be inscribed in the wider regeneration of Craigmillar, which began in 1993 under the form of a housing development plan promoted by the Craigmillar Housing Development Project (successor of NHPRG) with the participation of residents. In 1996 Craigmillar was

recognized as one of the most deprived areas in Scotland, and consequently was provided of a Priority Partnership (Craigmillar Partnership since 2000), a local agency with a twofold role of putting together different stakeholders (including residents and local government) and managing national regeneration funds, promoting projects mainly socially oriented. The early (and unchanged) goal of the Partnership states: *“By the year 2010 Craigmillar will be a self-sustaining, popular and valued community within Edinburgh”* (Craigmillar Partnership, 2005, p.10) with the subsequent objective of achieving: a mixed and stable population, good quality housing and environment, increased job opportunities, expanding local economy, enhanced education and training, a strong sense of community and effective community representations.

Although the continuous and integrated action, it seems that the work of the Partnership could not reverse the declining trend that led the population of Craigmillar to shrink from 17000 to 8000 inhabitants in 30 years. The reason of this failure was probably due to the limited public funding available to the Partnership. For this reason the Council decided in the early 2000s to undertake a project of physical and economic regeneration, inscribing the local needs into a broader city development strategy, and subsidizing it in partnership with the private sector (through the regeneration company PARC – Promoting and Regenerating Craigmillar). The new regeneration strategy is based upon the idea of bringing new population to foster the social mix, enhance the local economy and provide the necessary services and infrastructures to develop a sustainable community.

Finally it is worthwhile to consider that all these initiatives took place in parallel with the restructuring process of the Council service delivering strategy (Services for Communities before, and Community Planning later). The new strategy consists on having a more localised and participated approach, through the establishment of a Neighbourhood Partnerships to deal with the issues related with the day-to-day life in the neighbourhood (e.g. housing, environment, anti-social behaviour) in joint-up working with the residents and their representatives.

What results?

The regeneration in Niddrie housing estate if considered as a coherent unit produced quite considerable improvements. Starting from the viewpoint of tenure mix, the introduction of working adults through LCHO (Low Cost Home Ownership) scheme, and the housing associations more selective letting policy contributed to achieve a more balanced profile of households. These factors summed with generally enhanced environment led finally to reach a good degree of stability and improved life conditions. However some limitations of the tenure diversification strategy arose: the ownership fragmentation of the properties (partially of the Council, partially of different housing associations, partially privately owned) seems to threaten the cohesiveness of the local community. In particular, a consistent gap between council housing and the rest of the area emerged, especially in terms of household profile, and management of properties. Passing, then, to the built environment, if substantial improvements has been reached in the upgrading of houses (more popular housing type, upgraded structural features) and external spaces (design of gardens, streetscape, parking and play areas) however some Council properties already show signs of deterioration, suggesting the fact that the regeneration has not been completely sustainable.

In relation to the problem of crime, the housing associations allocation policy and the security conscious design measures have partially contributed to the fallen of crime rates, even if vandalism, littering and anti-social behaviours still exist as major problems in the area. For this reason, a short-term programme called Problem Solving Partnership recently put together the efforts of the police, the Council, local agencies and the residents in order to tackle the issue. Being one of the objectives of the partnership to raise the awareness of the community, it seems that the project showed more positive results.

For what concern the history of community involvement within the regeneration process, it is important to say that Craigmillar and especially Niddrie have showed a good record in terms of residents' participation. The early experience of NHPRG and HHHC are good examples. Furthermore, more recently the Craigmillar Partnership contributed to create a series of infrastructures for tenants' representation such as the Neighbourhood Alliance and the Community Council on one hand, and specific groups on the other (Community Regeneration Forum, Older People's Forum, youth conference, Capacity Building Project). Nevertheless the new regeneration plans by PARC, and its degree of community involvement is quite controversial in residents' opinion: although consultations (and others tools) were set up to take into account community view, on the other hand the profit rationale underpinning the project can be seen in contrast with some residents needs.

Concluding it possible to notice some progress in terms of holistic approach to regeneration: from merely housing focused early intervention to more integrated initiatives of the Craigmillar Partnership. However precisely the latter were criticized for being too much people focused, and consequently not enough decisive for the global asset of the neighbourhood. For this reasons the new PARC strategy is seeking to achieve more dramatic improvement in terms of environment and local economy thanks to private funding, risking, though, that social issues will slip back again on the background.

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