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## Viewpoint

# Reflections on the normalisation of poor quality in England's low-income housing

### Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that there is a problem with housing in England, as is also the case in countries and cities across the world. Whilst the government has conceded in policy literature (MHCLG, 2020) that price increases have led to an entrenchment of inequality in the UK, they have also accepted that the new homes being provided are often of too low a standard. Meanwhile, a recent policy document (DLUHC, 2022a) was published in response to the millions of private rental tenants paying market rent to live in homes the government considers unfit for twenty-first century living.

Less routinely discussed are these present circumstances in relation to those from which they have emerged. The UK's post-war house building programme – of which a significant proportion was social housing – has been described by scholars such as King and Crewe (2014) as one of its government's greatest successes, and indeed between the years 1951 and 1981 state-built housing made up 29 per cent of the total improvement in housing quality (Tunstall, 2020, 13). However, despite such a profound contribution to social progress, its built legacy has often been portrayed in negative terms, including by those with significant influence. Writing in 2016, then prime minister David Cameron argued that post-war housing estates were themselves entrenching poverty, such conflation of the council housing estate's material object with social deprivation having been a crucial factor in legitimising the cessation of meaningful state intervention in housing during the final quarter of the twentieth century. This discourse continues to help define relations between government, the market and the housing consumer, perpetuating a system that is dysfunctional and inequitable. Thus today, newly built or converted homes that are often comparatively smaller, darker and lacking in adequate access to open space are presented to prospective tenants and homebuyers as the dwellings they should expect. This circumstance was well captured in 'starchitect' and free-market propagandist Patrick Schumacher's proclamation that the typical young urban professional is content living in 'a small, clean, private hotel-room sized central patch' (2018), the presentation of this assumption as if it were axiomatic sparking much controversy.

In this piece, I argue permitted development (PD) office-to-residential conversions are emblematic of the low-cost housing being provided in England today. First introduced in 1947 alongside the UK's modern town and country planning system, PD rights are perhaps best understood as a set of rules that define what can and cannot be built in England without requiring planning permission. Originally, PD rights allowed only minor works to residential buildings – for example the erection of a garden shed. Their scope has since expanded significantly, with the 1979 Conservative government first extending such rights beyond the realm of the householder (Remoy and Street, 2018). Further changes have since occurred relatively regularly. In 2013, it became possible to convert office buildings (among others) to residential use without the need for planning permission, a change that has been salient to housing and its broad range of issues. With the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government of this time seeking to increase housing provision, regenerate town centres and create jobs in the construction and service industries, this expansion of PD rights aligned with other policy agendas (Clifford et al., 2019)

Whilst some other building types (such as storage buildings) were also eligible to be converted through this new policy, it is largely converted office buildings that have formed PD's contribution to new housing stock. Of the 72,980 new dwellings added to the housing stock through PD over the five years between 2015–2016 and 2019–2020, 64,798 (89 per cent) were created through office-to-residential conversions. Question marks were raised over the standard of accommodation being provided through this legislation and its reduction of important office space. Meanwhile, critics highlighted their impact on affordable housing provision; developer contributions did not apply to such conversions. The former criticism resulted in some revision to the policy. In 2020 it became a requirement for natural light to be provided in all habitable rooms of the newly created dwellings, and in 2021, for them to comply with nationally described space standards (Garton Grimwood, 2021).

In this Viewpoint, I take up Hatherley's suggestion (2009) that turning to the built legacy of the twentieth-century social democratic project can help displace the (now even further ingrained) knowledge of our status-quo as 'natural' or unavoidable. I do so with specific reference to the diminishing spatial and architectural quality of the homes being produced by the English housing system, which I suggest is demonstrated in many PD conversions. The broader themes of this Viewpoint apply to the UK as whole (and many places beyond). However, because PD is not pertinent to housing provision in all of the UK's devolved nations, this piece largely refers to the situation in England. Focusing on Runcorn, a 'Mark Two' new town in the north-west of the country, I briefly compare a (since demolished) post-war deck access housing estate with a nearby permitted development conversion scheme. These two forms of housing, it is argued, are emblematic of a significant regression in the standard of accommodation typically being produced for those citizens with little choice over where they live.

This leads to the argument that appropriate recognition of the housing achievements of England's recent past can help draw attention to the inadequacy of the homes manifest through its current system. Through this, I highlight an often-overlooked element in discussions over the need for reform in this context: the inferiority of the dwelling stock that future citizens will inherit, and perhaps even more alarmingly, will increasingly have to accept as the norm.

### **What is 'affordable' housing?**

Defining affordable housing is problematic, partly because it means different things in different geographical contexts, whilst there is anyway no absolute metric by which to measure affordability. Whilst it has often historically served as a synonym for social housing, in England and elsewhere affordable housing refers specifically to that which is subsidised for those whose needs are unmet by the market. More specifically in England, affordable housing is officially defined as housing that falls into four categories: housing rented at a minimum 20 per cent below market value; 'starter homes'; housing that is sold at a minimum 20 per cent below market value; and housing that provides a route to ownership for those who could not achieve this through the market (MHCLG, 2021: 64). Hilber et al. (2022) recommend a broader definition for international application: any housing which is deemed 'affordable' (in terms of periodic rent or mortgage payments) relative to household income. In many advanced economies, homes offered at 80 per cent of market rent/purchase price are not affordable relative to the means of their potential low-income inhabitants. Indeed, as Czischke and Gerard Van Bortel (2018) suggest of a city like London, 80 per cent of market price is still unaffordable for a majority of the city's population. The duplicity of this definition has been pointed out by Kallin (2020) among others. Although these homes may be categorised within the former definition, they do not necessarily conform with the latter. For such reasons, in place of 'affordable housing', I employ the term 'low-income attainable' housing throughout this piece. The term is used simply to refer to whatever is the least expensive readily available housing in a given locality – the housing that those with low-incomes and little choice are most likely to turn to through necessity.

An increased number of households entered the private rental market during the past decade (Rugg and Rhodes, 2018), part of a broader shift related to the decline and residualisation of social housing (Byrne, 2020). Whilst private rental was once largely associated with the student, the migrant and the young professional, this sector houses an increasing number of families and low-income groups, who would traditionally have turned to social housing (McKee et al., 2020). Whitehead and Goering (2021) posit that the increase in households facing unaffordable market rents is likely to grow in cities such as London and New York. Relatedly, affordable housing waiting list numbers have increased across Europe in recent years (Housing Europe, 2017),

with council house waiting lists in England expected to double from their 2021 figure of 1.1 million during 2022 (Housing Europe, 2021). In this context, private rental (and to a lesser extent market purchase) can be considered 'low-income attainable' housing in many localities.

The privatisation of social housing has taken place in countries across Europe (Baldwin Hess et al., 2018) and the world (Arrigoitia, 2018), with scholars such as Kallergis et al. (2018) suggesting a global crisis of housing affordability. Such a circumstance is undeniably complex and multifaceted, with significant geographical variation. Nevertheless, commentators such as Arrigoitia (2018) and Brickell et al. (2017) have argued that the housing affordability crisis is directly related to – and even dependent on – the reduction of social housing that has occurred across the global landscape during recent decades.

## **The mediocre, the poor and the appalling**

Housing is a deeply political topic, and of course what can be considered rational in this context is defined by ideology. The typical logic of those on the left has been that it is incontrovertible that housing should be built by government, because its core objective is (or should be) to provide high-quality homes for all members of society, something that such a politics generally achieves. To those on the neoliberal right, the market best serves housing demand, with high accommodation standards assured because developers must meet the requirements of the consumers on whom their profits rely.

In today's English context, the situation is muddier. Both Labour and Conservative governments of the past twenty or so years have discredited the built objects of post-war social housing estates, all the while a purported cross-party consensus has emerged over the need to build more social housing. This schism would suggest that there is political support for social housing as a concept, yet contempt towards the specific architecture of its manifestation under twentieth-century social democracy. However, despite its rhetoric, the current government's record on social housing provision is poor. Whilst its White Paper of 2020 referred to the positive contributions that have been made by social housing historically and pledged to see councils build more homes, the department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities' (DLUHC) own data shows how private developers have since continued to provide the vast majority of new housing. During 2020 to 2021, under a quarter of total housing additions were branded affordable (DLUHC, 2021) – a decline on the previous year - whilst private enterprise delivered 78 per cent of all new build dwellings during the same year. Local authorities contributed just 2 per cent, as they had the year before (DLUHC, 2022b).

Not only has much of the housing we are building been found to be unaffordable, conclusions have also been reached over its overwhelming lack of quality. A 2020

national audit of residential design found three quarters of the housing environments being created in England to be either 'mediocre' or 'poor' (Carmona et al., 2020, 7) and that less affluent communities get particularly bad developments – perhaps an inevitability within a marketised system. This study used 17 different design considerations as a metric by which to determine external design quality. Whilst post-war council estates have been criticised for lacking variation and may be considered soulless by many, today's privately built estates often display the same characteristics. At the global level, it has been suggested that the unadornment and physical regularity of post-war state-built housing represents the social homogeneity its politics aspired to, particularly with regard to the brutalist idiom (for example Tucker, 2014). However, the lack of variation and largely agreed upon absence of beauty in today's mass housing estates is not often conflated with the political-economic system that gives rise to them. Although views on post-war estates are typically polarised, something of a consensus exists across the political spectrum that new development (not limited to housing) is substandard. Conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, for example, declared we are 'littering the country with built debris' (Scruton, 2020, 99), whilst Marxist Geographer David Harvey has argued that even 'luxury' branded developments being built in today's cities offer only 'fictitious qualities of superior living' (2019).

Perhaps the most extreme spatial manifestation of today's deregulated, market-based housing system are the PD conversions, which make up an increasing amount of England's housing stock by changing the use of offices and other commercial premises to residential accommodation. The introduction of PD as a deregulatory mechanism is not unique to England, with countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Germany having introduced similar policies (Marsh et al., 2020). As discussed by Clifford and Ferm (2021) in this journal, it was largely state landlordism that ensured the continued increase of residential space standards during much of the twentieth century, an upward trajectory to which deregulatory measures have caused a pernicious reversal. The outcome of this downswing is demonstrable by the 'appalling' (ibid, 556) space standards that typify PD conversions. It is not only dwelling sizes that are at stake – Clifford's previous research on PD (Clifford et al., 2018; Clifford et al., 2020) found that it provides a marked reduction in the overall quality of housing being delivered in comparison with that created through planning permission. Other key issues identified were poor natural light levels and lack of amenity space, factors which have undeniable impacts on the health and well-being of those who end up residing in these places – often society's most vulnerable. Paradoxically, whilst developers carrying out PD conversions are exempt from having to officially include officially defined 'affordable' homes in such developments, these conversions are disproportionately inhabited by groups of people without the means to live elsewhere (Marsh, et al., 2020), and in many locations this form of accommodation can therefore be categorised as low-income housing, as I argue it can in Runcorn.

## The increasing desirability of council house dwellings

Although the quality of post-war social housing has often been thought of in generalised terms, there was enormous variation in the environmental and constructional standards of the estates built. There were internationally acclaimed projects such as the Alton Estate in Roehampton, which was described by a prominent North American architecture critic in 1962 as the ‘finest low-cost housing in the world’ (cited in Hatherley, 2013: 68). This scheme has since been given Grade II\* listed status for its architectural significance, as have several other particularly high-quality social housing projects of this era. On the flipside, there were constructional disasters, largely in system-built blocks. This was most poignantly manifest at Ronan Point, an East London tower block where a gas explosion on the eighteenth floor led to a ‘house of cards’ type scenario of structural failure in which there were fatalities. This event was hugely damaging to the British public image of both concrete as a material and to the typology of the residential tower block (Newland, 2008).

Another aspect of the negative popular perception of social housing has been its discursive construal as a spatial entity to which crime and poverty are intrinsic. Boughton (2019) has suggested the widespread transformation of the social housing sector during the 1980s and 1990s was legitimised by the emergence of the ‘problem estate’ as the predominant image of social housing in the UK, part of a discourse which conflated these environments with the social ills that sometimes occurred within them. Such a shift contributed to the transfer of over two million council homes to private ownership during these years, through right-to-buy policy and mass acquisitions by housing associations (Ravetz, 2002). However, with the recent growth in brutalism’s popularity and the emergence of a generation of adults whose views are untainted by received ideas surrounding the council housing estate, their taken for granted knowledge as places that inherently cause poverty and social deprivation appears to be gradually rescinding. A 2021 study by Aelbrecht and While found that millennials typically take a neutral stance on twentieth-century social democratic architecture, and that they were not likely to subscribe to any narratives of its failure.

Despite their inconsistent levels of building quality and regardless of one’s aesthetic preferences, the vast majority of homes built by the state after the introduction of the Parker Morris report in 1963 up to its abolition in 1980 had good standards of light and space. In many cases, these dwellings also possess thoughtful design features and benefit from central locations. For these reasons and the above-mentioned shifting perception of the architecture of this era, they are becoming increasingly coveted, especially in London’s context of globally high property prices. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the success and popularity of *The Modern House*, an estate agency set up around ten years ago after its founders identified a niche in marketing these (and other more grandiose modern movement) properties to a metropolitan, design-savvy demographic. Their listings are, however, only accessible to those with considerable means – at the time

of writing the cheapest of its 'modernist estate' properties is a £400,000 two-bedroom apartment in East London. A *Guardian* article (Barton, 2019) described how *The Modern House* is a source of escapism for many who cannot imagine ever realistically being able to afford one of its impeccably presented properties, suggesting a situation where millennials dream of a perfect life spent 'in such open-plan, light-filled harmony'. The spectacular irony missed by its author is that many of the homes marketed on this website were built as social housing, built to make exactly such living conditions accessible to everybody. These are the very same places recently so recently (and to an extent still) defined as barbarous 'sink estates', and what the success of *The Modern House* demonstrates is that the way we interpret council housing is largely the result of its social status, rather than its material existence. With the right photography, furnishings and marketing strategy it can be branded as something to be proud of, as it once was.

## Slums of the past, present and future

New towns such as Runcorn have been said to embody the spatial dimension of the welfare state (Ortolano, 2019), whilst Clapson (2017) has described the new towns programme as one of the only '*grand projets*' carried out by the British state during the twentieth century. Later in this century, the sale of new town assets formed an early part of the Thatcher administration's privatisation programme. Today, a vision for the town's future is currently being formulated as part of the Reconnecting Runcorn investment plan, which will be delivered through the allocation of £23.6m from the government's towns fund. As somewhere built under social democracy, substantially redefined under late twentieth-century market liberalism and undergoing significant redevelopment under the conditions of today, I therefore argue that Runcorn's new town centre is an appropriate case by which to examine the relationship between political change and the quality of low-income attainable housing that is being provided. Of course, Runcorn has a nuanced set of spatial and socioeconomic characteristics and is not intended to serve as a representation of England as a whole, or otherwise. Rather, it is presented as a symbol of change, as a place where this categorisation of 'before and after' housing products of England's altered political landscape have been well articulated in built form. Furthermore, with regards to the specific comparison of PD conversions with post-war social housing made here, Runcorn is not unique in its proliferation of both models within a new town context. Basildon, for example, saw 26 per cent of its new homes created through office-to-residential PD legislation during 2020, whilst Harlow saw 51 per cent during the same year (Hill, 2020). Moreover, each of these new towns were built to provide social housing for a significant proportion of their populations.

Built from 1973 immediately adjacent to the civic and commercial centre of the new town, the Southgate estate was a social housing scheme that used experimental

construction methods to provide 1,355 homes for people from across Merseyside and beyond, many of whom were leaving overcrowded slum conditions. Archival research on this now demolished estate brings into sharp focus two things that are particularly pertinent to this Viewpoint. Firstly, that the undersupply of housing (something that has dominated the conversation on the topic in recent years) is a contingent circumstance. There was actually a significant oversupply of council housing in Runcorn during the two decades following its creation, with the New Town's overall vacancy rate standing at 11.3 per cent during 1978. This was the year Southgate would be fully completed, its own vacancy issue more extreme at 31 per cent (Runcorn Development Corporation, 1978).

A similar picture of council house surplus could be found in many other parts of England at this time (Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994). Whilst Dellaria (2021) has problematised the putatively held notion that the building of Runcorn arose out of genuine meliorist intent, these figures help displace the conception of today's housing crisis as unavoidable. Rightly or wrongly, a politics from our not so distant past actually allowed for an excess of affordable housing to be available. This itself led to inevitable problems (Southgate's chronic under-occupancy contributing to its stigmatisation) and whilst adequate space standards were mostly achieved in post-war estates, the quality of other aspects of these environments was less universally achieved. At some estates, management and maintenance issues led to unkempt communal areas, whilst access to services could be poor (Tunstall and Coulter, 2006). It is however noteworthy that the availability of housing in Runcorn and many other English towns and cities at this time meant far fewer citizens needed to live in cramped housing conditions under precarious circumstances. In England, homeless households doubled between 1979 and 1990 (Farrall et al., 2019), a direct result of the sale of council houses during this period (Murie, 2014).

Second, despite the above-mentioned issues that were manifest at some post-war estates, it has become apparent that much of the housing once (and to an extent still) believed to cause social deprivation actually offered/offers good environmental standards, especially in comparison to so much of what we build today. Southgate has been routinely taken to epitomise the 'problem estates' of the post-war era, and more expansively, what some believe to be the outright failure of the modern project. Such a portrayal is perhaps best illustrated by the *Architects' Journal's* referral to Southgate at the time of its impending demolition in 1989 as 'Britain's Pruitt Igoe'. However, contrary to the largely accepted representations of this kind, this estate provided accommodation that (notwithstanding its typically poor thermal properties) could be regarded as luxurious in the context of today.

Having been designed by the Royal Institute of British Architects' gold medallist James Stirling, its flats and maisonettes gave everyone a fully glazed south or west facing living room that opened onto a large balcony or private garden, all of which overlooked landscaped public squares that had been modelled on the Georgian





Figure 1 Southgate model photograph, illustrating the generosity of its garden squares and its relationship with the town centre

Source: Cheshire archives and local studies

proportions of those in Bath, Edinburgh and London. Its generous amenity provision included 19 children's play areas. With its bold use of materials, dynamic formal composition and maritime-inspired porthole windows, this idiosyncratic piece of architecture gained international attention, being featured in Japanese, French and Italian architectural journals among others (*A+U*, May 1973; *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'Hui*, October 1976; *Domus*, June 1976). Furthermore, it provided the utmost convenience of access to Runcorn's commercial and civic facilities, its elevated pedestrian system connecting directly with the wider network so that none of the estate's (intended) 4,000 or so residents would be more than a four-minute walk away from the town centre. For much ruminated-upon reasons, the demolition of Southgate began in 1989, just 11 years after its full completion. It was replaced by Hallwood Park, an estate comprising developer-style houses built to a much lower density by a local housing association. It largely remains a place of social housing to this day, and although it lacks the architectural ambition of the scheme it replaced, is a pleasant, relatively



Figure 2 Brochure image of a Southgate show apartment  
 Source: Cheshire archives and local studies

positive example of the type of suburban environments built by housing associations in the post-Thatcher period.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Southgate's show dwellings look as if they might have appeared in a fashionable interior design magazine, admittedly helped by the furnishings and high-quality architectural photography (much like those 'aspirational' estate properties marketed by *The Modern House* today). However, even if the rhetorical capacity of the image is disregarded, it is clear from Southgate's full range of archival material that these flats were light, spacious and thoughtfully designed. This resulted in tenants who were generally happy in their living environments, a 1983 residents' survey revealing how a majority of residents were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their dwellings (Warrington and Runcorn Development Corporation, 1983). A typical one-bedroom, two-person flat measured around 50 m<sup>2</sup>, which happens to be today's minimum space standard for this dwelling type. Such standards are however

too often not being met: a 2011 survey of the England's eight largest housebuilders found the average one-bedroom home being built was just 46 m<sup>2</sup>. When it comes to PD conversions, far more extreme lows have been reached, with Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors' research (Clifford et al., 2018) finding many instances of 15 or 16 m<sup>2</sup> studio apartments.

With a nationally typical profusion of office accommodation available in Runcorn, developers have unsurprisingly begun to take advantage of the lucrative opportunities such buildings can offer in conjunction with PD legislation. Castle View House, located around the corner from where Southgate once stood, converted an office building formerly occupied by civil servants into 241 dwellings. At the time of writing, a one-bedroom 'penthouse' listed on Rightmove for £75,000 measures in at 28.5 m<sup>2</sup>. The apartment appears to have absolutely no storage space and because it relies on high-level skylights for natural light, it totally lacks a visual connection with its surroundings. A site visit to Castle View House in February 2022 revealed a complete lack of external or internal amenity space, save for the 'landscaped' lightwells pictured in Figure 3, and a relic of the building's days as a post-2007 office environment – a smoking shelter placed at the periphery of the car park. Apart from the post-boxes in the foyer and the minimal efforts of some residents to personalise the areas outside their doorways, there is little evidence that this is a place people call home. It is acknowledged that there is heterogeneity in the affordability and quality of PD conversions, and that Castle View House is not necessarily indicative of the full range of dwellings this legislation has created. However, whilst some 'luxury' conversions have been found in city centre locations, previous research suggests the standard of accommodation here is typical of – if not actually superior to – that of the generalised picture of PD accommodation. Only 30 per cent of Clifford et al's (2019) extensive survey of conversions met space standards and only 14 per cent had access to private or communal amenity space. Conversely, as mentioned above, the majority of social housing projects built during the twentieth century provided homes with carefully considered space standards. In New Towns such as Runcorn, Parker Morris standards were mandatory from 1967 (Clifford and Ferm, 2021)

Compared to some of the PD schemes identified in existing research on the subject, Castle View House does not, by any means, represent the worst of PD conversions. It benefits from a central location in Runcorn, and the majority of its apartments, whilst small, appear to have somewhere near adequate provision of natural light. Elsewhere in Runcorn, things could have been much worse. In 2015, prior approval was given at appeal to convert East Lane House, another large Runcorn office building, into 448 flats. Although it was not realised, a look at the proposed plans for this development show the majority of homes were to be sub 25 m<sup>2</sup> studio apartments, many of which only had views into lightwells. Floor plans reveal how many of the homes would have been accessed via very narrow unlit corridors in excess of 100 m long. Like at Castle



Figure 3 One of the interior courtyards of Castle View House  
Source: Charlie Cullen

View House, the only external amenity space would have been the ground level of the building's lightwells – not originally designed to be inhabited and certainly not pleasant places from which to enjoy the open air. Whilst this scheme was not realised, it is contextually important: the planning system would have allowed it to have created a large quantity of substandard homes, and the lack of other housing options would likely have seen them inhabited. Grosvenor House, which sits on the other side of Runcorn shopping city, is currently being converted through PD to create 113 new apartments despite concerns having been expressed by the local MP about the small size of the dwellings (McKeon, 2020).

Of course, these PD conversions form only part of the full breadth of housing being built in Runcorn today, and housing associations continue to build homes of a similar standard to those of the private housebuilders, homes that are 'affordable' by the official definition. These are of a finite quantity though, meaning there are many people (whether by choice or necessity) who take up the option of places such



Figure 4 A bedroom within a Castle View House 'penthouse'

Source: Rightmove

as Castle View House. It appeared almost fully occupied at the time of the site visit. An article in the local press (Whelan and Le-Clay, 2020) reported the police had been called to Castle View House over fifty times during a six-month period, indicating a high concentration of vulnerable people had been living there.

It is pertinent that the architecture of this scheme was not conflated with its excess of anti-social behaviour – it likely would have been were it a council block. Through an environmentally deterministic gaze, estates such as Southgate have been vilified for their assumed causation of criminality and other social issues. In a private development (regardless of its physical characteristics) where such issues are evident, they are not often discursively characterised as a result of their physical environment. An alternative view to this selective form of environmental determinism is that, in both instances, manifest social problems are largely attributable to extrinsic socioeconomic circumstances, and simply becomes disproportionately spatialised in whatever is the cheapest and most accessible housing of a given spatial-temporal context.

Owing to a variety of different factors, Southgate was once considered Runcorn's last resort as a place to make home. From today's perspective, its dwellings' spacious

internal accommodation and generous provision of external amenity space seem generous when viewed in relation to what might be considered 'affordable' whilst being immediately available in the same locality. Whilst thermal and other technological accommodation standards have undoubtedly improved exponentially over the past fifty or so years, the quality of light, space and communal facilities offered to many of those without housing choices has regressed dramatically. Built to get people out of slum housing, Southgate was conceived with a view to a future where nobody would have to live in conditions that were detrimental to their health and well-being. From the vantage point of today, where slums are arguably being newly (and lawfully) created through PD, such efforts seem to have been in vain.

### **What type of low-income attainable homes will we leave behind?**

For over a millennium, large proportions of the population have by necessity had to turn to the housing left over from their previous era. It is precisely this condition that led to the twentieth-century slum clearance programme and the building of millions of homes by the state. The industrial revolution had caused a significant rise in urban populations and this led to a massive increase in the demand for housing in cities, particularly between 1850 and 1930. In an almost entirely marketised housing system, developers responded to this demand by building large volumes of housing, for which they were able to command high rents. However, built hastily and primarily driven by profit, these homes and neighbourhoods were too often of low environmental quality. In an increasingly affluent society, the living conditions they offered began to be considered unsatisfactory, a popularly understood problem to which politicians and built environment practitioners were quick to respond (Rowlands et al., 2009) Whilst the homes of the wealthier citizens of this period make for good places to live today and are highly coveted, much of those that served the bottom of the market have now been demolished. Equally, the high-end dwellings built by private developers today will continue to provide comfortable conditions for those on high incomes. The similarities and differences of the housing dynamics of nineteenth-century market liberalism and those of today therefore prompts the question: what will be the quality of the low-income attainable homes the housing system of today will leave behind, and what will its repercussions be?

Without a significant shift in the dynamics of the housing system, many such dwellings are likely to continue to be built to low standards, and to be increasingly resided in by those without reasonable alternatives. Despite the ostensible existence of a consensus on the need for improvements to space standards, architectural quality and communal space provision, it is arguable that a marketised economy coupled with a deregulated planning system perpetuates the creation of homes that often appear

inadequate by comparison with many of those of the so-called post-war consensus. This was a time when strong political will and meaningful legislative action ensured an adequate supply of homes was available across the country, a circumstance that today seems all too distant.

Turning back to the case of Castle View House and its totally insufficient provision of external or internal amenity space, schemes such as this (PD or otherwise) are likely to limit the foundation of tenant communities and provide little opportunity for socialising and communal exercise in residents' immediate context. The small dwelling sizes will also restrict the feasibility of residents to take advantage of the (albeit perhaps overstated) rise in hybrid working that has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, and where people do work from home in these environments, their productivity can be expected to be poor. In the case of PD, it is a sad irony that people may now work from home in what had been conceived as a purpose-built office space, yet without the accommodation standards that had originally been planned.

The present-day system does not only define the types of homes being newly created – it also affects the trajectories of our existing housing stock, including that produced during the post-war era. Another way in which present-day attitudes and actions are defining what will be left behind is that it poses an existential threat to the estates still owned by councils. In the past ten years, the demolition and private sector 'regeneration' of places such as the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle and Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar has occurred. Meanwhile high-quality estates which house established communities, such as Central Hill in Crystal Palace, look sure to go the same way. There are also examples where the built object of an estate survives whilst its status as social housing is largely lost. For example, because of their heritage listed status, Park Hill in Sheffield and Balfron Tower in Poplar were retained as part of recent private-sector led redevelopment programmes, their developer's commodification of these buildings helped by a growing appreciation of brutalist architecture, as discussed previously. Whilst the increase in density achieved by replacing post-war social housing estates can be justified in relation to a lack of housing supply, the homes they create are in the majority sold at market rate, whilst the rest are only affordable by definition. Once ownership of a site or housing estate is transferred to the private sector, there is very little likelihood of it staying or reverting to a place of social – or realistically affordable – housing.

Much has been said of the inferior environmental standards produced by PD, however it is not suggested here that the repurposing of disused or unloved buildings for residential use is inherently wrong. After all, upgrading and reusing existing buildings is the most environmentally responsible way to meet changing societal demands. What is concerning, however, is the low environmental quality that PD (and indeed many new builds) too often provide. An alternative reuse route and likewise an obvious solution to the problem of unvalued post-war social housing stock can be found in

France. Here, architects Lacaton and Vassal have developed a strong track-record for refurbishing social housing developments, for which they won the Pritzker architectural prize in 2021. In schemes in Paris, Bordeaux and Saint-Nazaire, they have demonstrated that with the right attitude and the necessary political backing, these crucial public assets can not only be saved from the wrecking ball, but can provide homes that are beautiful, flexible and conducive to sociability. By opening up these building's existing facades, extending their floorplates and creating multi-use winter gardens around their perimeter, the apartments gain floor space, increased natural light levels and enhanced thermal performance. The reuse approach ensures residents do not have to move out of their homes whilst the renovations take place, whilst only half of the financial investment it would take to rebuild the block is required (Huber, 2016). On this note, it is a shame that Southgate does not still stand; it could be refurbished to conform with present-day thermal standards, either by the public or the private sector. It could provide the desirable, universally accessible dwellings it originally aimed at, serving as a strong alternative model to PD carried out by developers. The estate's problems with under-occupancy would almost certainly not be an issue today.

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