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SOCIAL HOUSING AND URBAN RENEWAL

A Cross-National Perspective

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SOCIAL HOUSING AND URBAN RENEWAL: AN INTRODUCTION

Paul Watt

FROM UTOPIA TO DYSTOPIA: THE DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE OF SOCIAL HOUSING ESTATES

Social housing estates — as developed either by local states (*viz.* public/municipal housing) or voluntary sector housing associations — became a prominent feature of the twentieth century urban landscape in many Northern European cities, and also to a lesser extent in North American and Australian cities.¹ Many of these estates were built as part of earlier urban renewal, “slum clearance” programs especially in the post–World War II heyday of the Keynesian welfare state. Old, overcrowded, slum areas of private rental housing were demolished to make way for new modernist housing blocks and estates which provided physically improved and affordable rental housing for workers and their families. In both Northern Europe and North America, the estates were created at a time of considerable optimism both in terms of town planning and modernist architecture, and also in the capacity of welfare states to build and manage mass housing projects (Campkin, 2013; Urban, 2012).

The heartlands of social housing in capitalist societies have been the large, industrial — now in many cases ex-industrial — cities of Northern Europe in

the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, and West Germany where there was extensive social housing provision, often, although not exclusively, in the form of monotenure estates. In some cities, these estates were largely located in inner-city areas, as for example in London and Amsterdam, whereas in other cases the estates were predominantly built in the suburban periphery, for example on the outskirts of the major Scottish cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, in the grand ensembles around Paris, Copenhagen, and West German cities such as Cologne and Dusseldorf (Power, 1997; Turkington & Watson, 2015; Urban, 2012; Whitehead & Scanlon, 2007).

In many Northern European societies, social housing took on a “mass” rather than a “residual” form (Harloe, 1995) in the sense that it did not house just the poorest and most vulnerable but instead catered for large tranches of the population, notably the industrial working class.² It was, in the words of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, “the people’s home” (*folkhemmet*; Harloe, 1995, p. 1), an example of welfare capitalism in action. This was also the case in postwar Britain where millions of people “considered council houses better than private accommodation, both in quality and in the security they offered” (Todd, 2014, pp. 179–180). This extensive provision did not, however, equate to the universalism that dominated other sectors of the postwar Keynesian welfare state such as health, education, and social security. Instead, housing has long been recognized as the “wobbly pillar under the welfare state” (Torgersen, 1987), even if that pillar has proved to be a good deal wobblier in some societies (and their cities) than others, notably England (Hodkinson, Watt, & Mooney, 2013; Watt & Minton, 2016; Chapters 3, 5, and 13 of this volume). In contrast to Northern Europe, social housing was far less prominent in US, Canadian, and Australian cities and tended to operate via an explicitly “residual” model of provision which primarily catered for the poor and notably for racialized minority groups (Darcy, 2010; Harloe, 1995; Hirsch, 1983; Wacquant, 2008).³

The widespread postwar optimism regarding social housing did not, however, last long. Despite the often utopian visions which lay behind social housing estates, in a relatively short time they came to be seen as problematic

both in design and social terms by politicians, the mass media, and academics. This was especially the case in relation to the large, modernist concrete “tower and slab” estates (Campkin, 2013; Coleman, 1990; Urban, 2012), for example, the “brutalist” about-to-be-demolished Robin Hood Gardens estate in East London (Mould, 2017). They were, and often still are, regarded as “sink estates” — stigmatized crucibles of urban poverty, misery, and lawlessness (Campkin, 2013) — even if residents’ lived reality was often at some remove from such stereotypical, stigmatizing images (Garbin & Millington, 2012; Watt, 2008), as discussed further in this chapter and several chapters of this volume.

Nowhere was this apparent systemic failure more pronounced than in the case of the public housing “projects” in the large US cities. Large postwar projects such as the Pruitt–Igoe tower blocks in St. Louis, and Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago (now all demolished), rapidly became bywords for spatially concentrated poverty and crime. The sources of this decline were manifold but included, in various combinations, a significant underestimation of management and maintenance costs, systemic public underfunding, neglect and disinvestment, mounting unemployment coupled with demographic concentrations of poor families including many young people (see *inter alia* Bradford Hunt, 2009; Heathcott, 2012; Rainwater, 1970; Urban, 2012; Vale, 2013; Wacquant, 2008).

Furthermore, the spatial concentration of poverty had a profound racialized aspect to it since the new modernist housing projects by and large replicated the racialized injustices of the old “black ghetto.” The deliberate racialized siting of the new public housing projects in or near the old inner-city black ghettos, away from white neighborhoods, resulted in their becoming the “second ghetto,” as Hirsch (1983) famously described in the case of Chicago. The projects’ typically stark, towering appearance on the urban landscape only highlighted the symbolism of policy failures: “in many cities, public housing has simply become a more visible kind of slum, and by its very existence as a *public* programme highlights the failure of the federal response to poverty” (Rainwater, 1970, p. 524; original emphasis).

If the US inner-city projects were emerging as problematic by the mid-1960s, their subsequent decline was further exacerbated by a lethal cocktail of

deindustrialization and the flight of newly affluent blacks to the suburbs, as powerfully argued by the Chicago-based sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987, 1993). The “truly disadvantaged” — those poor African Americans left behind in the inner city including in the projects — not only lacked jobs but, unlike the ghettos of early- to mid-twentieth century US cities such as Harlem, they also had a dearth of “respectable” role models. The result, Wilson argued, was the spatial concentration of poverty and social dysfunctionality in the inner city and the production of spatial “neighborhood effects” which result in negative life chances for the poor and their children *over and above* any individual disadvantages they might face.

If concentrated urban poverty and social dysfunctionality were most severe in the US projects, they were also identified in Northern European inner-city and peripheral social housing estates (Beider, 2007; Musterd, Murie, & Kesteloot, 2006; Power, 1997; Turkington & Watson, 2015; van Kempen, Dekker, Hall, & Tosics, 2005). English council estates and the Parisian banlieues, for example, experienced large-scale urban disturbances — “riots” — during the 1990s and 2000s (Dikecs, 2007; Power & Tunstall, 1997). Furthermore, in academic terms, the “neighborhood effects” which Wilson identified arguably made their way from Chicago to the poorer areas of European and Australian cities including social housing estates. Those people growing up in such estates were said to be doubly disadvantaged — not only by their parents’ poverty, but also by the poverty and disadvantages of the place itself which magnified young people’s social exclusion (Friedrichs, Galster, & Musterd 2003; Jenks & Mayer, 1990; Manley, van Ham, Bailey, Simpson, & Maclennan, 2013). Estate residents were said to lack effective role models and connections to the world of work, since they were spatially isolated and lived with similar poor people to themselves.

Before turning to the preferred policy solution to the decline of social housing estates via their all-too-literal “fall” — demolition — it’s worth pausing at this point to add vital nuance to the above overarching narrative. For one thing, what seems to have happened is that certain iconic, infamous US projects — such as Pruitt–Igoe and Robert Taylor Homes — took on a symbolic significance that is way beyond their socio-spatial representativeness. Despite the specific problems faced by Pruitt–Igoe and the way its

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decline was produced by macro-social and economic forces, this did not prevent it from assuming a symbolic, even mythical status in the eyes of politicians and those who were only too happy to see public housing interventions as inherently problematic (Freidrichs, 2011; Heathcott, 2012). In other words, these particular projects came to symbolize what Goetz (2013, p. 40) calls an “exaggerated discourse of disaster,” in which any policy successes from the projects in general were drowned out by a plethora of “bad news” stories. As we discuss later, residents of the projects, especially African-American women, were also at the forefront of concerted grass-roots mobilization attempts to combat the all-too frequent bureaucratic inertia and neglect they faced and in so doing demonstrated considerable attachment to their homes and neighborhoods (Feldman & Stall, 2004).

In relation to this, there is also disproportionate media and academic attention given to the Chicago Housing Authority project “failures,” while the far more extensive, well-funded, and generally positive projects run by the New York City Housing Authority receive relatively little attention (Hyra, 2008; Urban, 2012). As for the frequent design determinism which the policy analysts all too often employ to justify demolishing public housing units, Urban (2012, p. 32) points out how “many [NYC] areas that in the 1960s acquired a bad reputation – such as Harlem or the South Bronx – were neither high-rises nor public housing, but rather poor neighborhoods of three-story brownstone houses from the late nineteenth century.”

If US public housing is neither defined nor encapsulated by the Robert Taylor Homes or even the Chicago projects as a whole, it is even more questionable to try and make sweeping cross-national generalizations across from the US project experience to that of Northern European social housing estates (see *inter alia* Aalbers, van Gent, & Pinkster, 2011; Fenton, Lupton, Arrundale, & Tunstall, 2012; Stal & Zuberi, 2010; Wacquant, 2008). Not only were the latter far more extensive than the former, but in many European cities they were not equivalent to the racialized, hyper-marginalized enclaves of the US inner cities. As Wacquant (2008) and others have argued, the experiences of the black, inner-urban hyper-ghetto — in relation to racism, crime, poverty, and welfare state withdrawal — have no European equivalent, despite certain modernist architectural similarities (Urban, 2012). For one

thing, the US projects have had long-term strict income ceilings which mean they tend to cater for the poor and vulnerable far more than in Europe.

In comparison to the US projects, Northern European estates for much of their history did not cater for the very poor but instead for the manual working class and even sections of the middle classes (Harloe, 1995; Watt, 2005). More recently, however, many European countries have imposed formal income levels ceilings regarding who has access to social housing, while some continue to have no formal income restrictions (e.g., Austria, Denmark) (Scanlon et al., 2015). However, as Scanlon et al. (2015) identify, social tenants tend to have lower incomes than average in Europe. In addition, while the data are incomplete, they also found that ethnic minorities and immigrants tend to be overrepresented in social housing (31% in the Netherlands and 25% in Denmark), and even higher in large cities, for example Munich (Scanlon et al., 2015, p. 5), Paris and London (Urban, 2012), although not Berlin (Urban, 2012). Despite the concentration of low-income and ethnic minority groups in social housing in Europe, this is still far from the situation pertaining to the US inner-city projects, and especially to the most infamous projects such as Robert Taylor Homes and Pruitt-Igoe.

URBAN RENEWAL REDUX: DEMOLISHING SOCIAL HOUSING

Since the epochal demolition of the Pruitt–Igoe project tower blocks in St. Louis in 1972 (Heathcott, 2012) — the symbolic end of modernism according to Chris Jenks (cited in Harvey, 1989a) — social housing estates have been increasingly disappearing from the skylines of North American, Western European, and Australian cities. This eradication has occurred as a result of “new urban renewal” (Hyra, 2008) programs involving estates’ demolition and their replacement with mixed-tenure housing developments in order to solve problems of poverty concentration and social dysfunctionality. This “urban renewal redux” represents a rear-view mirror effect of how the old inner-city tenements were regarded as slums in the 1940s and 1950s and in need of demolition and replacement by the self-same modernist social housing estates that are now being torn down. As Vale (2013) has noted, in some cases this new renewal phase was even in the *same place* as

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previous slum clearance schemes, giving rise to the phenomenon of what he terms “twice-cleared communities.” Another example of this can be seen in Chapter 9 of this volume where Chikako Mori shows how elderly residents of the Kasumigaoka Apartments experienced a double displacement as a result of Tokyo’s staging of the Olympics Games, first in 1964 and then again in preparation for the upcoming 2020 Games.

These renewal programs — which in practice often come under the rubric of “urban regeneration” — have the aim of radically altering the neighborhoods where social housing estates stand, away from their being (or at least *being seen as*), concentrated zones of poverty, crime, drugs, and other social problems, by literally obliterating the estates — a form of physical “cleansing” with resultant “social cleansing” effects. In the United States, various policies were devised to combat poverty concentration and neighborhood effects, notably the Hope VI program which began in the early 1990s (Bennett, Smith, & Wright, 2006; Goetz, 2013; Vale, 2013). Hope VI meant demolishing the projects and, because of increasingly limited public housing replacement units, moving the poor away from their previous neighborhoods, while the latter were redeveloped into mixed-tenure areas with large numbers of affluent, often white incoming homeowners. The appearance of the latter would promote social mixing between wealthy homeowners and the remaining tenants, in which the latter would gain valuable social connections as well as raised aspirations by living cheek-by-jowl with homeowners. Furthermore, rather than such estates being primarily state-developed, they would be developed as part of public-private partnerships. This “new urban renewal” set of programs became the policy orthodoxy and spread out from the United States to many European and Australian cities with social housing estates (Darcy, 2010, 2013; Imrie, Raco, & Lees, 2009; Jacobs, Marston, & Darcy, 2004).

Contemporary urban renewal is of crucial policy significance for cities and their denizens, not least those who live in the affected estates. It is also the subject of intense academic and policy debate regarding whether it promotes social mixing and spatial justice, as its proponents claim, or instead generates new socio-spatial injustices, inequalities, and insecurities, as its critics suggest. As the new urban renewal has spread geographically, so it has become increasingly

controversial with academics condemning its simplistic one-size-fits-all approach which has failed to take into account the successes, as well as failures, of social housing estates (Goetz, 2013; Urban, 2012). Critical urbanists in particular regard the new urban renewal as little more than an integral component of neoliberal urban policies which ultimately result in the displacement of the poor from inner-city areas. It is *de facto* “state-led gentrification” — in other words, the state aiding and assisting private capital to maximize profits in hitherto unprofitable urban locations via exploiting the creation and realization of rent gaps (Glynn, 2009; Hodkinson, 2011; Lees & Ferreri, 2016; Uitermark, Duyvendak, & Kleinhans, 2007; Watt, 2013a).

What has also happened is that the residents of targeted estates have challenged and even overtly *resisted* the renewal programs which were supposedly being undertaken for their benefit. This has taken several forms, including legal challenges as well as traditional mobilizations in the form of demonstrations and lobbying local politicians (see *inter alia* Cumbers, Helms, & Swanson, 2010; Douglas & Parkes, 2016; Flynn, 2016; Glynn, 2009; Lees & Ferreri, 2016; Pfeiffer, 2006; Watt, 2013a). Such opposition and resistance feature in Chapters 3, 5, and 9 of this volume. Resident opposition has even emerged in the archetypal “failed” US projects: “One of the more striking images of public housing transformation in Chicago was the sight of residents carrying signs protesting the demolition of Cabrini-Green project” (Goetz, 2013, p. 86). As Goetz and others highlight (Feldman & Stall, 2004; Pfeiffer, 2006), the Chicago projects were by no means as unidimensional as their detractors suggest. As Feldman and Stall (2004) detail, female African-American residents of the Wentworth Gardens project in Chicago mobilized and fought to improve their living conditions for decades in the face of official intransigence and neglect, while they latterly resisted the threatened demolition by the very same officials who had run their neighborhoods down. Such “place attachments” (Watt & Smets, 2014) to home and neighborhood are largely invisible to urban renewal professionals: “the satisfactions residents gained from living in these communities and the positive attachments they experienced remained opaque to outsiders, who saw only physical deterioration” (Feldman & Stall, 2004, p. 86). Feldman and Stall importantly raise the interrelated questions of perspective and power, questions which are all too frequently glossed over in the

technocratic world of urban policy — “whose voices count in renewal programmes?” As they argue, the voices which all too often *do not count*, and are not even heard, are those of low-income, public housing residents, and especially African-American women, who are also often those at the forefront of grassroots struggles to improve neighborhood services on estates (for the UK, see Gosling, 2008). Such grassroots struggles of social tenants have also been prominent outside the United States (Glynn, 2009; Lees & Ferreri, 2016; Watt, 2013a; Watt & Minton, 2016).

In academic circles, there is mounting debate and skepticism as to how far social housing renewal has met its goals of enhancing social mixing and social mobility (Arbaci & Rae, 2013; Bridge, Butler, & Lees, 2012; Graham, Manley, Hiscock, Boyle, & Doherty, 2009; Smets & Hellinga, 2014; Smets & Snee, 2017). To make matters worse, the intellectual foundation on which much social housing renewal policy is justified — neighborhood effects — is by no means as robust as its policy advocates recommend. Certainly, some scholars have produced state-of-the-art accounts of “enduring neighborhood effects” as in the case of Sampson’s (2013) magisterial overview of Chicago. Nevertheless, despite the growing mountain of research papers on neighborhood effects, there is little consensus regarding the size of such effects, their significance, or their causal pathways (Manley et al., 2013; van Ham, Manley, Bailey, Simpson, & Maclennan, 2012). There is even skepticism as to whether neighborhood effects even exist at all, a skepticism which comes from both individualistic (Cheshire, 2012) and structural (Slater, 2013) perspectives. Furthermore, as Slater (2013) and Davies and Imbroscio (2010) suggest, an exclusive focus on spatial inequalities and their all too visible manifestations (poor places/slums) and relatively easy and physically spectacular policy solutions (“knock them down”) can detract attention from mounting social inequalities and the much more entrenched and powerful forces which keep those inequalities in place.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS, URBAN POLICY, AND SOCIAL HOUSING RENEWAL

The previous discussion suggests the existence of a polarized set of both political and academic positions on social housing estates and urban

renewal. One way of simultaneously summarizing and assessing this polarized debate is via discourse analysis. Using this, one can identify two distinct urban policy discourses regarding social housing renewal: first an official/mainstream discourse that dominates both policy approaches and mainstream urban social science; and second an oppositional/critical discourse that is prominent among housing and community activists who are opposed to renewal at their estates, as well as among academic critical urbanists (Watt, 2013b). These discourses are summarized in ideal typical form in Tables 1 and 2. Each discourse utilizes a set of key framing policy tropes, which encompass the identification of policy “problems” (Table 1), “solutions” and “effects” (Table 2). These ideal types represent an extrapolation not only from several academic sources (especially Darcy, 2010, 2013; Glasze, Pütz, Germes, Schirmel, & Brailich, 2012; Johnston & Mooney, 2007), but also from numerous policy and activist documents and websites, notably those derived from my own research on regeneration on London council estates (see *inter alia* Watt, 2008, 2009, 2013a; Watt & Minton, 2016). Like all ideal types, these are not meant to encompass all elements of both discourses, but instead to highlight their main constituent features and also to act as “models” against which social reality can be compared.

Before we examine these two discourses in detail, we will take a brief excursus into discourse analysis. This has proved to be a useful, albeit underutilized, tool in relation to urban policy (Jacobs, 2006), although it has featured in relation to social housing including regeneration and renewal (Darcy, 2010, 2013; Glasze et al., 2012; Marston, 2002; Watt & Jacobs, 2000; Watt, 2008). According to Levitas (1998, p. 3):

Discourse [...] means that sets of interrelated concepts act together as a matrix through which we understand the social world. As this matrix structures our understanding, so it in turn governs the paths of action which appear to be open to us. A discourse constitutes ways of acting in the world, as well as a description of it. It both opens up and closes down possibilities for actions for ourselves.

Not only do discourses provide perspectives on knowing the social world, but they are also, as Levitas highlights, conduits for social action. In the urban

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policy context, discourses act as ways of understanding policy issues, and they invariably do so by highlighting certain attendant “problems” while ignoring or sidelining others as well as providing mobilizing frameworks for action to “solve” the focused-upon problems (Stenson & Watt, 1999). Thus discourses frame and mobilize action — in this case either “for” or “against” renewal (Watt, 2013b), as we discuss in detail below.

The main contribution toward examining social housing renewal from a discourse analysis perspective has come from Michael Darcy (2010, 2013) in two seminal papers. He examines how US, UK, and Australian housing authorities have fixed on a similar consensus around removing geographical concentrations of public housing and their replacement with “mixed income communities,” based on a congruence between “international policy transfer and apparent social scientific consensus” (Darcy, 2010, p. 1). Darcy insightfully notes how:

Despite the marked variations in the location and form of the housing being replaced, the urban structures in which it occurs, and even in the socio-cultural composition of the targeted residential communities [...] the stated rationale and aims of these policies and programs, and the premise on which they are designed, almost indistinguishable.

— Darcy (2010, p. 2)

As several chapters in this volume highlight, this general rationale has indeed formed the crux of social housing renewal policies and programs in the United States (Chapters 2 and 10), England (Chapters 3, 5, and 13), and Australia (Chapter 4). However, other chapters highlight how this rationale has extended well beyond the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia — all societies with prominent, albeit uneven liberal welfare state regimes — to encompass cities in societies with very different kinds of welfare state regimes and social housing trajectories, such as France (Chapter 5), Italy (Chapter 6), the Netherlands (Chapter 7), and Japan (Chapter 9). In other words, there seems to be some credence to the notion that we are witnessing what Darcy (2013, p. 365) calls a “globalised discourse