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# Redeveloping the “Sink Estates”

England finds new solutions for a generation of failed public housing.

LIKE THE UNITED STATES, ENGLAND HAS SEEN INCREASINGLY WIDESPREAD failures in its public housing projects, and growing political pressure for reform. But England has many more residents living in public, or “social,” housing—fully 8 million, or some 15 percent of the national population, compared with just 1.2 million in the United States, or less than 0.5 percent. England, too, has considerably stronger political support for government-funded social housing. But there is little support for the generation of failing projects known as “sink estates.”

Although political support for government-funded housing is stronger in England than in the United States, there is little support for failing social housing projects called “sink estates.” A number of public housing projects—known also as council estates because they often are funded and run by local council governments—are struggling, such as these low-rise flats in the east London neighborhood of Haggerston, near Hackney.

That evocative term refers to social housing projects that trap residents in a downward spiral of urban isolation and decay—the sorts of grim dystopias portrayed in the 1971 Stanley Kubrick movie *A Clockwork Orange*. In fact, the filming location for that dark tale was the sink estate of Thamesmead, near London. The movie version may provide an unfair caricature of the site, but the problems there and in other sink estates—social isolation, poor maintenance, vandalism, and serious crime—are real enough.

Like Thamesmead, many of these “council estates”—social housing projects often funded and run by local council governments—began life with the highest hopes. The goal was that they would be clean, modern communities that would resettle residents from impoverished slums into socially enlightened living arrangements. Everything would be rational, orderly, healthy, and safe. Indeed, many residents were initially delighted with their new neighborhoods.

But within a few years, the reality was often far different, and by the late 1970s the reputation of Thamesmead and other council estates could hardly have been worse. The Margaret Thatcher government, believing homeownership would be part of the solution, instituted a right-to-buy policy giving residents the option to purchase their units. One result of this policy was a drastic reduction in the number of public units available for rent—from 15 million to 8 million—and a long waiting list for social housing to rent that continues to this day.

More recently, the government instituted the Decent Homes Standard, setting ambitious goals for the redevelopment of the worst of the council estates—some 20 percent of the total, by government estimates—to provide a minimal level of housing quality. The redevelopment plans typically featured selective demolition, upgrades in design and materials, addition of market-rate units, and better integration with surrounding neighborhoods. The planning and management process was changed, too, with greater involvement by existing users, and more local management. In some cases, the properties were turned over to fully independent social housing charities.

The process brought with it some serious reevaluations of the accepted principles of social housing design. The iconic image of the council estate had been the so-called tower block—a modernist high-rise apartment complex surrounded by commons areas; this was the form of the demolished Pruitt Igoe in St. Louis and Cabrini Green in Chicago, notorious U.S. urban housing projects. While many council estates actually feature low-rise apartments or even detached houses, the tower block has been the prevailing form in dense urban areas. London, in fact, has seen some 2,700 tower blocks built since World War II.

The years after that war were the heyday of construction of council estates. More than 4 million homes had been destroyed during the war, unemployment remained high, and millions of people desperately needed housing. New estates were built quickly and cheaply in response, following the new modernist styles of the Bauhaus or Le Corbusier’s “towers in the park” con-

cept. Like Thamesmead, they were clean and orderly, offered modern amenities and sanitation, and, on occasion, dramatic views and fresh air. They seemed positively utopian.

But also like Thamesmead, within a few years many of them were in serious trouble. Their rapid and low-cost construction often made them leaky, drafty, and uncomfortable. Maintenance was inadequate, and

**The iconic image of the council estate in dense urban areas has been the so-called tower block, a modernist high-rise apartment complex surrounded by common areas, such as this one in Shoreditch, east London.**



vandalism became endemic. The parklike common areas, once so admired, became dangerous no-man’s-lands, and crime rates soared. Things came to a head when part of one tower block, Ronan Point in east London, collapsed in 1968 after a natural gas explosion, bringing increased political scrutiny to all the other problems. The public demanded reform; new construction of tower blocks was halted.

Academic researchers offered a series of prescriptions, some focusing on changes in physical form and layout, and others on changes in social organization. Much of the debate boiled down to familiar either/or arguments over social engineering and spatial form. In part to evaluate these competing claims, the British government instituted a series of experimental redevelopment projects such as Housing Action Trusts (HATs), Estate Action Schemes, and the Design Improvement Controlled Experiments (DICE).

For many administrators, the problems could be traced to bad estate management, or in some cases, underfunded policing, maintenance, or community activity programming. But critics responded that the complex problems in these communities could not be reduced to a mere matter of spending levels on administrative programs.

A number of sociologists pointed to the concentration of poverty, the isolation of buildings from surrounding neighborhoods, and the lack of connection to outside social networks that could offer new opportunities. For them, the failures were those of an artificially created community lacking the support system and the problem-solving capacity of healthy neighborhoods.

A number of noted planning theorists pointed to faulty design. Most prominent among them was American architect/city planner Oscar Newman, who in his book *Defensible Space* offered a devastating critique of the modernist towers, with their lack of defensible private space and no-man’s-land common areas easily controlled by criminals. Newman’s recommendation was a series of low-rise units surrounding easily secured cul-de-sac streets.

Urban researcher Bill Hillier, professor of urban morphology at University College London, offered a more comprehensive

analysis in his book *Space Is the Machine*. In a sense, he said, the other theories were all partly right—but also partly wrong. He agreed that the estates are isolated from the surrounding neighborhoods. “Continuity with context is in general sharply broken,” he wrote. “The effect is that no one goes into these areas unless they have to. They become, in [British urban historian] Alison Ravetz’s accurate term, ‘reservations.’”

The design of the outdoor spaces was at fault, too, Hillier noted. “Public space is no longer constructed in smoothly changing yet readable patterns by the careful alignment and orientation of buildings,” he wrote. “Instead, at the small scale, there are endless courts, plazas, greens, and walkways, apparently intended to create an intimate sense of locale through the zealous pursuit of neighborliness.” But, in fact, this has the opposite effect, creating illegible and anonymous fragments of space, he said. “At the larger scale, these fragments are linked into abstract patterns in which space seems the accidental byproduct of a geometric order beyond the reach of experience, graspable in the plan, but not at the experiential scale of architectural reality.”

For Hillier, Newman’s notion of “defensible space” is a dangerous oversimplification. Instead, close attention must be paid to the way the elements of space fit together—the “space syntax”—to accommodate the actual social conditions. An effort to engineer neighborliness can have the opposite effect. A stranger walking down a well-populated street is not seen as a threat, and might easily enter into a conversation with a resident. A stranger walking through a secluded tower block hallway is another matter.

Hillier’s studies of crime patterns confirmed the flaws in Newman’s argument for defensible space as an area that is isolated from strangers. In fact, he wrote in *Space Is the Machine*, “something like the opposite seems to be the case. Other people, including strangers, keep you safe.” While short cul-de-sac segments are reasonably safe, complexes of culs-de-sac are, in reality, more dangerous, apparently because they create many more pathways without “eyes on the street,” he said.

Isolation and fragmentation are the real enemies—in both spatial organization and social organization, Hillier concluded from his studies. The remedy is to understand what is really going on in the existing social and spatial system, and then to generate new designs that allow it to develop unfettered. In effect, the designer’s challenge is not to socially engineer, but to plan for the unplanned—to let social networks develop naturally. “It is extraordinary that unplanned growth should produce a better global order than planned redevelopment, but it seems undeniable,” Hillier reported.

Hillier’s insights have been implemented by the U.K. government in a number of redevelopment projects, with encouraging results. His space syntax analytic method allows a proposed design to be tested for its ability to accommodate social connections and movement. (His projects have included more familiar landmarks too, including the Millennium Bridge and the revamping of Trafalgar Square—both considered successes.)

More recently, Hillier has been working with the Prince’s Foundation for the Built Environment, the think tank consultancy created by Prince Charles to tackle urban and architectural challenges. The foundation’s urban design team works with local governments and citizens to develop designs collaboratively, testing their effectiveness using the methodologies of Hillier and others. Each workshop becomes a kind of laboratory of design ideas that get offered, tested, and developed in a continuous charrette-like process the foundation calls Enquiry by Design.

Recently the foundation conducted a workshop with local stakeholders on the 552-unit east London tower block estate of Fellows Court. The plan that emerged calls for partial demolition of some of the buildings and extension of the original street grid back into the complex to better integrate it with the surrounding community.

The workshop included council estate representatives, leaders, government officials, and officials of the Shoreditch Trust, a northeast London neighborhood regeneration agency partly funded by the U.K. government. As foundation director Ben Bolgar notes, the area faces a significant challenge



**The Shoreditch Trust, an east London regeneration agency, and the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment recently held a workshop with council estate residents of the 552-unit east London tower block estate of Fellows Court to gather comments for the next phase of redevelopment of the project.**

in reconnecting the street network, which is interrupted by more than 30 campus-style housing estates. “This has the impact of inhibiting the potential for the area to develop a rich mix of uses that evolve organically,” he says.

The Shoreditch Trust is now implementing the regeneration, which will combine demolition and rebuilding with strategic changes to administration and programming. According to program director Adrian Lee, the key has been a partnership approach among the trust, the local council, and the community—cooperation that has not always been easy to maintain. There has been an atmosphere of mistrust. “Communities do not like very much being told what a mess they are,” Lee says. “They are quite certain of their own right to decry deplorable maintenance services, uncaring authorities, and other bureaucratic sufferings.”

It is important not to impose a simple regime, Lee says, and to encourage residents’ own tendency to colonize spaces and improve them. “There are pockets of well-kept places where some residents have taken the initiative to keep the external aspect of their home in spectacular condition,” he says. It is important to encourage this kind of initiative and diversity, he asserts.

Lee does not think tower blocks have to be demolished for a regeneration effort to be successful. In fact, he notes, many tower block projects have been successfully converted to mixed-income residences, including some in the Shoreditch area. Indeed, with concierge services, stylish remodeling jobs, and adequate budgets for maintenance, many are now sought-after addresses in housing-short London. But hundreds of other tower block projects around the country, much hated by residents and neighbors alike, have been unceremoniously razed.

Not all demolition and regeneration projects are welcomed by their residents. Recently, the Guinness Trust (of Guinness beer fame) proposed a regeneration plan for its Loughborough Park Estate in Brixton, a diverse and historically troubled area of south London. Residents fought the redevelopment project, arguing that its aggressive avant-garde design repeated the mistakes of previous tower block plans and fearing that the plan would decrease the number of affordable units. Last spring, the local council turned down the planning application, noting that “the height, scale, massing, and general design of the development is not commensurate with its surroundings and detracts from the general amenity of the area.”

But just down the road, the recently regenerated council estate of Angell Town is receiving positive reviews after having taken a more circumspect approach. The design team, led by the firm Burrell Foley Fischer, noted in its project narrative that “the residents are more comfortable with the idea of community experienced through their involvement in the life of the estate rather than symbolized by overstated buildings or too many community structures. The people create community, and the role of the architect has been to facilitate this rather than to regard the site as a design experiment.”

The project has received kudos from residents and observers alike, notably for its sustainable retrofits. Residents worked closely as part of the development team on sustainability features, including rainwater harvesting, use of solar photovoltaics to generate energy, use of certified sustainably harvested lumber, and other innovations. But that is not all. “Angell Town hasn’t gotten too tied up with the gadgetry side of sustainability,” noted sustainable housing expert Alina Congreve, speaking to the U.K.’s *Guardian* newspaper. “It is much more focused around people—their needs and aspirations. There’s no point having all these environmental features if people don’t use them.”

That more circumspect, more people-centered approach is echoed by Burrell Foley Fischer in its project narrative: “We should be careful to recognize that human beings and their relations have not fundamentally changed for generations, and our zest for experimentation and fashion should be tempered by a more subtle appreciation for the act of dwelling.” **UL**

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