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Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing

By John Boughton

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by Freddie Meade

Municipal Dreams is a social history of council housing in the UK which ties together and extends years of musings and research from the author's blog of the same name into a chronologically organised overview of council housing from the late 19th century to the present. The book is a celebration - or rather, a defence - of council housing's historic legacy, and makes the case for meaningful state and local state re-engagement in a neoliberal housing market wrought by inequality, exploitation, and marginalisation.

The book begins by charting the public health concerns - often coupled with moral and political fears of irreligion, 'degeneracy' and political radicalism - that arose in response to a surging and impoverished industrial urban proletariat. It traces the gradual emergence of a 'pragmatic collectivism' throughout the late Victorian era, as the local state and philanthropic organisations slowly moved towards providing small-scale but significant programmes of working-class housing (17). Council housing's origins are thus located by the author in idealistic but pragmatic, small-scale responses to the urban slums of Victorian capitalism. From this, he traces the different phases of council housing throughout the 20th century - from the large single-class 'cottage estates' of the interwar period, to the post-war new towns that symbolised ambitious, top-down state planning, to the system-built high rise tower blocks that characterised the late 1950s and 1960s, and the subsequent shift throughout the 1970s towards more experimental and radical local authority developments that embraced 'densification' whilst responding to past failures and oversights. This last decade, Boughton suggests, constituted a 'golden age of council housing' that 'would see the construction of some of the finest council housing ever built' (138).

The author traces these histories through localised case studies, anecdotes and resident testimonies, a 'bottom-up' history from below that emphasises tenant experience against dominant, stigmatising narratives promulgated by media, politicians and academics alike. These stories are weaved into a broader national, legislative and regulatory framework that continually alters the standards and nature of council housing throughout the period. Subsequent chapters chart the state's sharp retreat from its historic post-war role of providing - for the most part - well-built homes and estates for mixed and working-class communities, exploring the processes and consequences of demunicipalisation, cost-cutting, and residualisation since the 1980s. The latter process refers to a shift in the nature, perception and class composition of council housing, and its gradual transformation from a universalised form of state provision based on 'general needs' during the post-war era to a residual service and last resort safety net for society's most vulnerable.

These trends have been accompanied by decades of media denigration and working-class demonisation. In response, the author deploys anecdotes and statistical data to make the case against the 'environmental determinism' of those hostile to post-war council housing and urban planning. According to such academic arguments, which gained traction

throughout the 1980s, many post-war estates lacked 'defensible space', with inhabitants unable to become 'key agents in ensuring their own security' (Newman, 1972). These ideas built on the work of Jane Jacobs (1961), who highlighted a lack of both 'natural surveillance' and a sense of ownership. Alice Coleman took this a step further (1985), arguing that the built qualities of post-war mass housing naturally engendered criminality, anti-social behaviour, vandalism and what she called 'social malaise.' For Coleman, an ideological Thatcherite who spearheaded the architectural charge against council housing in the UK (she advocated 'minimum regulation and maximum consumer choice'), many post-war estates that were often purposely designed to encourage neighbourliness and community spirit had in fact created 'anonymity, lack of surveillance and escape routes.' This crude explanation for rising crime and social problems in these particular housing areas gained currency amidst the Thatcherite assault on state housing, local government autonomy, and traditional forms of working-class employment, and systematically overlooked socio-economic factors like unemployment, poverty and social marginalisation, which were compounded by drastic cuts to local authority budgets that led to increasingly inadequate facilities and insufficient estate maintenance. Problems rooted in the economy - later sharpened by neoliberalism - were attributed to architectural and spatial circumstance. These academic arguments have provided the bedrock for prolonged media denigration of working-class housing areas since the 1980s, fuelling a demonisation and stigmatisation that was re-charged following the 2011 London riots, themes that Boughton examines critically with political conviction.

A large part of the author's attempt to challenge council housing's bad reputation is situating it within broader political and economic trends, and emphasising that people's lived experience of estates are far more complex, and, on the whole, far more positive, than the dominant portrayal of council estates would have us think. Building on arguments previously made by Cole and Furbey, Boughton argues that the attack on council housing and much of its architecture has been a central part of a broader 'cultural assault on the form and ideals of social democracy' (184). As Boughton claims, alongside the demonisation of housing areas and the communities that live in them, there has been a battering of an 'underlying ethos' (2).

Alongside both of these things, there has been the physical destruction and unsympathetic redevelopment of many post-war estates themselves. For instance, many post-war estates, primarily in the capital, sit upon immensely profitable land areas, and have in recent decades become targets for local state-sponsored speculative redevelopment, something which Boughton explores in some depth in the concluding chapters, drawing attention to the speculative redevelopment of the area upon which the Heygate estate in Elephant and Castle sat, or the recent controversial plans by Lambeth council to raze the popular and successful schemes such as Cressingham Gardens in Tulse Hill. The book starts and ends with reference to the 2017 Grenfell fire tragedy, which Boughton rightly argues symbolises a broader crisis in social housing, and was the result and culmination of decades of aggressive attacks on the sector (5). For Boughton, Grenfell has reminded us 'how much we need the state' - chiefly, its regulation and oversight - to 'protect us from commercially driven agendas which value profit over people' (6). The need for regulatory overhaul is illuminated by the publication's closing chapters, as well as by recent publications such as Stuart Hodkinson's *Safe as Houses: Private Greed, Political Negligence and Housing Policy After Grenfell* (2019), which explores the implications of decades of demunicipalisation, commercial outsourcing and systemic neglect on social housing and its communities, drawing attention to colossal profits, accountability vacuums, marginalised health and safety concerns, and the shocking phenomenon of outsourced actors 'self-regulating' their building safety and quality.

If there is a fault with any of Boughton's arguments, it lies in his over-romanticised

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and reductive view of the historic role of the state. On top of arguing the need for the state's regulatory oversight (undeniable, especially after Grenfell), Boughton goes further in suggesting that 'we need its idealism – that aspiration to treat all its citizens equitably and decently which lay at the very heart of the council housing building programme' (6). The problem here is that such idealism and these ascribed features are by no means stable, permanent characteristics of the state, nor are they intrinsic to its imperatives. This was not particularly the case in the post-war era, and it is especially not the case now. For instance, the state and local state's present role in council housing - particularly in London - is largely characterised by systemic neglect, social cleansing, and cruelty. It is not a bulwark against profiteering and greed, but a key player in its organisation, as illustrated in profit-driven public-private partnerships surrounding the remains of British social housing that Boughton himself draws attention to. The state was not 'rolled back' throughout the 1980s, but rather reorganised in accordance with different imperatives. The British state and its local counterparts, whilst funding and constructing some of the best examples of social housing in the world, also played a key role in its unravelling. What Boughton writes fondly of is not so much 'the state', but rather a unique moment in history, a moment when planning, universalism, and a belief in the expansion of 'social rights' held sway in political and policy-making circles, something which shaped and informed the following decades. This moment significantly opened up spaces, opportunities, and funding for radicals and visionary architects - within various components of the local state - to pursue ambitious, utopian schemes, which Boughton is right to eulogize.

Whilst on occasion, the book slips into reductive sentimentalism, particularly in more polemical sections such as the introduction, *Municipal Dreams*, for the most part, is reasoned and nuanced in the cases it makes. Given that this book, which is accessible, engaging, and reaches far beyond a strictly specialist audience, is an attempt to reshape the collective memory and legacy of council housing in the context of a sharpening neoliberal housing crisis, we should perhaps not be too pedantic. Boughton's contribution to the rehabilitation of some of the best elements of Britain's social democratic era - its world-class council housing and sporadic but exciting cases of municipal radicalism - is much needed and should be welcomed.

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