

**Happy Communities** *and how to create them*





*Happy Communities and how to create them*

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*Abstract*

This dissertation considers the social aspects of sustainability, the poor relation in the drive to create sustainable communities. It argues that, despite the declared aim of the Sustainable Communities Act to build strong societies in which people want to live and work, we have a poor understanding of what constitutes a successful community and an inflated sense of the built environment's ability to transform people's lives. Yet billions of pounds are spent on house building and regeneration, based on good intentions and the idea that sustainable communities can be created by design. Meanwhile there is growing evidence that society is becoming increasingly fragmented and that the poorest communities are becoming more socially excluded as the gap between rich and poor continues to widen.

The discussion is in five parts. Part I introduces two communities located in London's East End: the Holly Street Estate in Hackney and Bromley-by-Bow in Tower Hamlets. Both are among the most socially deprived wards in the country and have large immigrant populations; and both were the subject of post-war slum-clearance. While Holly Street has undergone a £97 million redevelopment in the past fifteen years, Bromley-by-Bow has received just £18 million for piecemeal improvement.

Part II looks for consensus on the meaning of 'community' and 'sustainable community', supported by observational accounts written over a period of hundred and fifty years. Part III considers historical precedents and the influence of social and political ideologies, in order to understand whether planned environments have contributed to the success and failure of communities.

Parts IV searches for new evidence and insights, drawing on the expertise of various witnesses; while Part V shines this new light on the Holly Street Estate and Bromley-by-Bow, identifying indicators of 'happy communities' and how they relate to the built environment. Despite careful and well-designed redevelopment, Holly Street's underlying social problems persist; while Bromley-by-Bow is beginning to experience a revival, through community-based social enterprise.

The paper concludes that the factors that decide whether a community is socially sustainable are independent of the built environment – although the built environment can both damage and enhance communities. The act of development or redevelopment therefore cannot on its own determine whether a community will thrive; communities evolve from a strong social base and will always remain vulnerable to external events. Architects can contribute to their success only in conjunction with others; by acting from a basis of knowledge, taking account of local, social and historical context; and by engaging with people to create the physical conditions in which they can function and thrive.



*Milwall 1953.* Getty Images

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*There is something seriously wrong when new houses across the country form rootless estates that could just as well be in Beijing, Buenos Aires or Belfast – developments that have no regard for the community's sense of place, belonging or identity. I fear that we are building the slums of tomorrow.*

Lord Rogers of Riverside, House of Lords 2008



## *Introduction*

*Foreword* The number of households in England is growing by 155,000 a year. The government's target is to build 240,000 new homes a year, 3 million by 2020, along with extensive regeneration of urban areas. In addition ten new 'ecotowns' are proposed. We are currently missing the yearly target by fifty percent and the resulting shortfall is having serious social repercussions, particularly on the poorest communities. In addition to a 30-year decline in subsidised social housing, low-cost rented accommodation is already oversubscribed<sup>1</sup>: 1.7 million households are on council waiting lists; 7.7 million homes, housing a million children, fail to meet the government's 'decent homes standard'; and 79,500 households are currently homeless, with a further 64,000 in temporary accommodation. The options of buying or shared ownership schemes have been hit by the recession, especially in the South where average house prices in England are more than 7 times the national average income. Repossessions were expected to reach 75,000 in 2009<sup>1</sup>.

This has a knock-on effect on existing communities, with worsening housing conditions and public services. Yet, in accordance with the Sustainable Communities Act (2007)<sup>2</sup> all communities must meet social as well as environmental standards. Local Authorities must produce a Sustainable Community Strategy with specific targets reflecting their duty of care, including: the strengthening of community cohesion; recognition that every place is different, with distinctive strengths and needs; and more effective services that reflect the needs of users. Only vague reference is made in the Act to the built environment, such as the requirement to build strong societies in which people want to live and work and safer communities and a more attractive built environment that meets people's needs. Yet the Act imposes unequivocal duties on local authorities that dictate the delivery requirements for all housing development projects. How are these happy communities to be created?

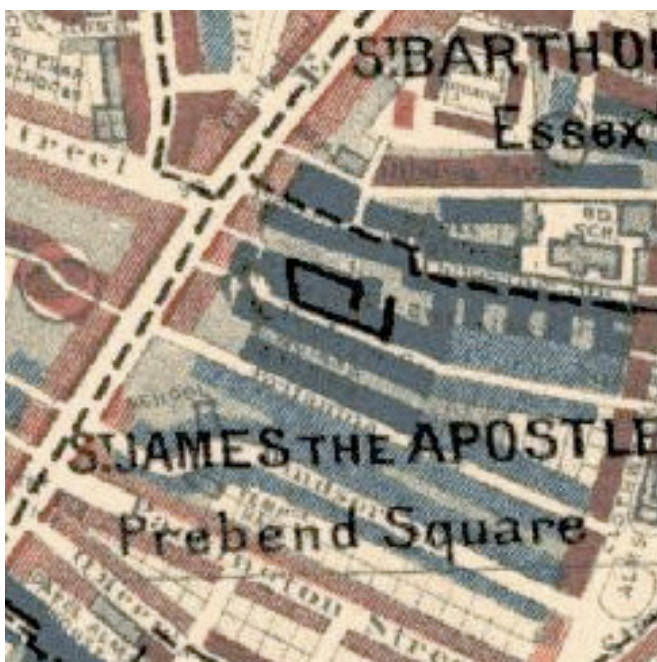
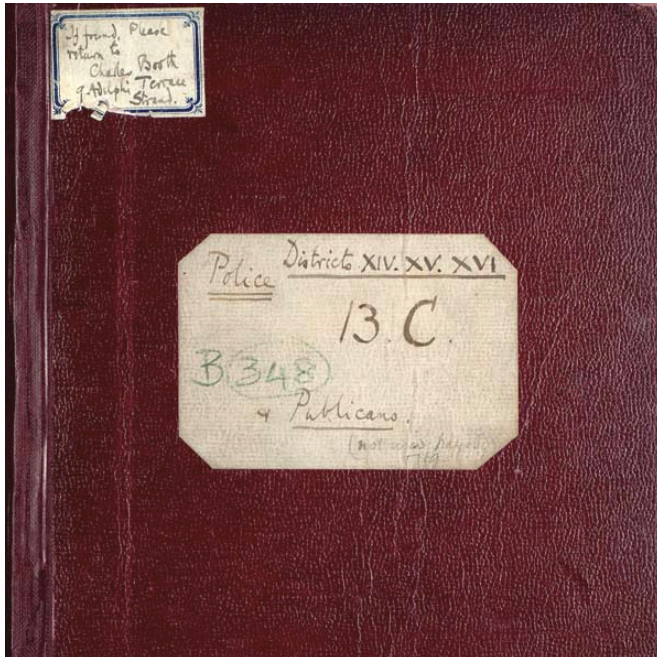
My question derives from a number of years spent filming documentaries in a variety of deprived communities – from rural towns in East Anglia to planned new towns in the North East; from inner-city Leeds to suburban London. These communities came in all shapes and sizes, including traditional, high-rise, post-war sprawl and edge-of town new-build, yet I was struck by the impression that their built form had little bearing on their social circumstances and I want to understand the nature of the relationship.

Policy and guidance are driven by social ideology, or by political and economic expediency, and there is a yawning gap between the reality of community life and political aspirations. As if unaware, architects swim along on the tide of good intentions and mistakes are often repeated. Based on the same old theories money is poured into urban communities, yet it doesn't seem to make them any better.

<sup>1</sup> Shelter. 04.11.08. *The Housing Crisis in Numbers*

<sup>2</sup> Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). 02.08. *Sustainable Communities Act 2007: A Guide*





You may meet regular doses of them any evening between 8 & 9 am. Stoke Newington is very healthy & has a great reputation. Nearly all the houses are small, "it is very seldom that you will find any one of them empty." Those know by experience, as he knows the state of the neighbourhood, because he has lately had great difficulty in finding one for himself. You would have thought that where there are so many you would have been certain to find one without difficulty but you don't! Anything will let or sell in Stoke Newington. The typical house of the neighbourhood is 36 rooms. Two on the ground floor, ~~two~~ on the first floor & 2 on the second floor. The Rife's built out of the back; then there is one scullery & one N.C. which were at the back & for the common use by both the Rife's & the other family. In front of the house is a low small green front with an overgrown hedge & an iron rail on the top of a low parapet which separates it from the street; behind there is a few back garden.

Images from Booth Archive. LSE

## *Introduction*

*Method* Just over a hundred years ago Charles Booth sought to classify the inhabitants of London's East End and the City into social categories, according to their income and where and how they lived. He believed there to be a link between their social status, physical surroundings and the quality of their lives. The result was a remarkable social and physical reading of the map of London, *Life and Labour of The People in London*.

His stated aim was: *to connect poverty and well-being with conditions of employment. Incidentally, to describe the industrial peculiarities of London (and of modern towns generally) both as to character of workers, and of the influences which act upon both*<sup>1</sup>. He went on to examine the causes of poverty, as the basis for social reform. He insisted that to do so he should 'start from the facts', because only then could social action follow. The question as to whether these communities were sustainable was implicit in the process; it was as if he was asking what are the roots of a strong community?

He devised a system of 'classes' to describe people's social condition and assigned these to a series of maps as a range of colours – from black: the lowest grade, occasional labourers, loafers, semi-criminals - the elements of disorder; to yellow: wealthy, who keep more than three servants. For this he relied on the School Board visitors, who performed a house-to-house visitation; every house in every street. He then began a series of street-by-street surveys, accompanied by a local police officer in order to benefit from local knowledge and anecdotal evidence. In the process he produced 46 notebooks describing 13,722 streets. He understood both the quantitative and qualitative value of these accounts; he even indicated shops, churches, theatres, schools and pubs and discussed the relevance of these institutions to their location and community.

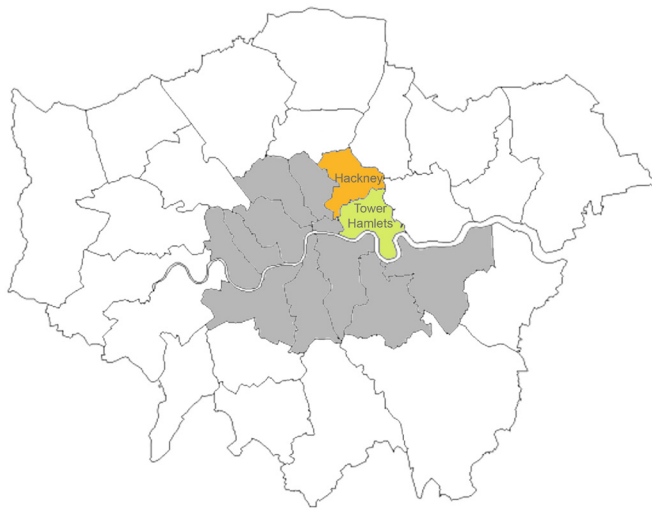
Booth's methods might now seem unscientific and moralistic, but they provide a degree of insight and integrity absent in many modern social endeavours – consider the spin put on the Olympics 'legacy', for example. Architects are not trained to think in depth about the social impact of their work, but they do believe that good design is transformative and can improve people's lives. It is an ambitious claim. If we are engaged in addressing failing communities and helping to create thriving ones we need supporting evidence for why we are doing what we are doing.

I have borrowed from the spirit of Booth's enquiry – using observation and analysis – to consider the relationship between communities and the built environment and to question the easy assumptions made about the social role of architecture.

<sup>1</sup> Booth, C. 1886-1903. *Labour and Life of the People in London (1886-1903)*. p23.



*Location of case studies*



*Holly Street towers 1990. Photographers Direct*



*East End 1983. Museum of London*



## *Part I*

### *Two communities*

Two areas of East London described by Charles Booth, provide a revealing comparison and will be used as case studies: the wards of Queensbridge in Hackney and Bromley-by-Bow in Tower Hamlets. Just three miles apart and similar in size and social demographic, they have many things in common, yet in recent years have fared differently as communities. Both were prosperous until the final decades of the 19th century, when the better off abandoned the Victorian villas and terraces for the suburbs and were replaced by new immigrant populations, living in multiple occupation and poor conditions; both were the subject of post Second World War slum clearance and experienced high unemployment as local industries and jobs disappeared; and both continued to experience a range of social problems, as traditional streets were replaced by large estates. By the late '80s, with many people rehoused in Essex, they became dumping grounds for problem families and those with no alternative. Today they both have ethnic minority populations above 50 percent and remain in the bottom ten most deprived wards in the country.

In the early '90s, however, their stories diverge. While the Holly Street Estate, which constitutes most of Queensbridge, has received £97m to fund redevelopment, including total demolition of its once notorious 'snake-blocks', Bromley-by-Bow has received little investment with just £18m made available for small-scale regeneration and infill.

*Holly Street* July 1897: Charles Booth walking with Inspector Fitzgerald through South Hackney, writes in his notebook: *First south down Holly Street, a purple to pink street...*, noting on the facing page *houses better than inhabitants... To Albion Square (south end of Holly Street) good 2½ storied houses round it but a very badly kept square. No gates, no flowers, only mud heaps and trenches dug by street boys who were playing in them. 40 or 50 yr old trees – remnants of former era – and a dilapidated iron railing round, were the only things to show it had once been cared for.* Booth also described the effect this deterioration had had on nearby facilities: *Albion Hall, a literary institute and swimming baths has now closed. Dances were formerly given there... Now the institute has lost its licenses owing to the character of the dances given... it adds to the illkemptness of the spot.<sup>1</sup>*

August 2009: I walk down Holly Street past the Community Centre and the GP surgery, past the neat new terraced houses, facing the pavement behind low brick walls, to the point where Evergreen Square and a well-equipped playground appear to my right. A solitary mother is pushing a small child on a swing, her dog carefully tied by its lead to the low perimeter fence. Behind me I hear the rumble as the very last surviving building of the 1960s Holly Street Estate is being demolished. As the 15-year, 1050 dwelling redevelopment nears completion, the only evidence of the former estate is a now gleaming white tower-block, saved by its former inhabitants after a long fight.

*Holly Street 2009*



R.I.P DAVID WE ALL MISS YOU CUZ  
WOTS THE POINT IN ALL OF THIS?  
THE POLICE ARE SO BLIND THESE  
DAYS EVERYONE KNOWS IT WAS  
THEM HOLLY ST BOYS BUT THE  
POLICE CANT SEE IT WHEN THE  
AWNSEER IS RIGHT IN THEIR FACE.....  
BUT JUST REMEM IF YOUR FROM  
HOLLY ST AND YOUR EADING THIS  
THERE IS MORE LONDON FIELDZ  
BOY`S THEN ALL OF YOU SO DONT  
EVEN THINK BOUT SHANKIN  
ANOTHER 1 OF MA BOY`S

*Memorial blog for David Novak 2008*



*Holly Street 2006. Guardian Online*

The place seems pleasant but deserted and it is difficult to associate it with Tony Blair's claim in 2004 that Holly Street had introduced him to 'the society of fear' when campaigning as a parliamentary candidate in the '80s and prompted his social 'crusade'. With its reinstated Victorian street pattern, street-facing houses with gardens, low apartment blocks and open spaces, Holly Street in its third iteration appears to have learnt all the lessons of the former 'sink' estate: the demolition was phased; there was extensive consultation; housing is mixed tenure, to encourage a social mix; there's sheltered housing, a nursery, a sports centre, an adventure playground, 'youth' and 'employment-training' facilities. The master-plan and housing have won awards and police chiefs and politicians have held it up as a model of social regeneration. On a visit in 1998 to launch his New Deal for Communities Tony Blair called it a symbol of what can be done.

But scratch a little deeper and a familiar story emerges:

*September 2006: A teenage drug dealer whose gang was responsible for an 'epidemic' of crack cocaine and heroin abuse has been jailed. Christ Williams... appeared with 14 fellow members of the 'Holly Street Gang' as the group were sentenced to more than 56 years at Southwark Crown Court... In what police described as 'open market dealing' the gangsters, including a 15-year-old boy, sold ten pound bags of crack cocaine and heroin in full view of pedestrians and passing traffic.*

Sept 2006 Hackney Gazette

*October 2006: Stevens Nyembo-Ya-Muteba, a churchgoing father of two, was knifed to death outside his home. He was attacked, apparently, after asking a group of youths to keep the noise down because he had to get up early for work... Yesterday in Evergreen Square it was easy to see the attraction for Mr Nyembo-Ya-Muteba. There was no graffiti, nor a scrap of litter, and smart new Golfs and Fiestas were parked under the newly planted sycamores and limes. According to some local people, the small park overlooked by Mr Nyembo-Ya-Muteba's apartment was plagued during the summer evenings by drug dealers.*

October 2006 The Guardian

*July 2009: A violent teenage gang member who took part in a brawl that ended in the death of a 16-year-old boy was locked up for seven years today. David Nowak was knifed in the back in December 2007 as he sheltered in a playground from an angry mob carrying sticks, bricks, bats and knives... The teenager, a member of the Holly Street Boys gang, was a "key player in group violence", the judge said. He had previous convictions for drugs, knife possession, violence and theft.*

July 2009 Evening Standard



*Bromley-by-Bow 1880s. Getty Images*



*Bromley-by-Bow 2009*

Following the early phases redevelopment, there was initially a big drop in crime and anti-social behaviour in Holly Street. But gang and drug-related crime soon returned and has persisted for five years, despite diversion tactics, ASBOs, dispersal orders and a heavy police presence. Talking to youth workers outside the portacabins serving as a youth centre to keep kids off the street, they say children either feel threatened or are running errands for dealers, with a serious knock-on effect on families, some of whom have begun to leave. Disaffection and fear – these are the recognisable signs of a downward spiral.

Holly Street's story raises fundamental questions: why have these problems resurfaced and persisted despite the investment, redevelopment and careful consultation that has taken place? And what role has been played by the built environment?

*Bromley-by-Bow* May 1897: Charles Booth's notebook records a walk with Mr Carter, the District Inspector of Police, round the District of Bromley: *Being Monday the district was alive with tallymen, insurance agents and rent collectors. Tally men in dog carts, smart, some with a groom in livery, and a pile of samples under the seat. Others on foot some on bicycles calling for orders... Bromley High St. is very rough throughout... On the west side where the High Street joins the Devons Road, Back Alley and Stewarts Buildings, both should be black, Notorious brothels and have been for years... Pawnshops doing a fair business with women who were putting away their own or their husband's Sunday clothes 'One of the signs of a poor street is the pawn shop at the end of it'.<sup>2</sup>*

Bromley by Bow, September 2009: Standing at the bend in the road where Bromley High Street meets the shopping precinct, it is evident why this is considered the most run-down part of the East End. It's a far cry from the gentrified 'villages' of Bow and Stepney nearby: someone's sleeping rough on the steps of the once grand, now boarded up pub; several of the shops are vacant, but a couple of stalls are selling vegetables; the road is lined with brick tenements and high-rise point blocks, some poorly maintained, others recently renovated. Turn into St Leonard's Street and the rumble of heavy traffic is constant – Bromley-by-Bow is almost entirely cut off by the A12 Blackwall Tunnel approach, The Docklands Light Railway and the Limehouse Cut. Beyond the traffic are the cranes of the Olympics site. The few remaining Victorian and Edwardian terraces have been infilled with post-70s cul-de-sacs and a primary school. Two buildings stand out as remnants of a traditional community, the United Reform Church and Kingsley Hall, an Edwardian-built social centre where Gandhi used to stay on his trips to London in the 1930s.



*Bromley-by-Bow 2009*

*Bromley-by-Bow 2009*





It is not surprising that Bromley-by-Bow is a pocket of social deprivation. First bomb damage and then the loss of jobs in the docks led to long-term residents being re-housed in Dagenham and Southend. By the mid 80s there was a transient population, in properties on short-let – with an average stay of 3 years. Everyone who could get out had done so. There were fifty local languages, high unemployment and severe mental health problems.

But Bromley-by-Bow also conceals an unexpected story:

As I walk down Grace Street there is obvious activity and people are acknowledging each other or stopping to chat. The gloomy tenements in Talwin Street have plants on the balconies and kids are playing outside among well-kept flowerbeds. Nearby a couple of women are tending a vegetable patch - the scene appears improbable and out of context. At the other end of St Leonard Street, there's a new building in a small park with a notice-board outside and a list of local job vacancies and cookery courses. It houses a community organisation that started out in the then crumbling church building next door in mid '80s. The Bromley-by-Bow-Centre does not have the look of a community building: a sculptor is working with her door open, next to a bigger studio where elderly men and women are sewing and chatting. Young people are serving drinks in the café opposite. The Centre has grown exponentially, out of the need to support people. Started by a few determined locals and a belief that given the opportunity people have the capacity to achieve things for themselves, it has expanded from a small health centre to address just about every local need: a nursery, care services, alternative therapies, advice, training, a job agency, adult education and social activities – and dozens of social enterprises to bring in funds and provide local employment. The housing agency, that began in a back room, now manages 8000 properties in East London. Things are changing in Bromley-by-Bow and although the problems of deprivation persist, they are gradually reducing and people are now choosing to move in.

The received wisdom is that communities are most likely to fail where there are concentrations of the poor and unemployed. Add in 'difficult to reach' groups, such as ethnic minorities with poor english, as in Bromley-by-Bow, and the risk increases. Why then has Bromley-by-Bow turned the corner and become a sustainable community in the making? Has the built environment had any part to play in it?

<sup>1</sup>Booth, C. *Notebook No B347*. p49

<sup>2</sup>Booth, C. *Notebook No B346*. p53





### *Sustainable communities – what are they and do we want them?*

Judging by appearances – and according to the political rhetoric – the Holly Street Estate is a success. Judging by recognised social markers – and the headlines – it is failing. Yet appearances and statistics give only superficial readings of the state of a community. There is no checklist of what constitutes a sustainable community, nor even an agreed definition. Given this lack of clarity it is difficult to understand why it should be our aim to create them.

The idea of the 'sustainable community' has gained political currency because it can be described as socially and morally advantageous. It is viewed as beneficial to individuals and society, so as with sustainability generally it is presented as axiomatically good and morally opprobrious to ignore. The danger with this position is that the value is assumed and so does not need to be defined or justified. This in turn produces the empty rhetoric and lack of substance evident in government policy and development proposals. The theme of social responsibility simply becomes part of the sales pitch, allowing us to hide behind the rhetoric.

Turned around, the 'sustainable community' also provides a framework with which to judge failing communities, in a way that is equally ill-defined. It should not simply be assumed that a sustainable community is a good thing, or that it comes in a particular form. We need to understand what it is - and what it is not - and be able to define its components. Only then can we determine what kinds of communities we are after, what is involved in creating them and where the duties of design and the designer lie.

#### *Definitions:* community

'Community' tends to be regarded loosely as pertaining to place. Yet although it might have spatial connotations, it is essentially a social construct – without physical boundaries, except to the extent that it is artificially contained, or deliberately composed. The word 'community' originally referred to 'the common people', but later came to mean a state of organised society, particularly on a small scale. 'A community' in a local sense evolved from the idea of proximity and face-to-face relationships, creating a social grouping with a common identity and characteristics. It is the quality of these relationships that engenders a 'sense of community', with shared goals and values. The idea that a community has certain desirable features (to which we might aspire or wish for others) follows on from this, along with a suggestion that a community evolves over time – a process Nicholas Taylor describes as 'slow-growth', or *elaborately overlapping social networks built over three or four generations*<sup>1</sup>. He prefers sense of identity to the moral intensity of the word 'community'.



Olympic Village 2012 London E15. London 2012.com

sustainable community?

Thamesmead London SE2. BBC



*Definitions:* sustainable community

The word 'sustainable' is a chameleon, *it takes on meaning within different political ideologies and programmes underpinned by different kinds of knowledge, values and philosophy.*<sup>2</sup> Likewise the term 'sustainable community' has become a melting pot into which a variety of social and environmental aspirations can be thrown, without risk of them being unpicked and identified. The result is that nobody seems able to agree what the term means. *About the only thing on which there is a consensus, and accepted in all policy, is the importance of the basic triad: the integration of social, economic and environmental sustainability.*<sup>3</sup>

The term evolved from 'sustainable development', for which a frequently cited definition is that of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987: *a development which is capable of meeting today's needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.* Definitions of 'sustainable community' inherited this idea of social justice and responsibility to future generations, along with commitment to the environment. But the social and environmental factors sat uncomfortably together and the environment - in the form of addressing energy use and CO<sup>2</sup> emissions - took precedence. It was assumed that social benefits would accrue with new technology and by the end of the 1990s definitions had found a more comfortable balance between quality of life and protection of the environment: *A sustainable community is organized so as to enable all its citizens to meet their own needs and to enhance their well-being without damaging the natural world or endangering the living conditions of other people, now or in the future.*<sup>4</sup>

The government's Sustainable Communities Programme was launched by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) in 2003, leading in October 2007 to the Sustainable Communities Act. There was an explosion of definitions, policy, guidance – and rhetoric:

- [a sustainable community] *should be fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture; have a strong sense of community identity and belonging; be socially inclusive with good life chances for all; have a sense of civic values, responsibility and pride... [It should be] well designed and built, well connected, thriving.*<sup>5</sup>

- The Academy for Sustainable Communities, set up by the ODPM, to help deliver and maintain sustainable communities across the country defines a sustainable community on their website as *a place where [people] know their neighbours and feel safe. A place with good homes, local shops, lots of jobs and opportunities for young people to get a good education... [where there is] good governance, public participation, partnership working, excellent public services and civic pride.* The list is endless, even including fairness to everyone in our diverse world. They add almost as an afterthought: *creating these places requires a change in the way our housing and communities are planned, designed, built and maintained.* This onslaught of rhetoric prompted The Architects Journal to ask whether it is *an academy of hot air.*



These definitions represent current policy. Even the guidance documents contain only principles and outcomes, attempting to describe what a sustainable community is, but not how it can be created.

The Sustainable Communities Act requires the building industry to create communities that are socially cohesive; the social wellbeing of communities must be acknowledged when considering the built environment. So when major projects are being developed does it follow that the spatial and physical aspects of people living in proximity are secondary to the social aspects? The absence of a clear definition makes it difficult for architects to consider what a sustainable community might include, or how design can fulfill this social purpose.

#### *The role of architects*

Despite scant reference to the built environment in definitions of a sustainable community, architects are seen as key to their delivery – and this is what the profession has come to believe. In 2004, the ODPM asked the industrialist Sir John Egan to outline the skills needed to deliver the aims of the Sustainable Communities Plan. In his Review, Egan listed the ‘core occupations’ involved in building sustainable communities. After local authority decision-makers, ‘built environment occupations’ top of the list – namely planners, urban designers and architects – ahead of ‘environmental’, ‘social’, and ‘economic occupations’ (in that order).<sup>6</sup>

The significant effects are a general expectation (among policy makers, the public and within the design professions) that a new, or renewed, community can be made socially sustainable by design; and a tacit acknowledgement that architects are part of a process of social engineering. This involves three further important assumptions: that there is a correlation between physical surroundings and the success or failure of communities and that this correlation can be identified; that the key components of a sustainable community can be defined; and that architects have the tools to create them.

In fact the Egan Review’s list of fifty Sustainable Community Indicators includes just one that relates to design – ‘the percentage of those satisfied with their home’, which is number 30.

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, N. 1973. *The Village in The City*. p 190

<sup>2</sup> Huckle, J. 1996. *Education for Sustainability*.

<sup>3</sup> Burton, E. 2008. Conversation at Oxford Brookes University.

<sup>4</sup> Girardet, H. 1999. *Creating Sustainable Cities*.

<sup>5</sup> ODPM. 2003. *Sustainable Communities: Building for the future*.

<sup>6</sup> ODPM. 2004. *The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities*.



London Docks 1880s. Museum of London

**Henry Mayhew**, a journalist and lawyer, made a study of living and working conditions in London and in 1851 published *London Labour and the London Poor*, a detailed account of life on the streets, based on observations and personal stories. In *A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of those that will work, those that cannot work and those that will not work*, he made important observations about the impact of employment and unemployment and established the idea of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor – proposing that the former should be helped by public funds and the latter denied support to force them to work.

East End 1950s. Getty Images



As head of the Labour Party Research Department, **Michael Young** helped shape the new welfare state after the Second World War, but he was worried that slum clearance policies were destroying communities that had proved their resilience during economic depression and war. With **Peter Wilmott** he began a series of sociological studies of Bethnal Green, which were published in 1957 as *Family and Kinship in East London*. Michael Young later founded the Institute of Community Studies.

## Part II

### Social context

*Observational accounts* Each community is uniquely defined and reflects its local circumstances and needs, yet there must be common factors that promote or inhibit sustainability. In search of the reasons why some communities succeed and others fail, I have drawn on a number of observational accounts of the inner city, written over a period of a hundred and fifty years. Inner city neighbourhoods are where the physical, social and economic aspects of community life are most clearly defined. Although impressionistic and inconclusive, the direct relationship between the observer and observed gives these accounts a particular authenticity – of things seen and experienced, not just reported. They give a voice to those who would otherwise remain unheard, often contradicting received wisdom.

Three of the accounts are historical, each written fifty years apart: Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851); Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the people in London* (1902-03) and Michael Young and Peter Wilmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) A further two were written in the last ten years and so provide a more contemporary commentary: Nick Davies' *Dark Heart: the shocking truth about hidden Britain* (1997); and Polly Toyne's *Hard Work: life in low-pay Britain* (2003).

Mayhew's preface serves as an appropriate introduction: *as being the first attempt to publish the history of the people, from the lips of the people themselves – giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own 'unvarnished' language; and to portray the condition of their homes and their families by personal observation of the places, and direct communion with the individuals... It is curious moreover as concerning a large body of persons, of whom the public had less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth.*<sup>1</sup>

*Poverty* These authors agree that poverty is at the heart of community breakdown, but this is not to say that being poor means a community will fail. Most of these accounts include descriptions of poor communities that are thriving – just as recent research has detailed the success of some favela communities. Henry Mayhew's description of a coster community in the East End bears a remarkable resemblance to Wilmott and Young's Bethnal Green a hundred years later: *It gave me the notion that it... formed one large hawkers' home; for everybody seemed to be doing just as he liked... Women were seated on the pavement, knitting, and repairing their linen; the doorways were filled up with bonnetless girls... Little children formed a convenient bench out of the kerbstone; and a party of four men were seated on the footway, playing cards.*<sup>2</sup>



In the mid 1990s **Nick Davies** spent several months with the inhabitants of Hyde Park in Leeds, a large 70s housing estate of neat flats and maisonettes which sits among streets of well-tended back-to-backs. What started out as a personal investigation into the nature of poverty, became a detailed account of downward spiral of a 'sink' estate. The resulting book *Dark Heart, the shocking truth about hidden Britain*, was seen as a damning indictment of Thatcherism.



Leeds. James Bell



Clapham Park. Danny Robinson

In 2002 the journalist **Polly Toynbee** responded to a challenge from the charity Church Action, to live on the newly created minimum wage of £4.10 an hour. She moved into the Clapham Park Estate and took whatever work was available at the Job Centre. In *Hard Work – Life in Low-Pay Britain* she paints a bleak picture of inner-city deprivation and social exclusion.



What is meant by poverty also changes over time. Mayhew and Booth witnessed 'absolute poverty' – the lack of the basic necessities to sustain life – but by the 1950s this had largely been addressed in the developed world. 'Relative poverty' became the major concern and the gap between the richest and poorest in Britain is still increasing with every decade. *Individuals, families and groups can be said to be in poverty when... their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.*<sup>3</sup> Poverty is increasingly described in terms of its knock-on effects, or 'social exclusion', and it is now generally accepted that societies benefit from greater social equity, because exclusion hinders social mobility and progress.

What has not changed, however, is the common conflation between poverty and immorality. Alongside the meticulous descriptions, Booth's notebooks reveal his fascination with squalor. In his day visitors used to bus into the East End to delight in the bad behaviour of others, just as nowadays the headlines equate poverty with crime and anti-social behaviour. This has governed the way people respond to poverty – by being simultaneously voyeuristic, judgemental and paternalistic. Being judgemental provides an excuse to keep poverty in its place and at a distance, while paternalism encourages grand gestures and rhetoric. Both give rise to a lack of investigation and knowledge – or what these writers describe as the invisibility of the poor.

The accounts identify other common factors that affect the ability of communities to thrive, yet it is striking that these factors do not necessarily correlate with unemployment or the extremes of deprivation. The situations they describe refer principally to the working poor and they show a remarkable consistency over time. They can be loosely grouped under five headings:

- a fair wage
- uncertain labour
- social networks
- social policy
- the safety net



*London Docks.* Museum of London

*A fair wage* The theme of a fair wage for hard work is fundamental to ideas of social justice, as is an understanding of the interdependence between the individual and a healthy economy – the top and the bottom are inextricably connected.

1849: *I have sold wet fish in the streets for more than fourteen years... I clear from 10s to 12s every week. That's not much to support two people. Some weeks I earn only 4s... I have no children thank God... I'm often very badly off indeed – very badly; and the misery of being hard up sir, is not when you're making a struggle to get out of your trouble;...but when your wife and you's sitting by the grate without a fire, and putting the candle out to save it, a-planning how to raise money. "Can we borrow there?" "Can we manage to sell if we can borrow?" "Shall we get from very bad to the parish?"*<sup>4</sup>

Ideas of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor have always been an important part of the poverty debate and regularly resurface during reviews of the benefits system. Mayhew, like Edwin Chadwick before him, believed that 'poor relief' encouraged idleness and he devised his own categorisation: *I shall consider the whole of the metropolitan poor under three separate phases, according as they will work, they can't work and they won't work.*<sup>5</sup>

1898: Charles Booth had a more sophisticated understanding of cause and effect, and of the mutual dependency within the economy: *There is a great sense of helplessness: the wage earners are helpless to regulate their work and cannot obtain a fair equivalent for the labour they are willing to give; the manufacturer or dealer can only work within the limits of competition; the rich are helpless to relieve want without stimulating its sources.*<sup>6</sup>

2003: Polly Toynbee recognised the same problem a century later: *The biggest single group of the poor is right here under [the Government's] nose, hard at work in its own schools, local authorities and hospitals.*<sup>7</sup> She welcomed Labour's New Deal, heralded as an end to poverty: 'work for those who can, welfare for those who can't'. *It was a brilliant idea... work was to be the salvation of the poor, their escape upwards: everyone believes in its redemptive power... But what if work pays so little that those on the minimum wage are still excluded, marginalised, locked out?*<sup>8</sup>

Both Polly Toynbee and Nick Davies argued that people's sense of social justice is tied to the idea of a fair wage for the work they do. The removal of the element of fairness and reward has a direct impact on their feelings of self-worth, provoking a process of disconnection. This in turn has a destructive effect within communities.

Leeds. Geograph.org.uk



Brush-making making 1995. Guildhall Library



*A little raft of places that Jean had come to rely on as part of everyday life in Hyde Park suddenly seemed to sink out of sight ... The shops were dead... Here were three facades in a row, all abandoned... several of the houses were closed to the world by wooden boards nailed tight against the doors and windows... there was no sign of anyone.*

Nick Davies<sup>9</sup>

### *Uncertain labour*

Henry Mayhew asked all his interviewees about employment, weekly earnings and outgoings, to establish their cost of living. He calculated that of a regular workforce of 4.5 million people in London, there was regular work for under a half, while 1.5 million were wholly unemployed. He understood the impact of competition and underselling on wages, and the stranglehold of 'middlemen'. But he reserved his greatest criticism for casual labour – 'lump work', 'standing still' (without work) and 'the slacks' (downtime) – which he saw as a cause of social exclusion. It would 'drag a man down'.<sup>10</sup>

*1849: All casual labour... is necessarily uncertain labour; and wherever uncertainty exists, there can be no foresight or providence... The ordinary effects, then, are to drive the labourers to improvidence, recklessness and pauperism. The effects of the lack of job security was not just to do with income, but with behaviour and self-esteem. When men find they are likely to have permanent employment they have always better habits and more settled notions.*<sup>11</sup>

Charles Booth divided the causes of poverty into three categories: questions of employment; questions of habit and questions of circumstance. According to his statistical analysis, the questions of employment – 'casual work', 'irregular work', 'low pay' and 'small profits' – accounted for 68% of the slide into poverty. Work, he concluded, only has redemptive power if it is steady and therefore provides stability.<sup>12</sup>

1952: In Bethnal Green work was plentiful, sustained by the docks. Local industry provided local jobs, which meant that money was made and spent locally – a virtuous circle that benefited the community: *You only have to take a bus down the main street to notice this is a place of many industries. You pass tailors' workshops, furniture makers, Kearley and Tong's food warehouse... The mentality of the master-craftsman which was one of the outstanding marks of the nineteenth century still survives too... an attitude of outspoken independence and a range of trades, customs and personality which has added to the variety of local society.*<sup>13</sup> Despite the post war boom, Young and Wilmott identified that the community had fragile foundations, because lack of job security posed an impending threat. Half those employed were in skilled manual trades and a third semi or unskilled. Jobs were obtained by word of mouth and were paid hourly. This is fine in a buyer's market, but dangerous when the tide turns. And so it eventually proved with the closure of the London docks and the relocation of businesses to satellite towns.

1995 Hyde Park: Nick Davies documented the experiences of Jean, aged seventy-two, who had been born in one of the local back-to-backs. When she moved into her new house in 1972 she thought it was lovely. The place had a settled quality, a good mix, and everyone knew everyone else. Men and women went off to work in the old foundries and factories and those that didn't work would head out to the shops: a Coop, a grocers, a sweet shop, a china shop, a greengrocer, two barbers, a fishmonger and two butchers. Although a thriving community, it too could not be sustained: *The change came slowly, almost invisibly, like waves wearing down a cliff.*<sup>14</sup> Just as the local jobs market had fed and sustained the local economy, the loss of local jobs quickly threatened it, causing the stability of the community to rock. By 1995, including the disabled and retired, 59% had no work (30% of young people) and the shops closed – due to *the commercial impossibility of surviving in an area where people had no money in their pockets.*<sup>15</sup>





*East End 1950s. Guildhall Library*

*Leeds 1990s. Geograph.org.uk*



*Social networks* Part of the downward spiral in Hyde Park was the departure of long-term residents, to find work or simply to escape. In their place were deposited new immigrant families, with little support, along with those at the bottom of the housing list. A stable population was replaced by a transient one.

1957: Young and Wilmott identified the long-term residence of families in Bethnal Green as a key to its 'sense of community', *that feeling of solidarity between people who occupy the common territory, which springs from the fact that people and their families have lived there a long time... The family contributes in another way to this sense of community, by giving people a very personal link with its past.*<sup>16</sup>

They found this sense of 'kinship' particularly among women: two out of three had parents within two miles; 80% of daughters saw their mother once a week; A Mrs Landon kept a record: *in a week she saw 63 people she knew in the street (some many times) of whom thirty-eight were relatives.*<sup>17</sup> In this way private space extended beyond the home; and with physical proximity came mutual support. It was Michael Young's conjecture that length of residence and kinship together are a powerful force within a community. One or the other can still be sufficient to hold a community together, but without either it is at risk of losing 'social cohesion'.

1995: Hyde Park. Jean mourned the loss of the familiar: of familiar places, familiar routines and familiar faces. In 20 years a whole layer of local support and supervision had disappeared: bus conductors, lavatory attendants, park keepers, shop keepers. In their place came the dealers, the crack houses and the gang. Those who remained retreated indoors to the point where ceased to exist as a community *and became instead a collection of strangers, in surroundings for which many can feel nothing but estrangement... Whatever had bound Hyde Park together in the 1970s had come unstuck.*<sup>18</sup>

2003: Polly Toynbee saw the results of this detachment from her fourth floor flat in Clapham Park: *Everyone walked fast and purposefully across no man's land. No one sauntered through these unwelcoming spaces, no one looked much to left or right, avoiding eye-contact for fear of some unwelcome encounter. There were not even clumps of kids hanging about. The only place to be was inside the safe, familiar, private space of your own flat.*<sup>19</sup> Most people wanted to get out and there was a 50 percent turnover every four years. Instead of mutual support the priority had become personal security and anonymity. Private space had shrunk to the protective confines of four walls.

*Slum Clearance.* Hulton Archive



*Evicted matchbox maker.* Museum of London



*Washroom, East End 1939.* Museum of London



*Hemel Hempstead 1954.* Getty Images



*Social policy* The destruction of social cohesion, or the glue that holds communities together, is inextricably linked to a loss of confidence. The causes are complex, but even apparently stable communities are vulnerable to external factors and the unintended consequences of social policies. The detrimental effect of bad housing and overcrowding on health and community life has been the justification of slum clearance for two hundred years. The implication is that if those conditions are improved, people's lives will correspondingly improve.

1898: Charles Booth helped propagate this theory by suggesting that better conditions engender both a better lifestyle and better behaviour. In his *Industry Series* he describes the typical housing for each 'Class'<sup>20</sup>. The Class B family lives and sleeps in one room: *The furniture... consists of things barely worth pawning, or they would have been pawned; things not only shabby and broken but foul... The window, broken patched and dirty, indicates more perhaps than anything else that no housewifely pride is taken.* Class D occupies one or two rooms: *The window is bright, shrouded with clean cotton-lace curtains, and often filled with plants; or a little table holding some treasured ornament is pushed between the curtains, that passers by may see it.* Apart from comfort, the key distinction is in 'housewifely pride'.

The idea that improved physical conditions inevitably improve quality of life has continued to underpin redevelopment and housing policy, ensuring that physical improvement takes precedence.

1957: Wilmott and Young described the impact on the Bethnal Green community of post-war slum clearance and the planned exodus of residents to a new town built by the London County Council in Essex (given the fictitious name of Greenleigh). The population fell from 108,000 in 1931 to 53,00 in 1955. Many chose to go: *Who can wonder that people crowded into one or two poky rooms, carrying water up three flights of stairs, sharing a wc... should feel their hearts lift at the thought of a sparkling new house with a garden?* But others felt that the poor conditions in Bethnal Green were outweighed by the sense of community: *I suppose the buildings aren't all that good, but we don't look on this as a pile of stones. It isn't the buildings that matter. We like the people here.*<sup>21</sup> Each of the packed streets, known as 'turnings', was a community in itself: *The residents... have their own places to meet – practically every turning has its one or two pubs, its two or three shops, and its 'bookie's runner'*<sup>22</sup>. By contrast Greenleigh is *all of one piece... row upon row [of houses] look virtually identical, each with its little patch of flower garden at front.* Many said they were lonely: *If I didn't go to work I'd get melancholic.... It's like being in a box to die out here.*<sup>23</sup> Whereas in Bethnal Green there was one pub for four hundred people, one shop for forty-four, in Greenleigh there was one pub for five thousand people and one shop for three hundred.

As family members and neighbours left Bethnal Green, the sense of continuity and identity diminished, and although many moved to Greenleigh together, the relative anonymity severed the bond of kinship. Michael Young later reported that it took two generations for Greenleigh to thrive<sup>24</sup>, providing evidence that communities take a long time to evolve. Meanwhile the community in Bethnal Green was virtually destroyed by the exodus and subsequent influx of immigrant families and has only begun to recover through gentrification. This demonstrates the destructive effects of displacement on both the old and new community.



Margaret Thatcher launches Right-to-Buy 1979. The Guardian

*A flyer through the door asked 'Are You A Council Tenant? Have you ever considered giving up your tenancy? If so you could receive between £6000–£26000'. Once New Deal money for redevelopment was announced, estate agent 'sharks' started a blitz of buying in to the estate... I wondered how many vulnerable or deeply indebted tenants might be catastrophically seduced into this scheme, losing their home and their right to a council tenancy for ever in exchange for a paltry slice of the profit.*

Polly Toynbee<sup>25</sup>

The equally devastating effects of the social engineering policies of the Thatcher years are described by both Nick Davies and Polly Toynbee. The 'right-to-buy' scheme, which swept Margaret Thatcher to power, became enshrined in the 1980 Housing Act, giving hard-working people the right to join the independent, property-owning classes – thereby encouraging social mobility. Simultaneously the construction of council houses was halted – *previously this had been the greatest benefit in kind for the poor.*<sup>26</sup> There was no safeguard to stop the haemorrhage of council housing and by 1990 1,275,000 council homes had been sold to professional landlords, housing associations and home ownership – a net total of 700,000 council homes were lost and not replaced (ONS). *The forgotten fact is that although it was life-changing for many of the 1.5 million who have bought their homes, in many places - the nations' property hot-spots - it has been a calamity because there was no policy to replace all the lost social housing.*<sup>27</sup>

In Clapham Park as in Hyde Park, better-off people did not buy in, to move the place up in the world. The only buyers were the professional landlords, who rented the properties out on short-lets. As long-term residents moved out, the poor became increasingly concentrated in the estates and a culture of dependency began to descend on these and many other deprived communities.

*Safety net* It is generally accepted that to ignore poverty and social exclusion is damaging to society. As far back as Elizabethan times, the local parish had a formal responsibility to look after its poor, both as an act of charity and to maintain a healthy and productive community. The idea of a safety net – a level of support that would keep people from 'destitution' – underpinned the 19th century Poor Laws and the design of the welfare state a hundred years later. Political and socio-economic debates still rage about the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, welfare dependency and disincentives to work. But the idea persists that when all else fails, 'social security' will provide for the least well off within communities and protect against socially-recognized ills.

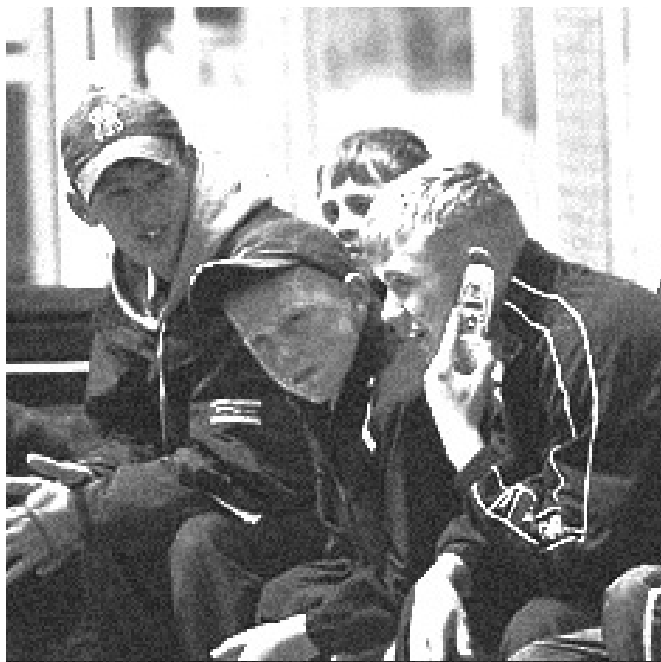
This is touched on by all five authors. According to Henry Mayhew's survey statistics<sup>28</sup>, in 1841 the number of 'paupers being relieved' was 1,299,048, or 6.94 percent of the population; in his first survey, in 1895, Charles Booth proposed a poverty line, to include those on low pay, as the level below which a family could not meet basic needs<sup>29</sup>. In 1889, 30.7 percent of the population of London was below this line. To put this in context, the number of families receiving housing benefit in Hackney in October 2009 is 41.9%, the highest in the country.<sup>30</sup>

In his review of the Poor Law in 1834, Edwin Chadwick had identified that the relief paid to the able-bodied poor was socially and financially unsustainable. At a cost £7 million, a fifth of the national expenditure, it encouraged idleness, took away labourers' pride in their work and kept wages artificially low<sup>31</sup>. Chadwick's proposed 'remedial measure', was that relief would only be available by going into the workhouse, the cornerstone of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834).

Yorkshire Evening Post



*The children in the Hyde Park gang are just the most visible among those who have lost their faith... Real life has been torn away from them. They have no future. They have lost their connection to this place: it does nothing for them and they do nothing for it.* Nick Davies<sup>32</sup>



*'I want to have a job, earn some money, have a kid. Look at me. Will you look at me? I live like a tramp, like a foogin' animal. Don't I?... I'm sixteen and I feel like foogin' killing somebody...' He dropped his chin onto his chest and mumbled, in a voice that was heavy with defeat, 'This area's fucked up'.* Quoted by Nick Davies<sup>33</sup>

*Kids Leeds. Photographers Direct*

1849: Mayhew railed against the Poor Law for *admitting of the reduction of wages to so low a point of mere brutal existence as to induce that recklessness and improvidence among the poor.*<sup>34</sup> Contrary to the intentions of the Act, in the first ten years there was a 56 percent increase in the number of paupers in London, despite a dramatic increase in the profits of trade.<sup>35</sup> He observed how the loss of local trades put pressure on artisans and their communities and, in the midst of this mounting insecurity, the humanity of the poor was being neglected. Mayhew's ideas of social justice recognised that there were social consequences to the widening gap between rich and poor – *We increase in poverty and crime as we increase in wealth* – and that no improvement in quality of life was possible until wages reflected the value of the worker<sup>36</sup>. *Justice, rather than the market, should rule.* In turn higher wages would stimulate demand and the local economy. He singled out trade societies, or unions, as providing an effective safety net because they could offer collective support without loss of pride.<sup>37</sup>

1943: When Michael Young helped shape the welfare state he cautioned *against state policies which might damage the resilience of communities.*<sup>38</sup> The Beveridge Report was welcomed *not simply because it offered material security, but also because it seemed to embody many traditional working-class practices, such as self-help, loyalty and reciprocity.*<sup>39</sup> Mutual aid societies, thrift clubs and informal networks and institutions provided personal security through mutual support. It would be a fairer system, based on membership of and personal contribution to the community. But when he carried out a follow-up survey of Bethnal Green in 1992 he recorded how the benefits culture had led to a loss of resilience. The welfare system had been undermined by the promotion of individualism and replaced by a culture of entitlement, which worked against the integrity of communities and weakened mutual support.<sup>40</sup>

Wilmott and Young could not have envisaged that post-war ideas of social responsibility and self-sufficiency would be replaced by welfare dependency, with half the population of some communities without regular work – particularly among the young. Optimism had been replaced by hopelessness and helplessness.

1995 Hyde Park: Nick Davies blamed successive policies for the destruction he witnessed in Hyde Park. *Just as jobs were becoming rarer, the government started to strip away the safety nets which for decades had ensured that the poor could not fall too far.*<sup>41</sup> Since 1979 they had overseen major cuts in benefits, doubled council rents, abolished wage councils, and curbed the powers of trade unions – and the numbers of working poor rocketed. Local institutions staggered under the burden: first the community centre closed, along with the play scheme, then the youth club and the Catholic and Presbyterian churches – and in a final act of destruction the kids burnt down the pub. *The welfare state... had retreated like an exhausted mother, too tired to offer her children anything but indifference.*<sup>42</sup>

The response of the 1997 Labour government was the New Deal. Welfare, it was decided, helps determine motivation and character, whether for good or bad; *In future, welfare will be a hand-up not a hand-out,* said Tony Blair<sup>43</sup>. Benefits could now be withdrawn from those who refused 'reasonable employment'; tax credits were promised to the low-paid as an incentive to continue working; and grants were replaced by loans.



*The history of social progress, from factory acts and electoral reforms to universal education and the welfare state, used to be the story of the onward march of social justice. But the clock seems to have stopped.*

Polly Toynbee<sup>44</sup>



*Lambeth estate under construction 1968. Museum of London*



*Council housing. Hulton Archive*

*These were once architects' little utopias, designer fantasies of the good community life, fatally turned inwards upon themselves instead of outwards to join the bustling world beyond.*

Polly Toynbee<sup>45</sup>

2003 Clapham Park: Polly Toynbee watched as her neighbours clocked up huge debts. *I had not realised the huge financial quagmire people had to cross in getting themselves off benefits and into a job... (anyone) was bound to start working life in serious debt*<sup>44</sup>. 'Crazy George', the community loan shark, offered credit to anyone on no security and at staggering rates of interest. Spending on credit cards and HP soared. If desperate you could apply to the Social Fund for a loan of up to £20 a month, but you had to be 'destitute' (the term produces an eerie echo of Mayhew's London). A New Deal for Communities followed in 1998 in an effort to regenerate deprived neighbourhoods, with money only made available if communities committed to reaching certain social targets. In order to qualify for £56 million, the Clapham Park estate would first have to reduce crime to the national average; reduce fear of crime by two-thirds; cut sickness by a third; and three-quarters of the estate must report that they feel involved in their community. *Who are the ones who are expected to galvanise themselves into heroic acts of citizenship?*<sup>45</sup>

Although varying in time and context, the five accounts tell a fairly consistent story, highlighting the importance to communities of social justice and self-esteem, of financial security, social stability and mutual support. They reveal the extent to which even stable communities are vulnerable to external pressures, including policies intended to alleviate deprivation. The more recent accounts show how welfare reform has locked people in to failing communities, where poverty and exclusion breed hopelessness, helplessness and a sense of injustice. And once the wall is breached the self-destructive effects of disaffection kick in: people leave, local institutions fail and the familiar character of a place is transformed.

Surprisingly little reference is made to the physical environment. It seems only to feature as a backdrop to a human drama, that reflects the mood and circumstances of the characters. The accounts suggest that there is a level of social disengagement at which people become dislocated from their surroundings — and the idea of community ceases to have much relevance for them. They have retreated behind closed doors, to the only space where they feel safe and in control.



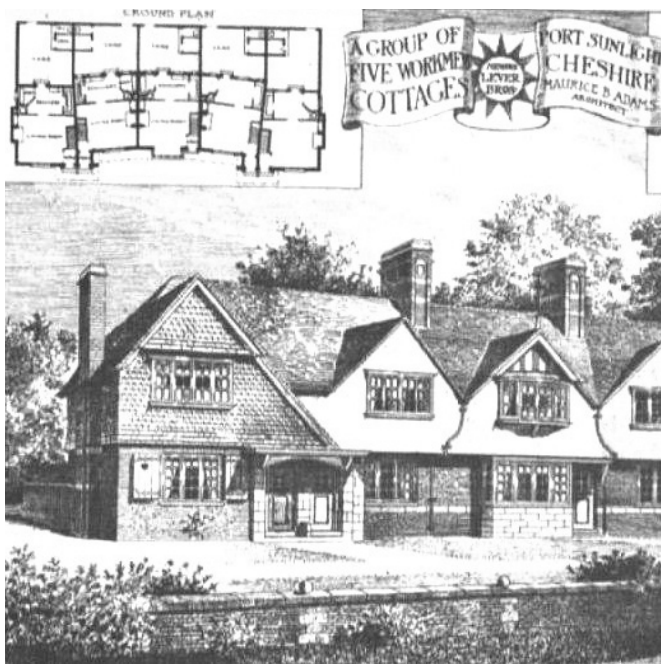
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- <sup>34</sup> Mayhew, H. 1861. p. 402
- <sup>35</sup> Mayhew, H. 1861. p. 311.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 267.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 502.
- <sup>38</sup> Young, M. Willmott, P. 1994. *The New East End*. p. 1.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.
- <sup>41</sup> Davies, N. 1997. p. 288.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 289.
- <sup>43</sup> Tony Blair. March 1999.
- <sup>44</sup> Toynbee, P. 2003. p. 14.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 47
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 129

*New Lanark. New Lanark Archive*



*Bourneville 1909. Getty Images*



*Port Sunlight Postcard. Portsunlight.Org*



### *Part III*

#### *Historical precedent – can communities be made sustainable by design?*

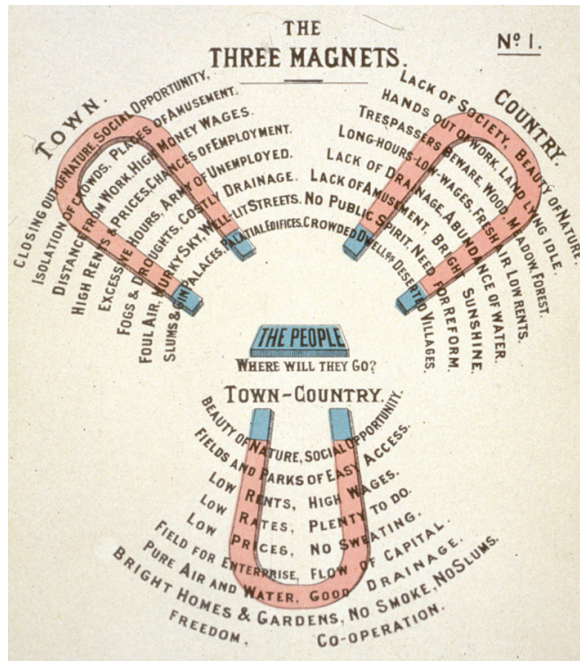
The evidence from observational accounts would suggest that social cohesion is more significant than the built environment in sustaining communities and that social exclusion is more relevant than physical conditions as a contributor to community breakdown. This does not of course offer any proof that successful communities cannot be created by design, or that the built environment does not play a part in the downward spiral of community breakdown. We need to know the extent to which people's physical environment has contributed to the success of communities. Can the components of sustainable communities be identified in historical architectural precedents?

#### *The model village*

In the eighteenth century there emerged a utopian belief that an ideal community could be created that would transform the lives of its inhabitants. This led to experiments in community building by social entrepreneurs – from the 'model village' to 'garden cities' and 'new towns' – underpinned by the belief that new communities were the key to social progress. (This later gave rise to a conviction that the traditional village, in its human scale and social cohesion, could be recreated in urban settings). These innovators understood the advantages of going beyond the improvement of physical conditions, to consider the well-being of people.

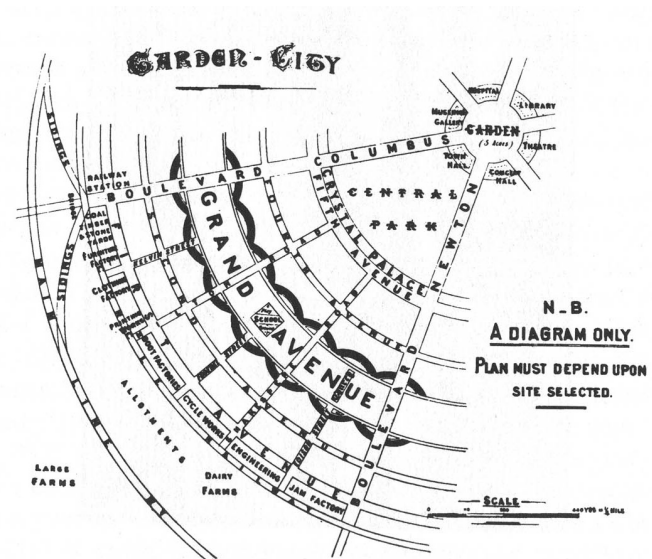
The model villages of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were created by industrialists and landowners with a particular social vision in mind – to address the living conditions of their workers, while exercising control and representing their own social aspirations. *They believed it was feasible to replace the subtly interwoven strands and patterns of a traditional settlement with an 'instant' alternative*<sup>1</sup>. Robert Owen, who created New Lanark in Scotland, wrote in 1813 of his wish to promote the individual aspirations of his employees. His theories on community embraced basic ideas of human rights, as a key to creating social stability. This led to innovation, such as the inclusion of an infant school at Lanark, to allow mothers to work. These ideas were pragmatic – better housing meant a better workforce – but they also acknowledged broader notions of well-being.<sup>2</sup>

George Cadbury developed this idea further at Bourneville, completed in 1895. He provided a sports ground and swimming pool for healthy activity, gardens and orchards for recreation and a village centre with shopping facilities and institutional buildings – all aimed at creating a healthy society. The village was run by a trust, with any profits ploughed back. A survey of local children found that they were 2 or 3 inches taller than children in the slums of nearby Birmingham.



The Three Magnets 1902. Garden Cities of Tomorrow

Grand Avenue 1902. Garden Cities of Tomorrow



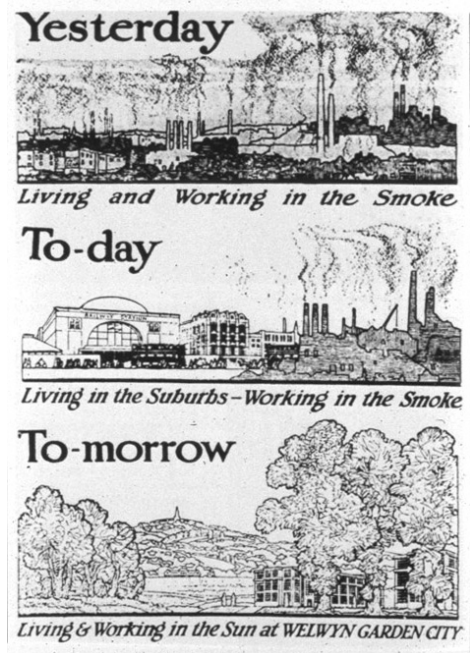
At Port Sunlight (1888), William Hesketh Lever created innovative interiors - with a built-in kitchen which included a space-saving sunken bath – but critics claimed it was ‘oppressive’ and ‘over-controlled’ and concentrated on the design and facilities at a social cost. A trade unionist later wrote to Lord Leverhulme: *No man of an independent turn of mind can breathe for long the atmosphere of Port Sunlight...*<sup>3</sup> Supporters argued that it was an ideal place in which to raise children, with a range of facilities, in secure and beautiful surroundings.

Bournville and Port Sunlight demonstrated that attractive and high-standard housing for workers was achievable. More significantly, they became the model for more ambitious experiments, such as the garden cities. *A clean start, with new buildings, a new situation and, above all, new ideals, no longer seemed entirely utopian.*<sup>4</sup>

### *The Garden City*

By 1900 there was an urgent need for city slums to be cleared. The answer lay in the development of suburbs, new towns and the ‘Garden City’ which, Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) believed, *would combine all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life with all the beauty and delight of the country*<sup>5</sup>. By 1905 13,000 families a year were moving from inner London to the suburbs. Howard represented the ‘Town-Country’ life in ‘The Three Magnets’ diagram in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. This would be the recipe for a perfect community, able to attract inhabitants from both city and rural areas. *The town is the symbol of society – of mutual help and friendly cooperation... The country is the symbol of God’s love and care for man*<sup>6</sup>. The idea was for planned new towns, of around 30,000 people, surrounded by agricultural land for food production and recreation. They would have protected residential areas containing good houses of a variety of sizes and types, carefully zoned industry, shopping, good transport and facilities. These ‘social cities’ would be self-sufficient communities – large enough to sustain the local economy and provide both employment and produce for residents, yet without sprawl and loss of identity. The city would be divided into six ‘wards’: *it is an important part of the project that each ward, or one-sixth of the city, should be in some sense a complete town by itself*<sup>7</sup>. Built in phases, each ward should therefore function as a place in its own right – its school buildings, for instance, could serve other functions such as places for worship, concerts, meetings, or as libraries.

The Garden City has been called *the first significant step in modern town planning and was advanced as a panacea for the many dwelling problems of the late 19th Century*<sup>8</sup>, but it also demonstrated important social ideas about the reciprocal role between the individual and the community which, Howard insisted, were mutually dependent. There would be a careful balance between municipal and private enterprise, for example, with the expenditure of money raised by rents controlled by the community. *Society will prove the most healthy and vigorous where the freest and fullest opportunities are afforded, alike for individual and combined effort*<sup>9</sup>. He also took steps in the planning of Letchworth to include various charitable institutions, managed and supported by public-spirited people to support their ‘more helpless brethren’; and protected traders from competition by determining the type of trade that could operate in a particular location (as is still practised in French towns and villages). In this way, he said, *an experiment can fairly proceed with the hope of permanent success*<sup>10</sup>. In other words the Garden City would be a sustainable community.



Welwyn Garden City poster

Letchworth Poster 1925



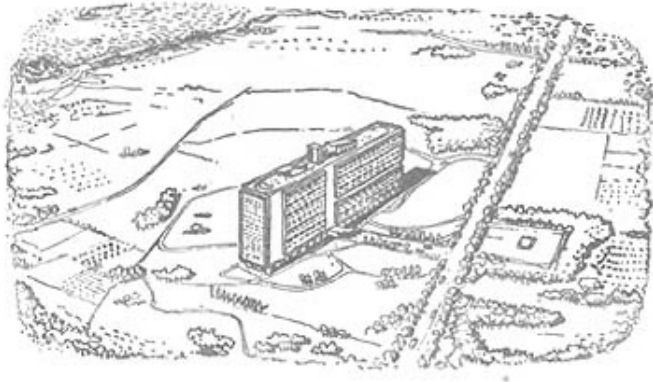
Behind this assertion was a sophisticated social model (echoed in part by social commentators today). Although paternalistic, with an ethos of hard work and healthy living, it is predicated on ideas of self-determination, mutual support and social justice: the Garden City should have a social mix and *raise the standard of health and comfort of all true workers of whatever grade*<sup>11</sup>; it should have a degree of communality with common gardens and cooperative kitchens; there should be flexibility and *the fullest measure of individual taste and preference is encouraged* so that there is *in every respect maximum freedom of choice*<sup>12</sup>. With wealth creation, Howard believed, there would come a *new system in which the productive forces of society... may be used with far greater effectiveness than at present, and in which the distribution of the wealth forms so created will take place on a far juster and more equitable basis*<sup>13</sup>.

Howard knew he was embarking on an ambitious social experiment and, anticipating his critics, he said *It is quite true that the pathway of experiment towards a better state of society is strewn with failures. But so is the pathway of experiment to any result that is worth achieving. Success is for the most part built on failure*<sup>14</sup>. He therefore examined previous social experiments in detail. It is interesting that, beyond simple diagrams and the basic principles, he did not preordain or create designs for the built environment of Letchworth – thus acknowledging, in his experimental model for a sustainable community, that the social and economic aspects took priority. The zoning and infrastructure followed, to ensure that the town would function as a community. And only when these aspects had been resolved did he launch a competition to find an architect. He proposed ten further satellite towns, in addition to Welwyn, (as applied in Abercrombie's Greater London Plan of 1944), but only once the success of Letchworth could be judged.

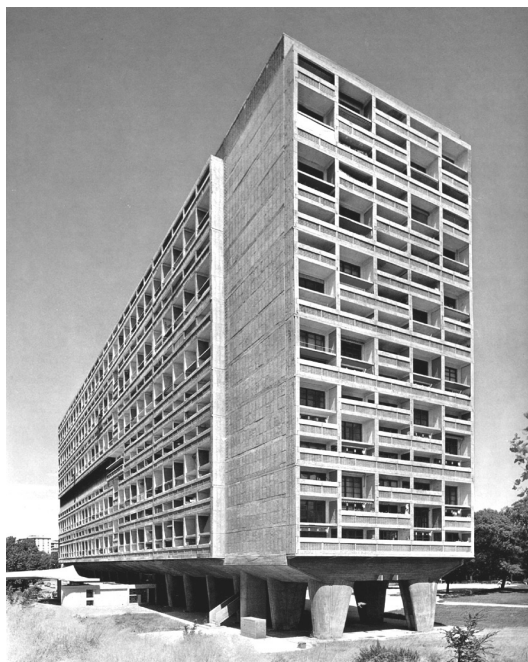
Howard is not without his critics. The Garden City is held partly responsible for later bad copies and for the 'formless mass suburb' that became the destination for most of London's migrants. *The ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low grade uniform environment from which no escape is possible*<sup>15</sup>. And its influence has continued, with a profound effect on town planning in Britain and elsewhere – not as a model, but as a menu from which to pick ingredients. *His prescription for saving the people was to do the city*, said Jane Jacobs, who bemoaned Howard's all-pervasive influence on American city planning and the adoption of precepts such as: *The street is bad as an environment for humans; houses should be turned away from it and inward, toward sheltered greens...; commerce should be segregated from residences... the presence of many other people is, at best, a necessary evil*<sup>16</sup>. Alice Coleman condemned his ideas as too authoritarian, *based upon intuitive beliefs and prejudices, embellished by unsupported theorising and made contagious by sincerity*<sup>17</sup>. Others considered the Garden City a social success on its own terms: F.J. Osborn, who led the New Town movement, wrote in 1945, *All its essential elements stand: moderate-sized industrial and trading towns in close contact with a surrounding agricultural countryside, each a healthy, well-equipped and coherent community; zoning of areas... for ready access between homes, work-places, shops and cultural centres... reconciling public interests with freedom of choice and enterprise*<sup>18</sup>. Yet the question remains whether the model could be transplanted if the social context were to change – such as the loss of local industry and jobs and the resulting impact on the local economy. Howard did not have in mind creeping suburbia when he mapped out his social cities.



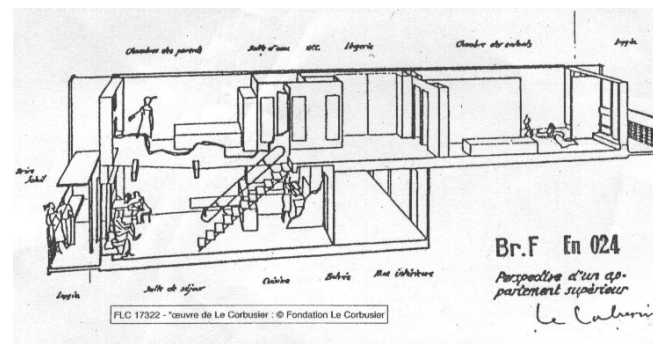
Le Corbusier's sketch showing the 'vertical garden city' overlooking countryside, with its transport route to the city.  
 Fondation Le Corbusier



L'Unité d'Habitation 1947-53. Cameron Nordholm



The section shows the double-height living area and how the apartments are designed to interlock. Fondation Le Corbusier



*Le Corbusier* The impact of the Garden City on the development of mass housing was equalled only by Le Corbusier's vision for the city. Both expressed utopian sentiments and were attempts at reconciling ideology and architecture; and both proposed a synthesis of rural and urban ideals. Le Corbusier's influence has been debated by a range of critics and theorists since the 1930s, but the focus has been on city planning, rather than social sustainability.

In 1922 Le Corbusier designed on paper La Ville Contemporaine, a modernist city for three million people. With zones for different activities and different classes of citizen, it was intended to be energy efficient and socially inclusive. Colin Davies describes it as socially radical but unnatural, *like a diagram illustrating the fragmentation of experience that is characteristic of modern life... sleeping, eating, playing, socialising, learning, working... The natural rhythms of human life, far from being embodied in the building, are cancelled out and silenced*<sup>19</sup>.

How significant then was Le Corbusier in terms of social experimentation and was it even his aim to create sustainable communities? *Vers Une Architecture* (1923) set out his brand of idealism and rationalism. As part of an architecture for the machine age, the new dwelling should be 'a machine for living in' – pared down to the essentials and fit for purpose. New materials and techniques would be employed in the service of society – *The Modern Movement was a revolution in social purpose as well as architectural forms*<sup>20</sup>.

L'Unité d'Habitation in Marseille (1947-53) is considered the most complete and influential example of Le Corbusier's social ambition. The theory behind it was published much earlier, in the 30s, and it was proposed as a universal solution, or prototype, for collective housing, whereby mass production would deal with the pressing social problem of housing shortages. Le Corbusier conceived L'Unité as collection of 12 storey blocks, each a unified community for 1800 people. Although high density, Le Corbusier felt people would thrive if given light, space and views over countryside: *The Garden City is a will-o'-the-wisp, he wrote. Nature melts under the invasion of roads and houses and the promised seclusion becomes a crowded settlement... The solution will be found in the 'vertical garden city'*<sup>21</sup>. Raised on columns – freeing up the ground for green space and transport – the single completed block has twenty-three flat variations, to suit single occupants up to large families. In section the floors interlock, so that each flat has a double-height living room and a terrace. He provided all the elements required for occupants to carry out their daily lives, without even having to leave the building. A shopping street and communal facilities were included on the seventh and eight floors – with a butcher, greengrocer, laundry, hairdresser, 'tabac' – along with a café and hotel, a nursery on the 17th floor and a pool on the roof. He intended a revolution in domestic architecture, based on the idea of collective well-being: not only would the sharing of the building promote a strong community life, it would promote mutual interests over individual interests. However he offered no theoretical basis to back up these assertions.





*Internal shopping street L'unite d'Habitation. 2007 Cameron Nordholm*

Siegfried Giedion, who founded CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), of which Le Corbusier was a leading light, wrote of L'Unité: *Its boldness consists in its social implementation... One is forcibly affected by the Corbusian dream of the good life – his antidote to the squalor of the industrial city*<sup>22</sup>. This sense of social isolation distinguishes the 'vertical garden city' from Howard's own vision and critics argued that this is not how people live and thrive in reality, cut off from the outside world. Mumford, for instance, criticised the internal street as an inadequate social equivalent to the traditional street in a dense urban setting and Taylor described *the appallingly aggressive splendour of the Unite flats – a high-rise slab of rough concrete isolated in the fields outside Marseille*<sup>23</sup>.

L'Unité has nevertheless proved a sustainable community; its inhabitants, both then and now, consider it a social success - *There's a ready-made social life. It's a village within the city and for children it's a paradise*<sup>24</sup>. It is difficult to reconcile the comments of happy occupants with the view that Le Corbusier's utopian vision was divorced from real life. Perhaps his social experiment just happened to work well within the social and physical context of Marseille – helped by being well looked after, good security and a good bus service; or perhaps it is because L'Unité has not escaped problems of social deprivation.

Undoubtedly it is the social and creative imagination he expressed in L'Unité, rather than their specific application, that has been so influential. *There is no longer any doubt that this building has had an enormous influence in shaping the mind of the younger generation. It has also helped to liberate the mind of the architect and planner from the conception of housing as a simple addition of single units and to expand it to the wider frame of human habitat*<sup>25</sup>. For Taylor, writing in the 70s, the problem was uncritical acceptance combined with a rejection of past experience (precedent). *London's architects were addicted to the Gaullist rhetoric of Le Corbusier and were already beginning to react violently against the supposed evil of 'cosiness' of English new towns.*<sup>26</sup>

Most criticism is reserved for the attempts by followers to interpret Le Corbusier's vision, without the benefit of his 'social imagination', or his fundamental understanding of form and function. *The vertical separation of uses and movement... the dominance of the motor car at the expense of the pedestrian who is relegated to the subway or elevated walkway... and the infamous high-rise estates which in 1980 were estimated to house 1 in 4 UK households, can all be traced back in part at least to Le Corbusier*<sup>27</sup>.



Social housing 1952. Getty Images

*Today there is a large scale segregation of the various social classes of the community that is almost as effective at stopping intercourse as the electric-charged barbed-wire barriers of a concentration camp. And that is in fact what many of our towns and suburbs largely are today: social concentration camps: places in which one social class is concentrated to the exclusion of all others.*

*Town Planning Thomas Sharp 1946*

*There are two public perceptions of the British council estate. This first is of the dream gone sour. Council homes were once the golden standard for a bright uncynical working class... To get a council house in the post-war period was to have a full stake in society.... The second perception of the council estate is bound up in the myth that the poor will always be with us, and that the existence of cheap housing to contain them is a nasty fact of life.*

*Lynn Hanley<sup>28</sup>*



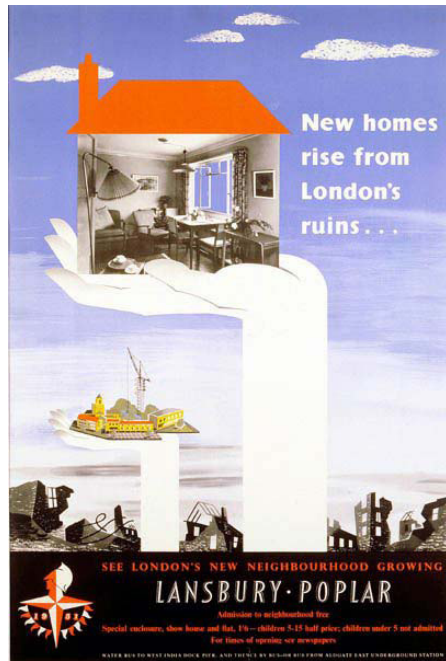
*Housing Estate 1950s. Hulton Archive*



*The council estate* Following the First World War, the Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George promised 'homes fit for heroes' – by which he meant houses with gardens. The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919 (Addison Act) had sanctioned the building of half a million homes immediately and a further 100,000 a year. A million were built by 1939 – providing jobs as well as housing – by which time 10% of homes were council houses. Suburbia swelled as a quarter of working class people moved from the inner-cities to new housing estates, engendering a sense of social aspiration. People were to have a choice of styles and the state formally bought into a certain level of quality, with the introduction of minimum standards – from room sizes and number of windows to density of homes per acre. In appearance private and council homes were to be indistinguishable.<sup>29</sup> Echoing Ebenezer Howard's ethos, choice, quality and equality would ensure a decent lifestyle, not just decent homes. In reality this 'happy' suburban life was marred by poor quality, poor transport and facilities, poor access to work and education and whole communities with a concentration of a single-class of housing. Nevertheless, The Mass Observation project, launched in 1937, also asked people what they thought of their new estate homes. The message was clear: the British liked to live in houses, but only if they had gardens.

When in 1943 Abercrombie announced the County of London Plan and the creation of satellite 'new towns' (eleven were designated between 1946 and 1955, followed by nine more in the 60s), there was an apparent willingness to learn from the mistakes of the inter-war estates. In a remarkable piece of government-commissioned research for the National Council of Social Service in the late '40s, L.E. White investigated both suburban and inner-city estates in detail (*Tenement Town and Community or Chaos?* – see Appendix). He wished to discover whether these communities were socially sustainable. In the suburbs he identified material problems such as the lack of transport and shops, also the lack of local institutions including pubs, social clubs and churches. He noted the absence of 'intangible' things such as 'community spirit' and 'sense of belonging' and described the *coldness, loneliness and a deadly, frightening quiet*. Of inner-city estates he said that people *live constantly hoping to move away, they put down no roots and are restless and discontented... we are driven to the inescapable conclusion that flats, however skilfully planned and mechanically modernised are not suitable for families*<sup>30</sup>. He identified segregation of the classes as a very significant problem and called for 'socially mixed development', arguing that if you only take housing need into account you cannot hope to build up a socially balanced community.

A high level of awareness and clear social aspirations therefore lay behind post-war housing policy. The principle of council housing was not to house the poor, but to provide decent homes for all; along with good health and education, this was a fundamental tenet of the welfare state, as proposed in the Beveridge Report (1942). While William Beveridge's aim was a more equal society through full employment and an end to poverty, 'Nye' Bevan, the post-war Health Minister who also had responsibility for housing, recognised the link between health and a good home. He was committed to integration – with doctor, butcher and labourer living alongside each other, upholding the dignity of working men – and recognised a new opportunity to build classless communities. *For a while there was a sense that society could be transformed for the better on the strength of the living conditions of its people* and this fostered the idea of community.<sup>31</sup>



*On this ground so recently a derelict and bomb-scarred wilderness, has arisen not a tangled of jerry-built and pokey dwellings, but a new urban landscape in which the buildings are growing together as a community*

Festival of Britain guide book 1951



Lansbury Estate 1951. Courtauld Institute



Lansbury Estate 2006

Decent homes would help 'win the peace' after six years of war, and following slum clearance and bomb damage there was an urgent need for thousands to be built. Public housing was judged a viable alternative to private housing – it had the advantage of dispensing with unscrupulous landlords – and it was never envisaged that there would be an obvious distinction between publicly and privately owned homes.

The first post-war inner-city council estates were built with good intentions. For a while there was a genuine engagement with the social function of architecture. The Festival of Britain in 1951 introduced the idea of the new inner city community, with a 'Living Architecture Exhibition' in the form of The Lansbury Estate in Tower Hamlets. Designed by Frederick Gibberd (also the architect of new town Harlow) this was intended as an example of state-of-the-art city planning and architecture – with low-rise flats and maisonettes, a pedestrianised market, schools, churches, playgrounds and a clock tower, all linked by open spaces. With the aim of mixing the social classes and encouraging community cohesion, it was 'human scale' and 'family friendly'. Bevan described the estate as 'a living tapestry of a mixed community'. It also demonstrated the ability of politicians, planners and architects to collaborate effectively, in an effort to design out the problems of the inter-war estates. Nevertheless a new generation of architects thought it old fashioned and timid. (Despite suffering the social problems and general neglect typical of East End estates, fifty years on the buildings have worn well and the community is experiencing a revival thanks, in part, to a core of long-term residents.)

Bevan and the Labour government could not produce homes of the Lansbury's quality quickly enough, compounded by a shortage of skilled labour and materials, and when Harold Macmillan became the new Conservative Housing Minister in 1951 he promised to build more – and quickly. The speed of slum clearance became more important than quality, as 300,000 were built in each year of the 1950s. More significantly the idea of council housing as a means of creating a more equal society was replaced with a new ambition of creating a property-owning democracy (Macmillan's words not Thatcher's).

Faced with the need for speed, local authorities looked for new solutions. A number of city planners visited Le Corbusier's L'Unité in the late 1940s – including a group from Glasgow who proceeded to commission the first of the city's three hundred slabs and towers – and he also lectured to the GLC. Le Corbusier gave politicians and planners the social and economic justification with which to argue for quicker and cheaper building methods; and gave architects the excuse to be brave and experimental in the name of social progress. It was a seductive vision. American architect Philip Johnson said: *We really believed, in a quasi-religious sense, in the perfectibility of human nature, in the role of architecture as a weapon of social reform... the coming Utopia when everyone would live in cheap prefabricated flat-roofed dwellings - heaven on earth*<sup>32</sup>.





*Le Corbusier's vision was powerfully seductive: it offered a cleaner slate than any that had gone before. It offered architects the chance to design their way out of the mess of the organically evolved city*

Lynn Hanley<sup>33</sup>



All other images Courtauld Institute

Loughborough Estate. Frith & Co

Some estates were heralded as exemplars of innovative social housing, such as Lubetkin's Tecton 'slabs' (1946-50) and Powell and Moya's Churchill Gardens (1946); other notable successes included the Alton Estate, a mixed development of 'point' and low-rise blocks, one of the few built to Bevan's standards, on a site overlooking Richmond Park (1952-55). The fact that Erno Goldfinger's 31 storey Trellick Tower (1972) in North Kensington is now listed Grade 2\*, despite its former life riddled with all the problems of severe deprivation, demonstrates the contradiction and confusion between so-called 'good architecture' and the creation of successful communities. Can a housing estate be considered well-designed if it proves to be unfit for purpose? If the answer is 'yes' it suggests either that whether a community succeeds or fails is independent of its built environment, or that design is detached (consciously or carelessly) from the social exercise of creating communities. With the design of Robin Hood Gardens (1966-72), Peter and Alison Smithson acknowledged a particular debt to L'Unité d'Habitation. Described by Pevsner as *ill-planned to the point of inhumane* and now facing demolition, the Smithsons nevertheless believed that the buildings themselves had the power to produce successful occupation. They espoused the *compulsively determinist belief... inherited from Le Corbusier, that it was the shape of the structures they designed which was the primary influence on forming the personal and communal attitudes of people*<sup>34</sup>. Anti-modernists, on the other hand, believed that such buildings couldn't function socially because they were *designed objects which took no account of dwelling in the full sense*<sup>35</sup>.

In reality most Local Authorities didn't even engage in this level of debate. The London County Council (LCC) justified high blocks as a component of 'mixed development', on the grounds that this broadened people's choice: *The introduction of eleven-storey 'point' and 'slab' blocks economised on the use of land, maintaining the open green spaces of the 'garden city' and ensuring sufficiently high overall density to allow space-consuming lower forms of housing, such as four-storey maisonettes and two-storey terraced housing to be mixed together on the same site*<sup>36</sup>. Two young architects working at the LCC in the in the 1950s were Alan Colquhoun and John Bancroft (see Appendix). They bought into Le Corbusier's ideas because they heralded an exciting new way of living. They were attracted by both the functionality and the social premise of L'Unité. Alan Colquhoun, for example, was involved in the design of a new standard LCC maisonette plan form and was keen to follow Le Corbusier's idea of variable units – although space limitations prevented this.

- *high-rise seemed the obvious option to relieve urban overcrowding. We were also persuaded by the need for people to live near to where they worked – if there are no jobs in the place where you live it's a flawed concept. And we deplored the alternative – urban sprawl. This was a strong and legitimate feeling and it has been borne out.* (Alan Colquhoun)

- *'Corb' was our hero [at the LCC]... the concept originated with him and that was significant. The big difference was that L'Unité was fit for purpose, with every detail worked out. London's high-rise estates, apart perhaps from the Alton Estate [Roehampton], simply weren't fit for purpose. They lacked the thought, the facilities and the things that might have made them socially cohesive. It wasn't done properly.* (John Bancroft)





*Prefabrication, Brandon Estate. Hulton Archive*

*Ronan Point 1968. HMSO*



*- I realised that high-rise would destroy the communities that were there before, but we felt sure people would adapt and grow to accept it, even love it. They would buy into the ideal. But I accept now that they didn't – the British have proved less able to adapt than places like France and Germany... The idea was immediately given a bad press and people liked the traditional street forms and the houses they were used to... I still think it could work if it was done properly. (Colquhoun)*

*- It's not fair to say we weren't socially conscious. I think we were – much more so than architects today. This was at the time of the creation of the welfare state – so we were all conscious of it. But we thought towers as part of mixed developments could work well as communities. (Bancroft)*

Certainly the lessons about sustainable communities, acknowledged in Bevan's social plan, were either forgotten or ignored as local authorities did deals with contractors – putting volume, speed and value for money before the needs of future occupants. The vast majority of the 4500 towers constructed by the late '70s were system-built, using pre-cast concrete, with every additional storey attracting a bigger government subsidy, thanks to the 1965 Housing Subsidy Act. The social aspirations of politicians and planners had largely evaporated – in one 'community', Castle Vale in Birmingham, 34 towers were erected to include 4000 homes, without any community facilities at all. The zeal to build upwards didn't stop until the collapse of the twenty-two storey Ronan Point, two months after completion in 1968. Even then, despite mounting evidence of the devastating effect on communities, high-rise was viewed as a structural failure, rather than a social one.

As high-rise gave way to low-rise, a return to the traditional street-pattern and houses with gardens promised an improvement. But endless and faceless new estates also overwhelmed the fragile sense of community of many new towns. Unlike Garden Cities, working class houses were not integrated into the town as a whole; as in Wilmott and Young's Greenleigh (in reality Debden in Essex), people displaced from other communities failed to find the same sense of human contact and mutual support. Although satellite towns in the South-East began to thrive sooner or later, especially where there was a core of long-term residents and local or commutable jobs, new towns in the North-East such as Peterlee and rural towns like Thetford, experienced deprivation on a par with the inner-city, as unemployment rose. Wasteland estates, with every fourth house boarded up, provided ample evidence of community breakdown.

In her 'intimate history' of estates, Lynn Hanley described the place on the edge of Birmingham where she grew up: *it housed 60,000 people, yet it didn't feel like a town because it wasn't knitted into the fabric of a town or city... Estate living becomes a state of mind, [estates] sap the spirit, suck out hope and ambition, and draw in apathy and nihilism*<sup>37</sup>. She identifies a subtle shift that had a dramatic effect.<sup>38</sup> As the poor – including 'hard-to-place' and minority groups – became increasingly concentrated on estates, so councils (and architects) began to provide homes for the poor, not for the masses. Ideas of equality and social mobility had been replaced by conscious segregation and the quality of housing now reflected the poor quality of occupants.



People were 'placed' in estates that nobody would choose to live in - and once there they had no choice but to get out. There was an acceptance of a lifestyle detached from mainstream society – the definition of social exclusion – and with it the familiar features of long-term unemployment (or casual work reminiscent of Mayhew), welfare dependency, low achievement, mental health problems and disaffection among young people. Even where problems were not extreme, a stigma attached to the term 'council estate', making the distinction between rich and poor plain for all to see. This sense of detachment made such communities unsustainable.

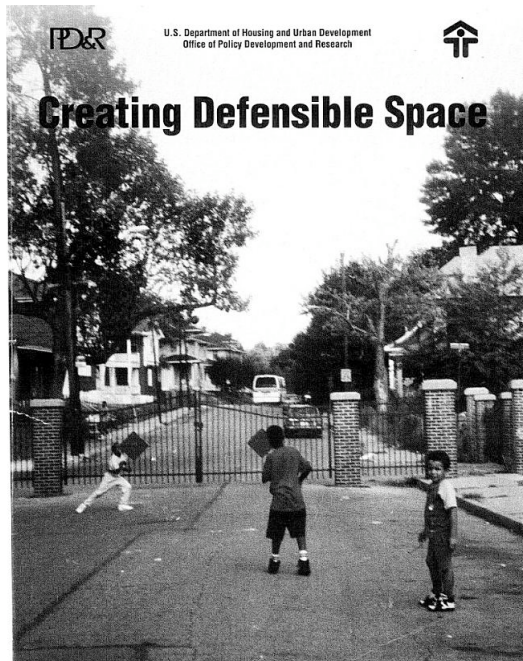
The late '70s heralded another political solution – to return council housing to private ownership. 'Right-to-buy', would produce a new home-owning working class; this would give them a share in national prosperity and reduce their dependence on the state. The deal was that local authorities had to stop building council homes. The combined effect is that the proportion of people living in council housing has fallen from 50% at its peak to 12%. The 'council estate' is no more, yet there are many home-owning people on estates who still live in poverty and are dependent on the state. Unable to sell up they have achieved neither equality nor social mobility.

#### *The role of precedents*

Ebenezer Howard's Garden City borrowed from the planned communities that preceded it and was developed on painstaking, although largely unproven, economic and social principles. Le Corbusier's L'Unité presented a radical social vision, allied to a technical revolution, but with no solid sociological basis. Both were then applied uncritically: the Garden City in the New Town movement and the unstoppable spread of suburbia; L'Unité in the ring of high-density estates round every British city. The rise of the council estate depended heavily on both examples, but without the vision or sustained social ambition to apply them effectively, they and their inhabitants became prey to the vagaries of political ideology. In the process the attempt to create stable communities was undermined. Meanwhile successive generations have failed to learn from the mistakes of the past.

The cynical interpretation is that the need to house the poor at low cost, met a potential solution in the ideas of Modernism – functional, mass-produced and cost-effective – with a simple social vision attached. This was in spite of what people wanted. With the poor now largely segregated in distinct communities, the lack of social awareness or sound theoretical basis has left politicians, planners and architects with little idea as to how existing communities can be improved and new, sustainable ones created.

It is clear that poor design, poor construction and poor maintenance create inhumane environments in which people are less likely to thrive. The corollary is that good architecture must have some potential to improve people's lives. Yet it is physical appearance that seems to have the greater impact. Lynn Hanley says *it was the anonymity and conformity of the estate as a whole that threatened to consume. It felt as if the identikit homes produced identikit people*<sup>39</sup>. Quite independent from their design, places and buildings reflect their occupants; they are symbolic of poverty or wealth and they reveal social distinctions. They mark people out, increasing the likelihood of stigma, disaffection and exclusion.



Illustrations from *Creating Defensible Space*

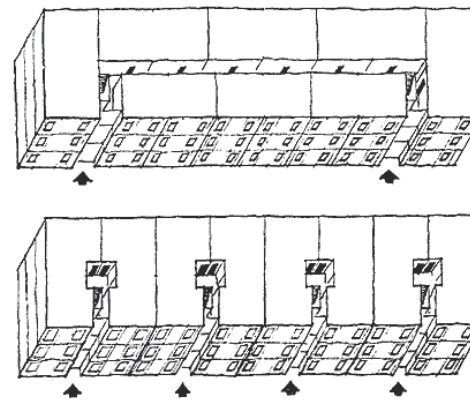
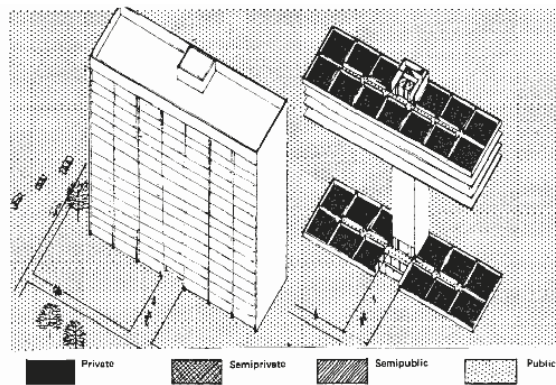


Fig. I-16: Comparison of two ways to subdivide the same building envelope to serve the same number of families, but in radically different ways.



Oscar Newman identified a correlation between specific design features, the anonymity and lack of surveillance of communal spaces and anti-social behaviour





### *The impact of design*

It is difficult to determine from precedents alone how significant a role the built environment plays in social sustainability. There is a danger when visionary ideas are interpreted and applied uncritically. The assumption is too readily made that *if the environment is changed in ways prescribed by the ideology, human behaviour will improve and happy communities will be the result... Evidence is the keynote. The research mind must be open to factual evidence and not closed by some predetermined ideology*<sup>40</sup>.

There is, however, a small but influential body of research to suggest that 'bad design' can create social problems. This was carried out on the premise that by identifying a direct causal link it would be possible for architects to avoid the design features that promote such problems.

*Oscar Newman* The architect and planner Oscar Newman published *Defensible Space* in 1972, in which he presented the results of research carried out in New York. His survey covered all of the city's housing projects – totalling 160 estates, 4000 blocks, and 500,000 people. He devised a test measure, using crime and vandalism records, to create an index of anti-social behaviour and the goodness and badness of each block. Police records contained details of the nature and exact location of anti-social offences. Newman's intention was to establish precisely which features of the block's design encouraged crime. He used a statistical method of correlation, to produce clear quantitative results. He identified three 'unifying principles' that made it easy to commit crime, but difficult to prevent: anonymity, lack of surveillance and the presence of alternative escape routes.

He found that anonymity was influenced by the size of the block, the number of storeys, the number of dwellings using an entrance and the extent to which the common parts are shared or defended by households. Essentially the more dispersed people are within the building, the greater the anonymity and the higher the levels of crime and vandalism. Newman assessed levels of surveillance at entrances (both inside and out) and in different types of corridor, to establish the importance of visibility. Where the inhabitants of the block have a better view and so can act as a watchdog, crime levels fall. For instance doors opening straight out onto the street are less vulnerable than those set back; and the further the entrance is from the street – for instance across a green space with a shaded path – the risk of crime is greatest.

Newman went on to consider whether the link was causal and found that where one or more of the design features was improved the crime and vandalism levels fell. Clearly his results were important in that they provided for the first time a clear correlation between the design of a building and anti-social and criminal behaviour.



However the identification of a correlation allows people to ignore the underlying socio-economic causes and erroneously suggests that if the design problems are resolved all will be well. The need to address underlying social problems, or to improve social cohesion can be ignored in this process. Newman fails to make the point that it is not the building itself that produces the social conditions for anti-social behaviour, any more than the presence of anti-social behaviour can be taken as evidence of bad design.

Newman's work did not have a direct influence in the UK, where it was seen to describe an American problem that was unlikely to happen here, but his theories were applied in many US cities and the idea that physical design has the capacity of to deliver a sense of security became widely accepted.

*Alice Coleman* In 1979 the Land Use Research Unit, led by Alice Coleman, decided to build on Newman's work with a study in the UK. When it was published in 1985 it was seen as a scathing critique of modern housing estates and as a testimony to social breakdown. Alice Coleman makes her views clear from the start – specifically identifying the design of housing estates as the cause of the social problems suffered by residents... *especially as there is every reason to believe that most of them could cope perfectly well with life in more traditional houses*<sup>41</sup>. The designers are not to blame, however – but the official guidelines they are obliged to follow, for instance regarding numbers of storeys.

She pointed out that without supporting evidence ... *policies for improvement may be wrong and expensive rehabilitation schemes may prove ineffective and a waste of money*. Schemes were absorbing huge sums of money *more in hope and in faith than in scientific knowledge of what will work*<sup>42</sup>. Arguably this is still the case. Like Newman she takes no account of social context or other external factors. By building on his work and adopting his approach, she considers the case of cause and effect to be already proven. Hence her starting-point is *the most glaring difference between modern problem estates and the ordinary unplanned housing of the past: design and layout*<sup>43</sup>.

Her research covered the boroughs of Southwark and Tower Hamlets in London, with Blackbird Leys in Oxford used for comparison. This included 4000 blocks of flats (106,520 dwellings, with approximately 250,000 people) and 4172 houses. First she identified six forms of 'social malaise': litter, graffiti, vandalism/damage, children removed into care, urine and faeces. The presence of these 'lapses in civilised behaviour' add up to an 'abuse score'. She then created a list of 'problem design variables', the sum of which makes up a 'disadvantage score'. These scores she applied in three categories. The first related to the block itself: dwellings per block, dwellings per entrance, number of storeys, whether flats or maisonettes, overhead walkways, interconnecting exits, vertical routes, corridor type. The second category covered the entrance and ground floor: entrance position and type, stilts and garages. The final group covered the setting of the block: spatial organisation, blocks per site, access points, play areas. The intention was that, once correlated, the results could be applied to any planned housing.

Walworth Estate, Southwark 1969. Michael Seaborne



Overhead walkways. Photographers Direct

*In 1988 Margaret Thatcher read my report, *Utopia on Trial*, and funded me to redesign seven misery estates.... and the anti-social activities disappeared amazingly quickly. A few small black spots were the very places where local authorities had rejected my redesign. So I advocated building no more flats, modifying existing blocks and demolishing those that were too obtuse for modification*

Alice Coleman Salisbury Review 2009

In *Utopia on Trial* Coleman presented suspects, evidence, case for the prosecution and verdict. *The ringleaders of the anti-social design gang are dwellings per entrance, dwellings per block, number of storeys, overhead walkways and spatial organisation.* Most of the ninety trend lines show an upward trend, *indicating a strong tendency for all six kinds of social malaise to worsen in precisely-known design directions.* She concluded that the mildest form of 'social deviance' proves to be litter. But as design worsens *litter is joined by graffiti and then successively by vandal damage, by family breakdown necessitating the placing of children in care, and by excrement.*<sup>44</sup>

The research gives undue weight to design features alone and scant consideration to the circumstances of inhabitants or local conditions. Flaws in her methodology seriously undermine it: both the 'abuse score' and the 'disadvantage score' relate to buildings in isolation, detached from their physical context; the indicators of 'social malaise' are similarly divorced from their social context; and as a picture of 'social malaise' they are in any event erroneous.

Social scientists would not view these types of abuse as evidence of social breakdown. For example, Coleman does not justify using 'the removal of children into care' as an example of 'abuse' beyond stating that the figures are readily available. By the '80s it was widely acknowledged that the majority of 'looked after' children are in care through no fault of their own and as a result of family breakdown. It is unlikely that parents' coping strategies would depend on the physical features of their environment and even if this was a contributory factor, it would be one of many. Yet Coleman says *it is with youngsters that widespread malaise begins, and we therefore feel justified in concentrating on test measures that are particularly related to children.* In this and many other cases she confuses cause with effect, even to the point of pronouncing that the worse the design of the building, the greater the probability that families will fail. This oversimplification feeds through to the conclusions and proposed corrective measures: *Fortunately... the worst excesses of all these variables can be cut by a single solution: the removal of overhead walkways.*<sup>45</sup>

Alice Coleman's work proved controversial, but it had high profile supporters, including Margaret Thatcher, and entered the mainstream. The Department of Environment commissioned her to put her conclusions into practice in a number of existing and new inner-city estates. For example at the Mozart Estate in Westminster overhead walkways were removed and new roads inserted to improve sightlines and access (a corrective measure repeated in many other estates). Follow-up research in 1993 found that crime rates had not fallen and residents were divided over whether the changes had been worthwhile<sup>46</sup>. The research therefore does not provide significant evidence of the impact of the built environment. It is likely that it also served to deflect attention away from the underlying causes of community breakdown.

Coleman finally reveals the extent of her moral outrage by saying: *living in a high-rise block does not force all its inhabitants to become criminals, but by creating anonymity, lack of surveillance and escape routes, it puts temptation in their way and makes it probable that some of the weaker brethren will succumb*<sup>47</sup>. It is likely that Coleman's research served to deflect attention away from the underlying causes of community breakdown.





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- <sup>8</sup> Gideon, S. 1941. *Space, Time and Architecture: The growth of a new Tradition*. p.782.
- <sup>9</sup> Howard, E. 1902. p. 115.
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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.57.
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- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 74, p.51.
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- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 34
- <sup>40</sup> Coleman, A. 1990. p. 19.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 80, p. 170.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24, p. 67
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## Part IV

### Witnesses

The precedents show that communities evolve over decades; new communities frequently fail, and those that succeed take a couple of generations to do so. Yet politicians, planners, developers and designers labour under the misapprehension that they can be created from scratch.

Communities are also fragile. They contain the seeds of their own destruction, particularly when they are pockets of poverty with high levels of unemployment or poor job security; the welfare state no longer acts as an effective safety net; long-term residents leave and short-term residents replace them; the local economy and institutions fail to thrive and social cohesion disintegrates. They are also vulnerable to external events and political shifts. But perhaps most damaging is the problem of perception: those who live in failing communities are aware of their own exclusion, of the gap between them and the wider community; while those on the outside, who have no wish to live in them, accept this distinction, perpetuating a particular image of new housing estates.

Meanwhile lessons from the past have been ignored and mistakes repeated. This is likely to continue because it is generally assumed that custom and practice is based on a body of collective knowledge and this 'received wisdom' is therefore endlessly repeated; also the absence of such evidence means that there is no firm basis for a fundamental change in approach. The social science of architecture is inadequate as an aid to designing communities, so simple assumptions are made and the social context overlooked.

Because of the chronic shortage of homes, the majority of new communities will continue to house the least well off on large estates. Their development will inevitably be dominated by short-term political and economic interests, compromise and even, as CABA (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) suggests, professional neglect: *Too often, the people who design and construct buildings... don't worry about whether they will work properly or what will they cost to run. Once the project is complete, they can move on to the next job*<sup>1</sup>. CABA also states that the components of good design and its impact on quality of life are well understood, but given the social factors over which designers have little control, it is difficult to see how this claim can be supported, let alone applied.

In order to understand the role the built environment plays in creating sustainable communities, there is a need for better information and fresh insight. I have therefore drawn on the expertise of a number of witnesses, either through their writings or arranged interviews. Each comes from a particular angle and with important ideas to communicate. Together they can offer part explanation, part practical suggestion, resulting in a collage of ideas.

<sup>1</sup> CABA. 2006. *The Cost of Bad Design*. p 6.

**Jane Jacobs**, writer, commentator, urbanist. Jane Jacobs is best known for *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), a detailed account of the social workings of cities and a critique of American urban renewal policies which had a powerful influence on city planning around the world. She organised grass-roots activism against regeneration that threatened neighbourhoods.

**Sir Michael Marmot**, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College Medical School, London; and Director of the International Centre for Health and Society. Professor Marmot is a world expert on the way in which social and economic factors affect the health of individuals, communities and society – including poverty, stress, unemployment and job insecurity, ethnicity and housing. He chaired and edited the Independent Inquiry and Report into Inequalities in Health (1989) and his book *Status Syndrome*, demonstrates how autonomy, social connectedness and equality have a greater impact on health and life expectancy than wealth.

**Elizabeth Burton**, Professor of Architecture and Well-being, Oxford Brookes University. Professor Burton is the founder director of WISE, Well-being in Sustainable Environments, the only academic department that investigates the social aspects of urban design, and particularly how the built environment influences people's well-being and mental health. She has a particular interest in dementia-friendly design and how it can inform the way people in general relate to their environment.

**Anne Power**, Professor of Social Policy, LSE; Associate of CASE, Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion. Professor Power has carried out detailed research in disadvantaged neighbourhoods around Britain for over twenty years and is an acknowledged expert on the sustainable development of cities, especially housing. She has a particular interest in communities, urban planning and the prevention of social exclusion. *City Survivors* followed two hundred families over seven years, a hundred in East London and a hundred in Northern cities.



*Witnesses* Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), writer and commentator: economy of cities, urban renewal

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, UCL: health inequalities \*

Professor Elizabeth Burton, Architect: WISE: Oxford Brookes University: well-being \*

Professor Anne Power, LSE: social exclusion, communities, urban planning

Andrew Mawson, social entrepreneur: social enterprise, communities from bottom-up

Professor John Hills, LSE: social economics

Peter Guillery, English Heritage: architectural historian \*

Charles Campion, architect, John Thompson Associates: community planning, design \*

\* those indicated with an asterix kindly agreed to in-depth conversations for the purpose of this dissertation. Comments from these interviews are not specifically referenced. Material sourced from their publications is referenced in the normal way.

**Lord Mawson**, OBE social entrepreneur and founder of the Community Action Network. Andrew Mawson moved to Bromley-by-Bow as the local Baptist Minister in the mid 1980s. Aware of the extreme deprivation around him in Tower Hamlets, he started the Bromley-by-Bow Centre to address local needs. From humble beginnings it has pioneered an entirely new approach to community regeneration, using local entrepreneurship to provide services, local businesses, training and jobs. BBBC was also the first community-run health and children's centre. Andrew Mawson has gone on to advise other communities and the government on regeneration and the Olympics legacy.

**Professor John Hills**, Professor of Social Policy, LSE. Professor Hills is an economist and his particular expertise is social security, the benefits system and social housing policy. He has carried out extensive research into poverty, from the perspective of social exclusion and income distribution, and has a particular interest in the role of government and policy on social equality. He is Chair of the National Equality Panel.

**Peter Guillery**, Architectural historian, English Heritage. Besides being one of the historians responsible for the Survey of London, a minutely detailed record of London's architectural heritage, Peter Guillery has developed an interest in the role everyday buildings play in social cohesion and identity of place. Working with local people he carried out an extensive social and historical study of post-war housing in South Acton, as a means of informing regeneration.

**Charles Campion**, architect, partner John Thompson Associates. Charles Campion is the partner responsible for community planning and has extensive experience of urban regeneration and residential development in both the public and private sectors. In the 1980s JTP pioneered the introduction in the UK of community planning as a tool for engaging local people in the design of their own neighbourhoods. They have been responsible for many projects aimed at creating more sustainable communities through physical, social and economic change. He has a particular interest in identifying and promoting best practice in urban design.

## *Social factors*

*Messy reality* Given the impact social problems have on the stability of communities, social factors must also contribute to the success of happy communities. These factors need to be pinned down. Where the built environment has been shown to have an impact on communities, it is principally a negative one; meanwhile well-designed housing developments have failed to have a beneficial effect because of persistent underlying social problems. There must surely be definable ways in which buildings and their inhabitants connect.

A fundamental difficulty is that designers believe the problems in deprived communities to be so entrenched that the best they can do is to make the built environment as user-friendly as possible. It is an attitude easy to hide behind and it only distances designers further from the people for whom they are designing. Jeremy Till has an interesting take on this: architecture is contingent upon so many things that the natural response is to retreat. Instead, he suggests, this dependency should be seen as a strength. Architecture must make the best possible social and spatial sense of messy reality and architects must cease to inhabit a parallel universe.

There is a lack of evidence to show what aspects of the built environment work well for people, says Elizabeth Burton, *so we go doing what we are doing. We haven't got the proof it works – yet we plough on.* There is plenty of research about housing policy, but not about the design of housing and neighbourhoods. CABE also highlights the lack of research. She therefore set up WISE (Wellbeing in Sustainable Environments) at Oxford Brookes University, to produce the evidence and so provide authoritative guidance for designers. She believes architects have lost sight of the link between architecture and people and the fundamental principles that have been the basis of housing and shelter. This has a knock-on effect on teaching and training.

Andrew Mawson blames successive government policies for formalising a lack of interest in people. *Government gives its backing to structures, rather than individuals... Many answers to macro-political questions must be sought in the micro-experience of local activity... in the messy details of people's real lives and experiences.*<sup>2</sup> He sees this as a form of arrogance – a belief that you are doing good, even without knowing what people want or need. It is a further excuse not to engage with the social reality.



*Wellbeing* 'Wellbeing' is the 'happy' in 'happy communities'. It has entered the political vocabulary, embodying the idea that wealth creation must be linked to social progress. The Local Communities Act states that *it is a public duty to promote the wellbeing of citizens and local communities*, and imposes duties on local government to deliver it. Economists are now using happiness indicators to measure wellbeing ('happiness' in this context is defined as 'fulfilled and meaningful lives'<sup>4</sup>). The Improvement and Development Agency (IDEA) has responded by launching The Local Wellbeing Project. *People need to see progress: is my life getting better; is my community getting better? ... If the answer is 'no' we have a problem and need to address it*<sup>4</sup>. It sounds like yet more empty rhetoric, although its aims – to minimize isolation, maximize aspirations, increase community pride and social cohesion – are clearly relevant to making communities sustainable. The question is whether the idea has any practical application.

Achieving wellbeing, according to the New Economics Foundation, is dependent on a combination of inner psychological resources and supportive and enabling external conditions. This idea echoes attachment theories (first suggested by John Bowlby in 1969). Attachments aid survival, in the evolutionary sense – providing a secure base and from which to explore. People form psychological attachments to places as well as people and if the primary attachments of family and community are fragmented, the external environment takes on a more important attachment role. If this too is fragmented, then it seems likely that the problems of exclusion will be exacerbated.

Elizabeth Burton offers some supporting evidence of this. WISE is undertaking research to identify the mechanisms by which the built environment affects individuals and the features associated with wellbeing. Results so far suggest that the built environment is most relevant to mental health: positive mental health is more than just the absence of depression or hopelessness, it comprises happiness and optimal psychological and social functioning. The built environment can have a *direct* influence, through its ability to reduce stress or induce happiness; and an *indirect* influence, by encouraging social interaction<sup>4</sup>. An early piece of WISE research in two north London wards (with dwellings varying from tower blocks to streets of terraced housing) found a significant association between specific environmental indicators – such as lack of private gardens and shared recreational space – and the prevalence of depression (39%). Current research is considering how the built environment can affect people's perception of quality of life, of safety, satisfaction with the neighbourhood and community spirit.

Charles Champion suggests that wellbeing surveys could become a very useful tool for independent assessment of communities, in order to establish the beneficial and detrimental effects of local conditions. John Thompson Associates already considers aspects of wellbeing in the very early stages of master-planning and development proposals. But he adds a note of caution. Why is it that structures can remain the same, while wellbeing changes around them? The answer is that other elements are at play: wellbeing is influenced by the political and social landscape. The socio-economic issues must therefore be addressed first.





*'You're like an onion and gradually every skin is peeled off you and there's nothing left. All your self-esteem and how you feel about yourself is gone – you're left feeling like nothing and then your family feels like that.'*

*If the neighbourhood is insecure and uncared for, families will want to leave... Poorer urban neighbourhoods become a kind of no-man's-land where families and individuals come and go, undermining social control, a sense of community and eventually family life itself. Anne Power<sup>6</sup>*



*Social exclusion* Anne Power believes families are the litmus test of communities. They are the best critics and they carry the most powerful sensors for problems in poor areas. When they reach the point where family life is threatened, they leave if they can. *It is the neighbourhood that nourishes family life... where families organize their survival and progress... You survive in an area if you can cope with its problems*<sup>7</sup>. For communities to be stable, it is therefore important for families to stay. She found that the London families she studied had difficulty identifying with their community; yet without the mutual support it offers, families break down. *Community spirit is vital for family survival, for communities are the heartbeat of neighbourhoods. Without them, family life is too lonely, too fearful, too fragile*<sup>8</sup>.

The biggest problem for parents in deprived areas – and most likely to push them away – proved to be anxiety about their children: bad influences, getting into trouble. These local conditions feel beyond their control and embody, for them, the instability of the neighbourhood. This is exacerbated by the withdrawal of familiar functions and faces, such as park-keeping, caretaking, maintenance, health visiting and rent collecting. Another big issue is feelings of isolation, particularly for ethnic families and this is both a cause and effect of community breakdown. They are not involved in local activity because there are no channels of involvement. But Anne Power points out, they contribute to the community by way of all the low-paid services jobs and complain of getting little back in return except insecurity. In stark contrast she found that where mothers on the same estates are well plugged in to the community and have good support networks, they are optimistic and thrive. Given a fairer deal they will begin to participate. She cites the example of Sure-start, which most parents identify as making a positive difference – because it listens, helps and informs parents and makes children happier. This should be a model for other support schemes, because it has a snowball effect.<sup>9</sup>

Andrew Mawson described his first impressions on his arrival in Tower Hamlets: *There was a real disconnection at this time on the estates in my area. People lived in their own little worlds... It was very clear to me that it was in forging relationships between people from different backgrounds that progress was to be made*<sup>10</sup>. I had a sense that building up a sense of community in an area where so many people were isolated would mean creating some kind of rhythm around which they could orientate themselves.. But this was jeopardized by widespread depression. *I realized just how deeply we all depend for our sanity on relationships with other people.*

It is the psychological damage that makes social exclusion self-perpetuating. *Poverty is experienced not only as a wretched and insecure economic condition, but also as a shameful and destructive social relation... As one mother put it, 'poverty... sucks you in and breaks you'*<sup>11</sup>. As long as people in poor communities feel they are differentiated, social exclusion will continue. The first step in making these communities more included is recognition of the citizenship and rights of people living in poverty. Andrew Mawson turned this into positive action in Tower Hamlets, by exploiting people's individual and collective potential at every opportunity. He quickly found that the vicious circle of exclusion and isolation could be reversed if even simple ways could be found to bring people together.



*Social mix* The Charter of European Cities and Towns Towards Sustainability (1994) states: *an unequal distribution of income and wealth is likely to have draining effects on the vitality of urban activities and to be a source of unsustainable lifestyles.* Elizabeth Burton believes that the distancing effect of inequality is physical as well as social. The polarity has become a spatial gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots': on one side of the gulf there is fear and contempt, while on the other side there is humiliation and low self-esteem. Mutual respect begets self-respect, which is critical to human functioning.

The impact of socio-economic segregation within environments can be measured – in schools for example. National tests allow the authorities to track the performance of individual children against expectations, adjusted for their personal circumstances. Michael Marmot describes how children from deprived backgrounds perform better than expected in mixed ability schools, whereas if placed all together they perform less well than predicted. The same applies to health – people who are poor in a deprived area will have worse health than if they are poor in a non-deprived area. The explanation is to be found in how people perceive their status, which changes according to the social context.

Strong communities are rooted in the solidarity and mutual respect between the poor and non-poor, as is evident in many traditional communities where there is a social mix<sup>12</sup>. Andrew Mawson identifies other positive advantages: *New ideas generally emerge from the creative process that occurs when people from different backgrounds with different approaches engage effectively with each other. Difference and diversity, not conformity and equality, are the fertile soil of social change.* Anne Power agrees that to invest in and improve the social mix in failing communities brings both social and economic benefits, so it is important to capitalize on the mix where it already exists. Efforts to introduce a greater range of wealth, she says, are sometimes dismissed because 'gentrification' is seen as damaging. However, if poorer people remain in place as a community is regenerated and low-level gentrification takes place, it helps it to recover. She has found that families are more likely to stay when they realise they are *alongside people in work, people who are ambitious for the city, people who demand and are able to organize better services, [such as] teachers, health workers and shopkeepers*<sup>13</sup>.

Anne Power worked closely with tenants to produce a report for the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) on the future of social housing (2007). They concluded that a mix of people by ethnic group, tenure and age should be built into all regeneration programmes. They felt ethnic mix was particularly important because polarization is an increasing problem in many of their communities and youth gangs are often based on ethnicity. They suggested that rules on allocation should be imposed in all social housing developments; that the isolation experienced by immigrant communities should be addressed, by being housed in streets so that they can meet on the doorstep; and points of contact should be identified – such as primary schools and health centres – to encourage mixing. For instance community use of school buildings outside school hours has proved very effective, because people are already familiar with such places.

*Lenzie Glasgow – life expectancy 81. Geograph.org.uk*



*Calton Glasgow – life expectancy 53. Geograph.org.uk*



*Inequality* Michael Marmot is unequivocal: inequality is extremely damaging to individuals and communities. In a remarkable body of research carried out over twenty years, and now applied around the world, he demonstrated that your position on the ladder of any social hierarchy is intimately linked to your chances of getting ill and to your life expectancy. As a result health is an indelible marker of a successful community. Whatever the ranking system the social gradient is played out across society – and not just the best and the worst, but the pecking order of everyone in between: the higher the position the better the health. It follows that a fairer distribution of wealth improves health and longevity. But this has nothing to do with absolutes of wealth or poverty (in Kerala and Costa Rica good health defies lack of money), it is to do with psychology – *once people reach a certain threshold of material well-being, another kind of well-being becomes more relevant: autonomy. How much control you have over your life - and the opportunities you have for full social engagement and participation are crucial for health, wellbeing and longevity*<sup>14</sup>.

This explains something that has puzzled social scientists for years – why it is that the health and life expectancy of people in poor inner-city communities is so much worse than that of relatively wealthy close neighbours (in Glasgow, for instance, life expectancy for men in Calton is 53, 28 years less than in nearby Lenzie). This has not been explained sufficiently in terms of diet, for instance. *The causes of the social gradient in health is are to be found in the circumstances in which we live and work; in other words in our social arrangements... It is not the calamities that most determine wellbeing but the way we go about our daily lives, in offices, banks, factories, houses and neighbourhoods. It is about the fact that... participation in what society has to offer (is) distributed unequally*<sup>15</sup>. The way this translates into illness is that the psychological experience of inequality has profound effects on body systems, becoming the major contributor to heart disease, diabetes and, especially, mental illness (after adjusting for diet, smoking and genes).

Michael Marmot's research has other important implications for communities: simply increasing the wealth of poor communities will not help their health; however improving self-esteem and having a sense of purpose and control has a dramatic effect. (Similar claims have recently been made for happiness, following research at the LSE). It is also relevant to the benefits system, to welfare dependency and to the types of jobs available to people – the greater the degree of autonomy, the greater people's wellbeing.

Specifically this suggests there is a value in local initiatives that people develop for themselves, working alongside others. Andrew Mawson has seen how this can transform communities, with the success of home-grown social enterprises, but he warns that it cannot be delivered from outside – least of all by government policy. Success depends on innovation and the creativity of both entrepreneurs and local communities. The Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (2005) made £200m available to support enterprising activity within the most deprived areas, but the money was simply passed from one agency to another: *Initiatives like these fail because they become pure process and have no engagement with people*<sup>16</sup>. What hope then, he asks, for an Olympic legacy on his doorstep in the Lower Lea Valley?

*It was very clear to me that it was in forging relationships between people from different backgrounds that progress was to be made; in people willing to 'learn by doing' and engage in practical activity together over a long period. It was my hope that in working hard and creatively and engaging in the messy details we would build physical structures that actually worked in practice and were run and used by people who believed in and had an investment in creating a successful and future*

Andrew Mawson<sup>17</sup>

*There is a constant urban exodus, with a sifting outwards of better-off people and a holding back of those who cannot afford to move, and then a sifting inwards of poor people who have no choice. Often migrants fill the space... The sifting drives the decline of inner areas: slow decay, poorer populations replacing better-off ones, areas becoming unfashionable, and then fewer people... The poorest people will always lose out and the better-off will move out. The city is left emptier, barer and more polarized as a result.*

Anne Power<sup>18</sup>

*A good city neighbourhood can absorb newcomers into itself, both newcomers by choice and immigrants settling by expediency, and it can protect a reasonable amount of transient population too. But these increments and displacements must be gradual... [and] can only work if the underlying neighbourhood networks, formed by continuity of people, is in place.*

Jane Jacobs<sup>19</sup>

### *Stability and social capital*

When a community is stable it provides the organizing base for families – it is not just a physical space but a structure for living, for social relations. Anne Power defines ‘community’ as an informal, intimate sense of belonging, among family, neighbours, friends and familiar faces. The families she tracked for City Survivors all agreed someone to call on nearby is very important, as is a sense of mutual trust. This is undermined by strangers, rapid change and turnover of people, and disruptions like regeneration. Unslumming hinges, paradoxically, says Jane Jacobs, on the retentions of a very considerable part of the population. If you don’t do this, nothing else will work; schools and other institutions cannot thrive in unstable neighbourhoods.

In any stable community, says Jane Jacobs, you find lots of little formal and informal institutions – from churches and PTAs to clubs, sports teams and fundraising committees. Stability is dependent on the interweaving of the relationships these institutions engender. Out of this ‘net’ come working relationships that spring up and contribute to local public life. Those connections give rise to more connections, but they need time to root themselves and require the growth of trust and cooperation.

Charles Campion defines ‘social capital’ as *the resources that become available within a community as a consequence of networks of mutual support, trust and obligation...* [It is] *the glue that binds us together*. It is accumulated when people interact with each other in a whole range of formal and informal ways. *Without social capital no amount of investment in physical or economic initiatives will be sustainable*, but to foster it effectively makes communities more stable<sup>20</sup>. Jane Jacobs noticed that many ethnic communities in cities are successful simply because historically migrant communities have maintained strong social networks and have been good at self-management. *They stick together and stay put*. They should be encouraged to bring these strengths into mixed communities.<sup>21</sup>

Michael Marmot’s research has found that social capital follows the same gradient as health. Compared to their better-off neighbours, people who live in deprived communities have a smaller and more local social group, with fewer friends, less contact with neighbours and work colleagues, but more contact with family members. It is particularly damaging to disrupt these fragile connections. Slum clearance and redevelopment often uproot networks, institutions and the people who formed them, consequently both Jane Jacobs and Anne Power call for phased, small-scale development or regeneration so as to avoid disruption. It is essential, instead, to harness and build on existing social networks and institutions.



### *Empowerment and choice*

Richard Layard's research has shown that happiness is derived from cooperation; there exist within communities all sorts of capabilities and when harnessed people report that they feel happy<sup>22</sup>. Anne Power finds that when people use 'social control' to achieve common goals the results can be dramatic<sup>23</sup>. As Michael Marmot says, they begin to exercise control over life's circumstances. Failing communities are characterised by helplessness and hopelessness, but when people become involved and find they can influence decisions, the dynamic of a community begins to change. The difficulty is that long experience has told people that they won't be listened to; they would be more active if they felt it made a real difference and their wishes were acted upon. *What you say and do really matters to people: seeing is believing. Integrity is the name of the game.* Andrew Mawson found that once this trust is returned, people are keen to collaborate and they quickly begin to learn by doing.<sup>24</sup>

Among her survey families Anne Power found that people were prepared to be involved when they saw it as a way to meet like-minded people. But for interest to be sustained they needed to see the results of their efforts and be kept informed. This is the crucial difference between empowerment and consultation. *However the result of tenants having more say should be an actual transfer of power to communities, leading to real change*<sup>25</sup>. This is evident in community-led developments like Eldonian Village and Coin Street. People feel changed by involvement and the transformation can be sustained as long as there is handholding and brokering. As a community's self-confidence grows, so does collective efficacy – such as watching out for neighbours and children. The knock-on benefits are exponential. It is therefore essential to provide active support and to put resources behind people to change things for themselves.

Consultation of the type required in all development projects is valueless says Charles Campion. It is a token exercise. Whereas, when a community is given the opportunity to be fully immersed in a project, there is a much greater chance of success. He describes how community design projects can act as a catalyst, creating unlikely alliances. At best the existing community becomes the guardian of the new community – not through consultation, but by sharing values and ideas from the earliest possible stage. John Thompson Associates pioneered the idea of community planning, typically spending eight weekends per project working with local residents to develop ideas. They start without preconceptions and might together decide on the extent of demolition, for instance. In this sense architecture becomes less an art than a social science. Both the brief and the programme are designed in collaboration, with the community acting as client and critic. The designers start by sketching out the collective ideas, then go away with an agreed brief, to return to present more developed ideas – and so it continues. As things are seen to progress, it becomes an iterative creative process and increasing numbers want to be involved. It is a very particular form of facilitating for which the design team receives training – *it doesn't come naturally, we are used to acting as creative individuals.*

Some architects might consider such close collaboration detrimental to creativity and good design. Jeremy Till believes architects have inflicted much unhappiness on the world though 'misplaced goodness' – the belief that the creative process of design is for the greater good. What is important is the *real* ethics of social engagement – how architects understand and engage with other people's needs and create new social and spatial futures on their behalf.<sup>26</sup>





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- <sup>10</sup> Mawson, A. 2008. p. 77, p. 21.
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- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6, p.7.
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- <sup>26</sup> Till, J. 2009.

*The great function of the city is... to permit, indeed to encourage and incite, the greatest potential number of meetings, encounters, challenges between all persons, classes and groups providing, as it were, a stage upon which the drama of social life may be enacted*

Lewis Mumford, Landscape Magazine 1960



## *Economic factors*

*Diversity and density* Whether a community is to thrive and become socially stable depends on the mutually beneficial effects of various economic, social and physical factors. A busy local high street, for example, is a key feature of a stable community: it provides local jobs and is a place for social interaction; as familiar faces, shopkeepers provide continuity and are part of a subtle process of self-policing; but to be economically viable the mix of local shops needs to be carefully managed. The benefit of these factors is therefore collective and cumulative.

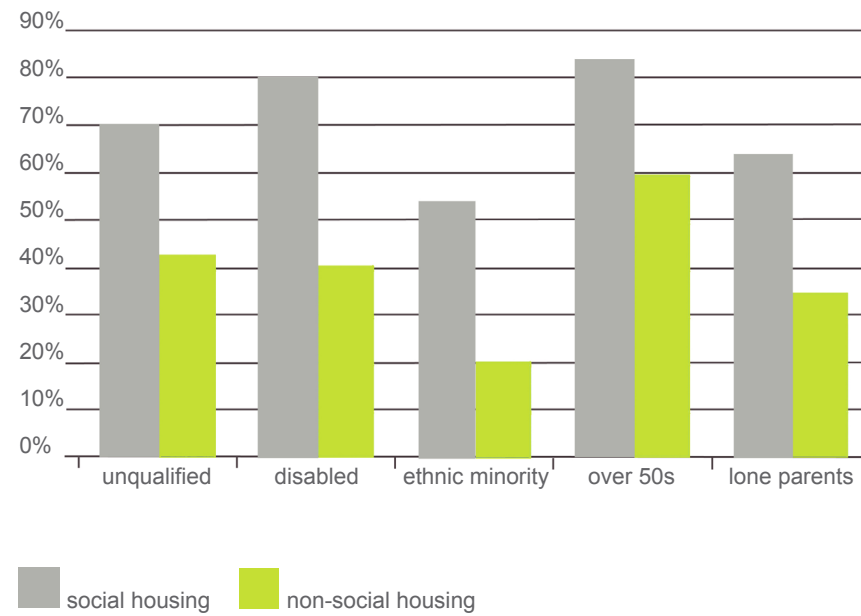
Charles Campion points out that a successfully integrated community creates real monetary value, through property and local enterprise, so there are good commercial reasons to make communities more sustainable. There is also a huge financial downside to failure.

Jane Jacobs believes that a combination of diversity and density is essential in city communities because it incubates economic enterprise. *With so many people together even quite standard but small operations like... hardware stores, drug stores and bars can and do flourish... because there are enough people to support their presence at short, convenient intervals. The same applies to cultural opportunities*<sup>1</sup>. But high density areas only do well if combined with diversity – of people, businesses, buildings. As communities decline people are driven out or displaced, causing density to fall in inner-city communities and leading to increased demand for new house building - at low density - elsewhere. [Note: density – a large number of dwellings per acre – is not to be confused with overcrowding – a large numbers of people per dwelling]. It's a delicate balance: with too low a density vitality and economic decline; yet too high a density increases the uniformity of buildings, causing a loss of diversity.

Anne Power also believes density to be a critical factor in the viability of city communities: *Cities work on the back of people density. This cuts across the prevailing reality, of low-density cities and the dominance of cars*<sup>2</sup>. In practical terms a *minimum level of 50 homes per hectare [is] necessary to support local schools, a frequent bus service or local shops. Even in London, where the average density is 45 homes per hectare, there are many areas, particularly eastwards into the Thames Gateway, where the population is too thinly spread to support essential services. A century ago household size was 6 people per home, it is now down to 2.2 people per home, so there needs to be three times the number of households in the same space to keep up services and local shops.*

Both identify the same solution: to fit more homes into existing areas, so that urban densities increase to sustainable levels and generate more integrated communities. Anne Power also calls for obligatory capacity studies and authoritative guidance on density.

Fig. 1: Unemployment among people in social housing compared with those in non-social housing in 2006



Source: Labour Force Survey, as reproduced by J. Hills

85% of the over 50s in social housing were unemployed compared with 60% in non-social housing  
 70% of unqualified people compared with 42%  
 80% of disabled people compared with 40%  
 54% of people from ethnic minorities compared with 21%  
 64% of lone parents compared with 35%

Between 1981 and 2006, the proportion in social housing who were in paid employment fell from 47% to 32%

*Mixed use and new use* The need for 'close-grained' diversity applies equally to communities and buildings, with the mixing in of social and work activities. Segregation of living and working was the aim of city planners for decades, but in reality they give each other valuable mutual support<sup>3</sup>. Buildings in city neighbourhoods are adaptable for all kinds of new uses, but it is difficult to inject jobs and diversity into communities where they do not already exist. It is better, therefore, to retain and support what is already there and to encourage the creative use of leftover space – a loss of diversity should be avoided at all cost. Planning legislation should support this accordingly.

There is a strong economic and sustainability argument for retaining rather than replacing buildings, but this is rarely acknowledged by developers and local authorities who see them as obstacles, both physically and economically. Local enterprise often flourishes in these reusable spaces and over time it becomes a beneficial dynamic process, as local activity and jobs are created. As Anne Power points out, the service industry is the largest employer in poor communities and there is a huge social benefit to changing work patterns so that people work close to home. *The service economy needs multiple small businesses, requiring varied building styles. Homes, churches, pubs schools, health centres, shops, factories, warehouses, garages, sheds, basements, attics all offer potential spaces and are increasingly in demand. Conversions are labour intensive but save materials, land, infrastructure, and generate demand for local builders, suppliers etc. This helps restore declining communities*<sup>4</sup>.

Existing buildings, however rundown, are often familiar landmarks with which people identify. Pulling them down damages this sense of place and local identity. At Silvertown Quays in the Thames Gateway, for instance, riverside warehouses occupied by established local companies and social enterprise start-ups, are soon to be levelled to make way for 29 acres of speculative 'mixed use' development, including 5000 homes and promising 'innovative solutions for sustainable communities'<sup>5</sup> (note the word 'solutions' which implies answers to a problem, but no question is posed). The community of West Silvertown is already experiencing the detrimental effects of its recently completed redevelopment: the token corner shops and cafes are a poor and patronising imitation of diversity, simply contributing to the sense of anonymity.

*Benefits trap* Work and benefits is a huge issue for communities, and as Polly Toynbee and Nick Davies highlighted, the 'benefits trap' - whereby opting for paid work leaves you worse off while also failing to provide job security – has very destructive knock-on effects. John Hill found that in 2006 more than half of those of working age living in social housing were without paid work<sup>6</sup> (*fig 1*). Compared with national levels, in every social group those in social housing were much more likely to be unemployed. Lack of qualifications, physical disability and depression kept many people out of the jobs market, but much more significant was the steep withdrawal of benefits as income rose. For example 64% of lone parents in social housing were without a job, compared with the national rate for lone parents of 35%.





Increasing incentives to work must go hand in hand with creating secure local jobs. In discussion with the families that she followed over a period of years, Anne Power came up with a range of practical suggestions: the right agencies available locally to provide benefits advice, job training; active recruitment of local tenants into local jobs; changes in the benefit system, including housing benefit to overlap with the start of paid employment; realistic wages and an end to unfair competition from new immigrants paid below market rates; the creation of apprentices in construction and maintenance; better transport links and free bus passes for people accessing low paid work; affordable and trustworthy childcare. More to the point unless these issues are addressed, she says, people cannot begin to see a way out of their dilemma.

#### *Social housing and tenure*

John Hills considers the future of social housing an urgent issue, as alternatives become less affordable and housing supply declines. The use of temporary accommodation, for instance, has more than doubled in ten years. *It is extremely important to ensure a viable supply of affordable homes for rent for many lower paid households at different stages of their lives*<sup>7</sup>. There needs to be a return to the idea of ‘a decent home for all at a price within their means’. Social housing affects four million households in England and uses assets worth more than £400 billion. He presents a strong social and economic argument for continuing social housing at sub-market rents: it offers higher quality than private landlords, it avoids discrimination and ensures affordability for the least well off.

New social housing is still located disproportionately in the most deprived neighbourhoods, with two-thirds in areas originally built as council estates. There is a strong bias towards ethnic minorities: 27 per cent of all minority ethnic householders are social tenants (43 per cent of black householders), compared to 17 per cent of white householders. So making the image of social housing more acceptable, both to those who are already tenants and to a broader constituency, is extremely important if these communities are to become sustainable.

When Anne Power asked long-term council tenants how best to address stigma, they said build at a better quality – cheaply-built ‘affordable homes’ have poverty written all over them; they suggested house building should be split: one third social, one third shared ownership, one third private – a level playing field across different types of tenure makes renting more respectable and the types of home less distinguishable.<sup>8</sup> Removing the stigma, they said, might also help to make people take more care and pride in their community. Anne Power also recommends that where possible people should be supported to pay for their own accommodation, rather than payment being made direct via benefits.

The argument for mixed-income communities is that it reduces stigma, while also making the labour market more integrated – thereby boosting the local economy. John Hills points out that measures to support the livelihoods of residents also sustains the income mix, maximising the potential of local residents to the benefit of the community. With a range of tenure options, if and when people’s circumstances improve, they can stay within the community. Flexible housing options for those with different degrees of need also allows public resources to stretch further.<sup>9</sup>

*Tenements Liverpool.* Liverpool Records Office



*Tate and Lyle factory.* Scottie Press



*Eldonian Village.* Liverppol.com

Anne Power proposes a number of ways to stimulate the rental market.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most radical is the creation of non-profit landlords as a means of enabling people to get on the bottom rung, as an alternative to temporary accommodation. She also suggests strong incentives for the reuse of small sites and existing underused buildings; and for shared household developments (the elderly and the young housed together). She wants the building of smaller estates of social housing in better areas; and for the funding to be put directly into the communities themselves. Housing should also be built with local management in mind, to give people more than a token say in how estates are run. This has a knock-on effect because as people become more engaged in the process, they begin take advantage of local facilities like schools.

The potential of existing housing stock is often overlooked, because the emphasis is on providing new units. But as Anne Power points out, what happens to the existing stock and its occupants has much greater bearing on the sustainability of communities. It makes sense socially and economically to use infill of vacant land within social housing areas to bring in new stock for sale, shared-ownership or renting. As it is, whereas 1.9 million people have bought council homes under the right-to-buy scheme, only 150,000 have taken advantage of shared-ownership schemes since their introduction in 1991. Yet where a mix of tenures has been available within small developments they have been very successful. She partly puts this success down to the simple fact that people are offered some choice.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Social enterprise*

Retaining control has been the incentive behind a number of successful community housing projects, such as the Eldonian Village in Liverpool, a self-build project by former employees of Tate and Lyle following the closure of the sugar factory. Threatened with the destruction of their community they secured the factory site on which to build new homes, to their own specification, under their own management, training and using their own labour. The community continues to thrive and has created hundreds of jobs for residents, along with two hundred home-grown businesses. Michael Marmot believes such projects have a very good chance of success because of the degree of individual and collective control the community has over its own destiny.

To encourage similar self-motivation in an existing poor community is extremely difficult, yet Andrew Mawson says change is possible if you start small and apply business experience and logic to social problems. But you have first to spot the potential hidden behind closed doors – *social entrepreneurs are found in all sectors of society; you have to find them and back them*<sup>12</sup>. It is an inside-out approach whereby incremental steps are taken once people see the practical results. Local control is very important and this simply isn't possible if you are relying on outside agencies for funding, so the key to success is home-grown social enterprise. *Social enterprises are designed to grow; you learn through doing it, then you do it again elsewhere. It's a good formula.*



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*Frying Pan Alley 1980*

*Slater Street 1977. Hulton Archive*



## *Physical factors*

*Sense of place* It is already clear that the way people relate to communities is complex. Having looked at the part played by social and economic factors in creating happy communities, the role of the built environment still seems elusive. Buildings cannot be considered in isolation, without the spaces they create around them. The arrangement of these private and public spaces in turn contributes to a unique sense of place. The physical context, the form and function of a particular place, is therefore inextricably linked to the way people use and respond to it – it is a spatial, practical and emotional relationship.

It is difficult to define a sense of place, says Peter Guillery, because it cannot be separated from a sense of belonging. In an existing community, there is something about the particular way that the buildings and spaces are interlocked that makes it different from anywhere else. It is this distinctive quality that makes a place identifiable as your own. The physical identity – the relationships between buildings and building types – and the social identity – how people relate physically and emotionally to buildings and spaces – become embedded in the place and the community. The identity embedded in the community's past has to be revealed and protected, if the sense of place is to be retained.

The historical context of architecture is often labelled 'heritage' and viewed as an adjunct in regeneration and development projects, rather than an integral component. With the past buried in both the social and physical fabric of a place, it cannot be extricated – unless it is destroyed. Jane Jacobs talks about the organic city and how communities can thrive amidst disorder and decay, within and around the layers of its past. She likens the seeming disorder to *a dance composed of movement and change*<sup>1</sup>. Cities evolve organically in this way, like the London of Mayhew and Booth.

A sense of familiarity is equally difficult to define. It has little to do with aesthetics and a great deal to do with the patterns of movements and encounters that take place in a particular place and the way people store and recall the memory of them. In a community, over time, a collective recognition develops. This is independent of the quality of spaces, or the efficient functioning of a place. It is an emotional response and it means that people value and identify with buildings, open spaces, objects and institutions because they are familiar, not because they are distinguished. Again outsiders will often discount this and make aesthetic judgements. Peter Guillery believes a detailed historical environment survey is essential to every major development and regeneration project, to unearth what people value about their community. Apart from the wealth of detail, it provides preemptive knowledge of potential problems. A study he carried out of housing in South Acton<sup>2</sup> looked at everything from the aftermath of the war and the impact of social shifts to attitudes to tower blocks and perceptions of recent regeneration; yet it also identified the value of the wall where people hung out as kids. The 1960s estate took thirty years to build, involving the destruction of the community for a whole generation – a disaster that the 2005 study will hopefully prevent from being repeated.

*Byker Estate 1975. Courtauld Institute*



*Excalibur Estate Catford. Robin Bell*

*Value of heritage* The value of heritage-led regeneration is gaining recognition (just as heritage in general is becoming more popular), partly for economic reasons: old building often more adaptable and easier to reuse than newer buildings; they make places attractive and are comforting to live in and to visit.

To ignore the past life of a place during a process of redevelopment is destructive of community. Charles Campion argues it is also a wasted economic and creative opportunity. Incisive research can give a proposal a commercial edge and provide insights that even the client didn't know about. He capitalises on the past, using historical context and local knowledge as his starting point. The place itself generates an understanding of that place – how it works, what is good and bad. So it is essential to learn from places, to understand what works and why, so that it can be reapplied. Only then is it possible to make claims about creating sustainable communities.

Anne Power delivers grave warnings to communities about major redevelopment: if it takes too long you will be displaced; there will be complete upheaval; you will have no sense of control (it will feel too big); therefore proceed in a limited and modest way<sup>3</sup>. Much more serious attention must be given to conservation and renovation: it is cheaper, more sustainable, less destructive of the community, can be more quickly responsive to residents' wishes and needs and retains the familiar. With buildings built since the war Local Authorities do not stop to think about social value; they too quickly assume that something has no historic value and pull it down. The potential benefits of preservation are evident from two very different post-war examples, The Byker Estate in Newcastle, which was given lots of money for improvements, and a prefab estate in Catford, South London. Residents love them and both are now listed.

*Effects of urban form* It is difficult to create a sense of place or identity in a planned community, particularly given the precedents of failure. Elizabeth Burton made some interesting discoveries about how the built environment generates a sense of wellbeing, by studying the positive and negative effects of urban form on older people. One particular project considered the design of dementia-friendly outdoor environments<sup>4</sup>. People with mild and moderate dementia still tend to go out alone, typically to the corner shop, post office or for a walk. They greatly value this outdoor activity because it gives them a sense of independence and self-respect, '*I feel in charge of myself, the world belongs to me for just that bit of time...*'. However they become anxious, disorientated and confused in complex or crowded places and they are less aware of physical and social dangers. Yet despite their dementia, they have highly developed wayfaring strategies and continue to be able to plan and visualise routes, using landmarks and other visual cues. This spatial memory helps explain how people retain a sense of identity.

The characteristics of dementia-friendly neighbourhoods were found to be: a familiar environment (with change being incremental); a legible environment (spaces and buildings whose functions are obvious, visual continuity); a distinctive environment (landmarks, visual variety). *Dementia-friendly places are familiar, legible, distinctive, accessible, comfortable and safe*. It is telling how similar these findings are to surveys carried out in deprived communities.



*The Lambeth 1938. Hulton Archive*



*The trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts... The sum of such casual social contact at a local level... is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighbourhood need.. The absence of this trust is a disaster to a city street. Its cultivation cannot be institutionalized.*

Jane Jacobs<sup>5</sup>



*Play Street 1950s. Getty Images*



*Brick Lane Market 2008*

Michael Marmot talks about the direct physical benefits of the built environment. For instance unless there are secure play areas, children can't be physically active or experience independence; unless there are adaptable spaces where teenagers can congregate, they are more likely to express themselves through anti-social behaviour. Addressing the physical symptoms of deprivation has also been found to improve behaviour – in the Bronx a policy of immediately repairing broken windows made children less likely to break them; and removing graffiti from the New York subway had a similar effect. However The Commission on Social Determinants of Health, which he chaired, also found that improving physical conditions alone does not empower people and does not change their behaviour. You have to address the psycho-social, not just the physical factors. What is significant is people's perceptions of their physical surroundings. The term 'fortress flats', describing a dislike of and fear of communal areas, in fact refers to the sense of having no control over what is beyond your front door. Marmot suggests it is not a response to the physical environment, but the result of people's lack of control over what happens there. It is a feature of disempowerment. There is a physical impact, however, in the abandonment and neglect of public areas – public space becomes negative, wasted space.

#### *Shared space*

Research with older people has a wider application in understanding the role of public and private space. It emphasizes the importance for a community of familiarity, of activity, of feeling safe and not threatened, and of accessibility – and reveals how these things relate to the mental spatial map people have of their community. Just as Polly Toynbee describes the shrinking of personal space in the threatening environment of the Clapham Park Estate, Jane Jacobs explains how, in a thriving neighbourhood, life spills outdoors. Public space becomes 'shared space'.

The significance of street life, and therefore the arrangement of streets, has long been acknowledged both for good and bad. From 'vibrant', 'dynamic', 'friendly', to 'intimidating', 'threatening', 'deserted', descriptions of streets are evocative. *Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of the city, are its most vital organs... If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting*<sup>6</sup>. As Jane Jacobs suggests, streets reflect the health of a community. People of all ages use them, for trivial social contact, to hang out in, to play in. In well-used city streets children can explore physical boundaries, learn public responsibility for others, negotiate a busy shared space. It is not surprising that 'reclaiming the streets' campaigns are so well supported.

As the deserted streets of Nick Davies's Hyde Park and Lynn Hanley's The Wood attest, *impersonal city streets make anonymous people and anonymous places*. Jane Jacobs also criticises the way planners deal with pockets of inner-city deprivation. *The city plan designates and removes these chunks of blight and replaces them with chunks of Radiant Garden City designed, as usual, to minimize the use of streets*<sup>7</sup>. Forty years ago she predicted that as people take refuge in cars and behind closed doors, these empty streets would leave a vacuum, allowing danger to hold sway. This in turn would cultivate the institution of turf. She has been proved right, thus establishing a significant link between planning policy, the built environment and social decline.





The same applies to green spaces. For Elizabeth Burton they demonstrate how much of what urban planners and designers do is uncritical and unsubstantiated. The obligatory 'green lung', is conferred on inner-city communities as a special benefit, in the belief that it is a community anchor. This is a fallacy, it is the life of the park that does that<sup>8</sup>. Oscar Newman found that unpopular green spaces have a negative effect: children are subjected to intimidation and gangs rule there because there are no 'eyes' to oversee these areas. Playgrounds and open, car-free spaces are often not the wholesome places intended, yet development proposals include persuasive pictures of 'users' enjoying them.

Jane Jacobs found that successful community parks had key features in common: a diverse, busy rim; different users for different purposes throughout the day; safe, pleasant routes to cut across from one place to another. The greenery does little on its own – it is the other uses that attract people to parks. Recent inner-city 'greening' projects have borne this out. In Barcelona, for instance, parks created in left-over spaces in the already busy fabric of the city have been very successful. So rather than planning community spaces with specific functions in mind, Anne Power suggests that what is needed is a range of indoor and outdoor flexible places that can be adapted and readapted over time. Within towns and cities, existing spaces can be appropriated for all sorts of new uses and to make them available to the community is cost-efficient and widely welcomed. Andrew Mawson, for example, turned his church into a flexible space for use by all faiths, a weekday nursery and an evening performance space.

*Conclusion* The collage of ideas from the witnesses creates a useful overall picture. They state the importance of stability: of creating and maintaining social networks and mutual support; of avoiding the destruction of the glue that binds people and communities. They call for fairer distribution of wealth – on the basis that equality means better health and happier communities; and a greater social and ethnic mix – to take advantage of diversity and avoid the dangers of polarization.

They say that self-motivation and a sense of purpose and autonomy are essential to a thriving community and that change must start from within; so it is essential to identify and support local talent, initiatives and enterprise. They identify the value of a sense of place – of existing fabric, landmarks and local identity; and the importance of collective recognition and familiarity – of people, institutions and places. These should be maintained. They also reiterate the advantages of mixing residential other uses, the reuse of existing buildings, of flexible spaces and adaptability.

They also provide some clear indicators of a successful community: good health and life expectancy; the stability of families; community involvement and autonomy; busy streets, local enterprise and jobs.

All of the witnesses emphasize the social role of architecture and the importance of resolving problems of social exclusion alongside addressing the built environment. Pockets of poverty in estates and the stigma this produces, are not conducive to sustainable communities; there should be a return to mixed communities that engender mutual respect and support, and an end to the obvious distinction between 'social' and other housing types.



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- <sup>1</sup> Jacobs, J. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. p.50
- <sup>2</sup> Guillery, P. 2005. *South Acton Housing Histories*
- <sup>3</sup> Power, A. 2008. *Local Wellbeing Conference*
- <sup>4</sup> Burton, E. 2004. *Neighbourhoods for Life*. Wise, Oxford Brookes University
- <sup>5</sup> Jacobs, J. 1961. p. 56.
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- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 95.

*Snake blocks 1961. Hackney Archive*



*You were asleep in bed and cockroaches would fall on you. You'd go into the kitchen, switch on the light and it'd be a battle zone. I'd get people to put their coasters on top of their mugs instead of under them.*

Joan Lefevre<sup>1</sup>



*Holly Street 2009*



*Holly Street Estate Hackney. Google*

## Part V

### Case studies

The witnesses have identified social, economic and physical factors relevant to whether a community will thrive or fail. By applying their ideas to the Holly Street Estate in Hackney and Bromley-by-Bow in Tower Hamlets, I hope to shed new light on how happy communities can be created and sustained and whether the built environment plays a significant part in the process. This exercise cannot provide conclusive evidence, but it is revealing.

*Holly Street* Efforts at social regeneration on the Holly Street site have continued on and off since World War II. In 1961 twenty-two acres of Victorian terraces were replaced with a series of 5-storey 'snake blocks', to which four twenty-storey point blocks were added by 1971. *There was no sense of designing a community. Nothing like that. It was all designed by numbers on a drawing board: The development should house 136 people per acre, therefore precisely 2794 people; each dwelling should have 3.09 habitable rooms*<sup>1</sup>. The snake blocks were linked by walkways, sharing 1.5 km of continuous internal corridor. Murders and suicides were common... *I got mugged once and what could the police do? The mugger disappeared and came out of an exit a quarter of a mile away.* Ken Gilmore lived in a snake block from the start. When I met him along with other residents in 2005 he was 82 and living on the 16th floor of the one remaining tower block: *When they built the snake blocks everyone was moved out of the area: moved out – demolished – rebuilt – moved in. In the process the whole community was destroyed. Different people moved back in. Hackney's policy was no continuity of the community. We simply didn't have a say in it.*<sup>2</sup>

By 1993 80% of the residents had requested to move. Holly Street had become notorious — crime-ridden, with 50% unemployment, London's highest rate of teenage pregnancy and, of the 1100 dwellings, 850 were illegally occupied. *I hated it. They had rats and everything. We used to sit out and play in the corridor, but they smelled of pee and bad boys rode bikes and scooters along them* (Mel, aged 11). After just 20 years the blocks were in turn condemned, resulting in one of London's biggest housing developments projects.

This time local residents insisted on having a say, helped by a change in the political climate. A government report on the social impact of construction and development in the 90s, highlighted the problems in excluding the community from the development process and so there was extensive consultation<sup>3</sup>. This was backed by Estate Action Grants, with development funding dependent on a partnership between a private funder, contractor and the community. Sixteen years and £97m later, the final phase is now being built. 60 percent of Holly Street's residents were promised new homes on the estate – they even had to fight for this percentage, arguing that anything less would destroy the community. But in reality, only 10 percent of the early 90s community remained by 2008.



*Bromley-by-Bow. Google*



*70s blocks and infill 2009*



*Tenements 2008*

*So my course was clear, I would get to know the people, walk the streets, visit the markets and schools and businesses... and get a handle on what was happening in this community to keep it from fulfilling its potential*

*Andrew Mawson<sup>5</sup>*

*Bromley-by-Bow* Only the church and a handful of buildings and terraces survived the blitz and the LCC slum clearance programme in Bromley-by-Bow. As the docks wound down and traditional jobs were lost, those who could afford to moved out of Bromley-by-Bow to new estates in Dagenham and Southend. There had been a long history of immigrant settlement, but in the '60s and '70s this became a large immigrant population, with some fifty languages, housed in rundown tenements and estates. *The new approach road to the Blackwall Tunnel then carved the landscape, industry, society and amenities in two and led to it being one of the forgotten areas of East London*<sup>6</sup>. Bounded by roads and railway lines, by the 1980s Bromley-by-Bow became an island of abject poverty, with some of the highest indices of deprivation in the UK, high unemployment, poor social integration and poor health, yet every government scheme had failed. Nobody moved in by choice, and as soon as they arrived they were queuing to leave – so that people rarely stayed more than two or three years.

The built environment adds to the feeling of abandonment. For the twenty years following the war, the building of medium and high-rise estates followed prevailing planning theories, separating land use between housing, work, pedestrians and traffic – and creating sub-standard housing and vacant public spaces. This is largely how it remains, except for the addition of ad hoc infilling with cul-de-sacs of post '70s semis. The area is devoid of cohesion or physical sense of identity.

When Andrew Mawson, a former telecoms engineer, moved into Bromley-by-Bow as pastor of the local United Reformed Church, in 1984, there was no apparent community, no will - internally or externally - for anything to be done to address overwhelming problems and no money. Starting small, within the four walls of the near derelict church, and responding to the immediate needs he saw around him, he set in train a process of social transformation, which has taken twenty years to bear fruit. In that time Bromley-by-Bow has continued to suffer serious under-investment, with only £18 million spent on small-scale regeneration.

<sup>1</sup> Joan Lefevre, long-term Holly Street resident

<sup>2</sup> Tim Watson, Holly Street Redevelopment Coordination Manager, Hackney Council

<sup>3</sup> Ken Gilmore, Residents Committee

<sup>4</sup> Latham Report, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Mawson, A. *The Social Entrepreneur*. p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Haines, G. 2008. *Bow and Bromley-by-Bow*. p. 6.

Fig. 2: Statistical comparison

|                                     |                 | Holly Street | Bromley-by-Bow |                    |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Population:*                        |                 | 10,179       | 14,869         |                    |
| Density (per ha):*                  |                 | 94.27        | 107.81         |                    |
| Households:°                        | total           | 4,485        | 4,188          |                    |
|                                     | lone parent (%) | 13.5         | 15.1           |                    |
| In social housing (%):*             |                 | 59.4         | 72             | (nationally 19.15) |
| Ethnicity (%):°                     | White British   | 58.5         | 39.2           |                    |
|                                     | Black           | 27.2         | 10.9           |                    |
|                                     | Asian           | 5.5          | 42.9           |                    |
|                                     | Other           | 8.8          | 7              |                    |
| No qualifications (% working age):* |                 | 31.7         | 43             | (nationally 28)    |
| Economic inactivity (%):*           |                 | 32.9         | 49             | (nationally 21.2)  |
| Unemployment (% working age):*      |                 | 6.05         | 7.8            |                    |
| Housing benefit (% households):°    |                 | 55.5         | 56.9           |                    |
| Life expectancy:*                   | Men             | 74.9         | 74.1           |                    |
|                                     | Women           | 82.1         | 83.6           |                    |
| Mortality rate:*                    | Men             | 117          | 122.8          |                    |
|                                     | Women           | 88.9         | 84.6           |                    |
| Crime (per 1000):^                  | Burglary        | 14.83        | 19.3           |                    |
|                                     | Robbery         | 9.63         | 5.9            |                    |
|                                     | Violent crime   | 38.5         | 29.9           |                    |
|                                     | Drug offences   | 23           | 6.0            |                    |

Sources:

Office of National Statistics: Neighbourhood Statistics (\*); Hackney or Tower Hamlets Ward Data Report (°); Metropolitan Police Crime Figures (^)

*Initial comparison* Queensbridge (of which Holly Street forms a major part) and Bromley-by-Bow have significant similarities, although Bromley-by-Bow is about 30 percent bigger at nearly 15,000 and has higher density, at 108 households per hectare compared with 94 in Holly Street. Working age unemployment is comparable, although Bromley-by-Bow has a higher number who are economically inactive. Both have very high levels of social housing, compared with borough and London averages. And both have a similarly high percentage of lone parent families. According to Indices of Multiple Deprivation, both wards are among the most deprived in the country: Bromley-by-Bow is ranked 634th and Queensbridge is 2697th out of 32482 wards, with Bromley-by-Bow scoring among the very worst in terms of income and housing.

Closer inspection reveals interesting differences (fig 2): Bromley-by-Bow has over 60 percent ethnic minority households, with just under 40 percent in Holly Street. Over-crowding in Bromley-by-Bow is five times greater than Holly Street, which is around average. 43 percent of working age people in Bromley-by-Bow have no educational qualification, compared with 31 percent in Holly Street; yet women in particular have better health and lower mortality rates in Bromley-by-Bow. A comparison of crime statistics also reveals that Holly Street has significantly higher crime levels across all categories, particularly drug-related and violent crime; and whereas crime levels have remained level in Holly Street, they have been reducing in Bromley-by-Bow.

Judging by social indicators Bromley-by-Bow has the greater degree of poverty and deprivation, yet the social effects of deprivation are more evident and more persistent in Holly Street.

A simple comparison of the built environment presents a dramatic contrast between the two communities. Levitt Bernstein's Holly Street development, built to emulate the traditional street pattern, consists of a varied combination of well-designed terraced brick houses with gardens and low-rise blocks of flats. Interiors are spacious, well-equipped and make good use of natural light. The streetscape is attractive and user-friendly, with plenty of trees and well-planned open spaces. In Bromley-by-Bow the majority of people live in brick tenements, or featureless point or slab blocks. Buildings and their interiors are cramped and often deprived of natural light. Only now are they being refurbished and properly maintained. The sound and air pollution from surrounding roads are evident in all open spaces.



*Holly Street Masterplan. Levitt Bernstein*



*Holly Street 2008*

*'The Holly Street estate redevelopment in Hackney has transformed a whole community. In addition to the newly created neighbourhood of small streets... the project has sought to remove the fear of crime, improve security and improve the mental and physical health of residents, thus reducing the call on health services.'*

*ODPM Sustainable Communities in London (2003)*

### Comparison – social factors

#### Empowerment and involvement

The Holly Street redevelopment was considered an excellent example of partnership and cooperation in social regeneration (and is used as an exemplar of a sustainable community by the ODPM). Support was given to the community to enable proper collaboration. Laing, the original contractor, agreed to train and employ 435 local people, but this was undermined when subsequent phases were competitively tendered. The architects, Levitt Bernstein, worked closely with an elected tenants committee to develop the design and facilities. The council even paid for committee members to be trained in consultation and budgeting. The residents wanted the new build to be closer to the Victorian street pattern – specifically they did not want anything that could be described as an ‘estate’. They wanted a first class sports and community centre to keep teenagers off the streets and to provide a focus for the community, a nursery, a health centre and sheltered housing. All were provided. Of the four original towers one was retained, on the insistence of residents, as housing for the over 50s. The Queensbridge Trust was formed from the original development committee expressly to safeguard the sustainability of the community and when I talked to one of its members in 2002 he was very positive: *The first phase is now four years old, so we know it works. There’s no graffiti, it’s clean, people know each other. The thing is they feel they own it!*

The residents had considerable control. For instance, empowered by their success in negotiating retention of the tower, its residents took over the management. They control the budget, employ a caretaker from among the residents and even vet the tenants – it is now thriving as a community within a community. But there is an important distinction between the tower and the rest of the estate: the turnover of residents is low and many were long-term residents of the previous estate. *I grew up here, went to school here. I can’t fault how they’ve done it. I’m in the over-fifties block, with lots of space, a big bathroom, 24 hour security. You wouldn’t believe the difference<sup>2</sup>.* Elsewhere on the estate, despite the fight for a high percentage of former residents to be rehoused, the turnover of residents has been rapid and, contrary to the fundamental aims of the redevelopment, the former community has been almost entirely replaced.

In Bromley-by-Bow the extent of deprivation meant there was insufficient cohesion and self-motivation within the community to bring about any change. In the event, the efforts of one individual to galvanize a small number of other people made the first steps possible. With £400 in the bank Andrew Mawson looked at the scene around him and then at the one asset available to him – the church building – and went in search of people to occupy it. *Anything to generate some activity in this dead place must surely help.* Behind this were some basic principles (at the time no more than a hunch): that change is possible; that people, whatever their circumstances and their differences, have potential; that when applied effectively this potential can transform individuals and communities. He stuck a notice on the door asking if anyone needed space for any purpose and when a woman arrived wanting to build a boat he did a deal: rent-free space as long as she trained someone else in the process. To a dance teacher who soon appeared he offered low rent in exchange for subsidized lessons for local kids. Bit by bit this ad hoc community grew. Everyone paid according to their means and they each gave something back to the community in exchange.





*Bromley-by-Bow Centre 2009*

*I understood that all the strategizing and report-writing about the problems of the inner-city... were failing because they didn't engage with the people themselves. Where they saw failure I realized there was great potential – and it was there all along in the people who walked up and down the streets. My task was to begin a ... This community would flourish only if the people in it began talking to each other and taking more personal responsibility together for the area in which they lived.*

Andrew Mawson<sup>3</sup>



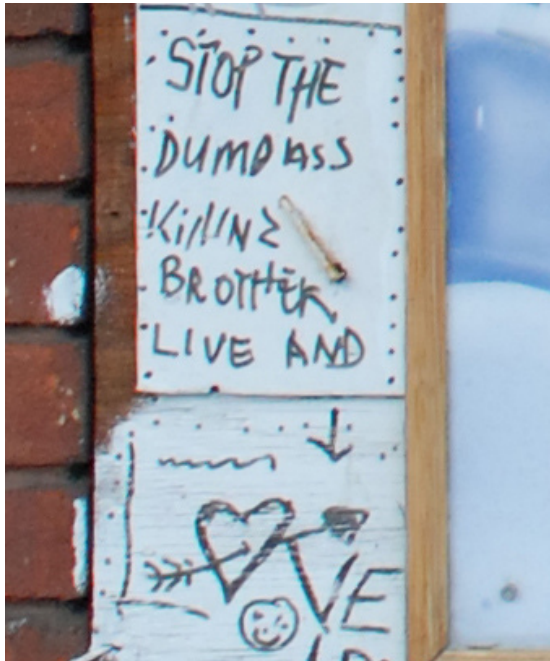
*Boys at the Bromley-by-Bow Centre 2009*

Soon the group's motivation changed – they looked around them to see what the community needed and how they could hook in others in providing it. The result was the Bromley-by-Bow Centre (BBBC): This would not be another community centre – a tacky, rundown, public-sector building with posters on the wall – but a 'centre of community and entrepreneurship'. It would be built and owned by the people it was to serve, through a development trust.

A combined health, advice, arts, education, enterprise centre and housing agency, the BBBC supports families, young people and adults in improving health, gaining skills, building confidence, finding employment and starting businesses. It has so far spawned more than a hundred social enterprises. The Centre motivates people to help themselves, on the basis that once there is a sufficient head of steam and people begin to benefit, it becomes self-perpetuating. The difference between and standard forms of consultation is self-evident. Michael Marmot would point to the degree of self-determination and autonomy; Anne Power would identify the levels of involvement. But the essential ingredient is time: the changes in Bromley-by-Bow have been taking place organically, by dealing directly with the community and its needs over a period of twenty years. These are the fundamental principles of social enterprise.

*Social exclusion* All should have been well in Holly Street and for a while the results looked very positive. A 2005 residents' survey, comparing life before and after redevelopment, reported that residents found it cleaner, healthier and safer: use of antidepressants had reduced by three-quarters; and feelings of fear had dropped from 49 percent to 16 percent. But by 2003 there were already reports of renewed problems. As local MP, Diane Abbott, described to the House of Commons *Just after the 2005 general election, there was a problem of serious drug dealing on the estate... The issue was not only criminal... people associated with the drug dealing were congregating and there were no-go areas*<sup>4</sup>. The crack dens had returned, people felt threatened and so the police brought in a dispersal order. *There was a sense of people holding their breath – it could go either way now*<sup>5</sup>. A surveillance operation ended in a sting in March 2006, during which 20 dealers were arrested and later convicted. Labour Minister Hazel Blears claimed *the problems on the Holly Street Estate have now been removed for the long term*<sup>6</sup>. But the assurances were premature, as evidenced by the spate of murders between 2006 and 2008. The community had found itself at the centre of a post-code war between the Holly Street Gang and the nearby London Fields Gang.

Gang activity is common to many inner-city boroughs and it is arguable whether this in itself constitutes evidence of a 'failing' community. It is however a symptom of the disaffection and disconnection experienced by young people and a significant cause of social exclusion. Although only a small proportion of the former community still lived in Holly Street by the time the problems re-emerged, the underlying social context remained unchanged, leaving the new community vulnerable. *Hackney desperately wants to change the facts so that 'regeneration' looks like a success story... Knocking down a problem estate, rebuilding and privatizing it will not address the problems of youth unemployment, drugs and poverty in the area*<sup>7</sup>.



Local graffiti

*These were anonymous children... What if you scolded or stopped them? Who would back you up there is the blind-eyed turf? Would you get, instead, revenge? Better keep out of it. Impersonal streets make anonymous people.*  
Jane Jacobs<sup>8</sup>

Holly Street Estate's Young People's Centre 2009



*It's fed by negativity, despair and frustration. From 10, 11 they are groomed as runners and once they earn some cash and status they are nearly unreachable. Get them young and give them something better. If not forget it.*

Steve Curtis<sup>9</sup>

If, as Anne Power suggests, families are the litmus test of the health of a community, young people (as shown by Alice Coleman) reveal the first symptoms of its downward slide. Steve Curtis runs Cityzen, a youth led social enterprise organisation, which in 2006 set up a project in Holly Street to engage local kids and give them an alternative to gang involvement and drug running. *The sting left fifteen to twenty 12 or 13 year-olds underemployed and under ASBOs. These kids moved into the shoes of the guys sent to prison. They are earning some money, have some status... so there's no incentive for them to get out of it. The gang provides a sense of purpose... a sense of identity not adequately provided by the community.* Six months later the first murder took place.

Youth workers, standing outside the portakabins that provide a temporary youth club, pinpoint the underlying problems: *crap local schools and crap youth provision.* It's a story of mistrust fostered by broken promises, boredom, and no access to local facilities. Anger is especially directed at the Queensbridge Sports and Community Centre which used to have things for them to do, but was then contracted out and no longer allows them access. After the 2008 murder Hackney quietly gave Cityzen £6000 in a brown envelope and asked them to sort the problem. Steve Curtis is convinced that the estate will continue to slide until schools or projects manage to get through to them.

Bromley-by-Bow has not been immune to gang violence, but in the early '90s, steps were taken to defuse a growing problem of racial intolerance. Following a number of attacks by the BNP, Kingsley Hall, that still houses the Gandhi Foundation, backed local young people to set up and run a peer-led project called Tolerance in Diversity. It has successfully engaged kids in addressing racial issues, through workshops on cultural identity and conflict resolution. This appears to have preempted racially-motivated gang violence and has had an impact on how young people of different faiths perceive and relate to each other. Through the networking effect of the Bromley-by-Bow Centre young people have also been able to access a range of venues in the neighbourhood for sports, clubs and ad hoc activities. In this way they plug into and still benefit from the run-down built environment.

*Confidence* One of the biggest difficulties for Bromley-by-Bow has been the isolation of older people and of women from ethnic communities. In the '80s and '90s it was proving difficult to persuade them to use local health or social services. So-called 'hard to access' groups are a problem for communities and, in response, one of the first acts of the BBBC was to set up and manage its own community health centre which directly employs doctors, community nurses and any other therapists – determined entirely by local requirements. Once they managed to bring in these women on some pretext, they directed them straight to all the other services – so they might receive a flu jab, have their corns dressed and attend a dress-making group on the same visit. Teenage mothers, who had little social contact and were not bringing babies in for health checks, were successfully attracted in by the offer of free baby portraits while they waited. When a woman approached the Centre wanting to start an organization for disabled people isolated by poor access in housing blocks, she was given space on condition she integrated it with other community efforts. Local disabled people proved hugely resourceful and many now have work; and learning disabled young adults run the Centre's café.



*Old and new – Holly Street final phase 2009*



So successful has the Centre been in reaching members of the community, the government uses it as a precedent to justify plans for polyclinics. But Andrew Mawson insists it is not just the delivery of services, but the knock-on effects that have had a beneficial impact on the community, from the reduction in depression to the network of relationships and the growing sense of confidence that people have about the area. People no longer queue up to leave; and Poplar HARCA, the social housing company created within the BBBC, has taken over control of six thousand properties in Tower Hamlets, by popular request, and are over-subscribed. As the community has become more stable, the various burgeoning groups and organisations have put down roots.

Essentially a new community, it appears that Holly Street residents began to lose confidence even before any sense of social cohesion could be established. The initial goodwill and optimism, supported by the attractive environment and excellent facilities, was damaged by the fear and violence that ensued. In spite of exemplary consultation and good design, Holly Street is already experiencing the affects of stigma. One of the Holly Street youth workers explained why families are trying to leave: *The reality is that if you are a black family in Holly Street with boys, the chances of keeping them out of trouble is very poor. If you don't reach the children, you lose the families and the community needs its families if it is to put down firm roots.*

The Holly Street Estate Youth Diversionary and Positive Peer Engagement Project asked 150 young people, aged from 8 and 19, what they thought of their estate – first in the autumn of 2005, and again in the summer of 2008. The questions, which were asked by peers, covered concerns about the area, whether they enjoyed living there and whether they were affected by the drugs culture. Their answers provide intriguing insight into the downward spiral of the new community: in 2005 64% of the girls enjoyed living on the estate and 69% said they would stay in the area; but by 2008 only 46% enjoyed being there and only 29% said they would stay. By 2005 two-thirds of boys and girls had concerns about drugs, and while the figure remained unchanged for girls in 2008, only 21% of boys were still expressing concern (a figure explained, according to the youth workers, by the level of involvement in drugs of the survey cohort). This is further supported by the number of the girls (over 70%) stating in both years that young people were affected by drug and alcohol misuse. In 2008 92% of the girls said that they should have more say in decisions that affected them and 71% of boys said they didn't have enough to do. The estate's image is overwhelmingly negative in both surveys and reflects the low self-esteem, lack of empowerment and levels of anxiety among young residents.

The image of the estate has been tarnished by dramatic and possibly isolated events and this has had both an internal and external effect. It needs only to shake the confidence of a small but significant number of residents to cause a ripple effect. People thought Holly Street had shed its once notorious image, but now they are not so sure. They have good cause to be nervous, because once a neighbourhood begins to gain a bad reputation – in this case spread across newspaper headlines – investors start to lose interest: people think twice about buying a property there; insurance companies and lenders mark it down as high risk. The parallel with Hyde Park in Leeds is worrying. Holly Street might survive the shockwaves of recent events, but not until its social problems are addressed and confidence returns.





*Bromley-by-Bow 2009*

*Fig. 3: Ethnicity (%)*

|       | <i>Holly Street</i> | <i>Bromley-by-Bow</i> |
|-------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| White | 58.5                | 39.2                  |
| Black | 27.2                | 10.9                  |
| Asian | 5.5                 | 42.9                  |
| Other | 8.8                 | 7.0                   |

Source: Hackney and Tower Hamlets Ward Data Reports

*Social mix* Social and ethnic diversity benefits communities, the witnesses suggest, yet inequality and ethnic polarization are damaging. Holly Street and Bromley-by-Bow are among the poorest communities in the country and so can equally claim to experience the effects of social inequity. *No happiness without fairness*, claims Richard Layard, suggesting that the cards are stacked against both communities. It was intended that the redevelopment of Holly Street would achieve an improved social mix, through different tenure options and the inclusion of a number of private houses, but the social diversity has not been sustained. Steve Curtis was always sceptical: *Hackney wanted a mixed community, they thought they were solving problems by bringing in rich people. But the poor local schools and lack of affordability of local amenities just emphasizes the gap between rich and poor.* In Bromley-by-Bow they decided to start young and set up an 'inclusive' nursery, which has children on at risk register alongside children whose parents are paying.

In terms of their ethnic make-up the two communities have significant differences (fig 3). Bromley-by-Bow is fairly evenly split between Asian and white British residents (42.9% and 39.2%), with a significant minority of black residents (10.9%) and 'other' (7%). Holly Street is more polarized, between white British residents (58.5%) and black residents (30.5%), with Asian and 'other' together totaling 10.1%. Both the poverty and the greater ethnic polarization in Holly Street might, according to Anne Power, contribute to the higher incidence of gang-related violence. The greater ethnic diversity in Bromley-by-Bow might equally have improved its chances of social change, particularly as ethnic groups begin to be successfully integrated into the community. The large Asian contingent might itself be an advantage if, as Jane Jacobs says, it has a greater tendency to stay put and to maintain its own social networks. The cultural diversity is in fact quite evident when you walk the streets of Bromley-by-Bow, or visit the BBBC. Andrew Mawson believes in the value of the arts to create a sense of place and belonging. The Centre houses a number of artists studios and local residents run well-attended classes on ethnic cookery and crafts.

*Social capital* Anne Power defines 'community' as an informal, intimate sense of belonging, but as Charles Champion says, it takes time to build the necessary networks of support and trust. Social capital has to be created before it can help to sustain a community, yet without it the investment of resources is pointless. In Holly Street the efforts to place control in the hands of residents was not wasted and might yet prove an important weapon in rebuilding a sense of community, but it has been undermined by circumstances beyond the community's ability to control. All communities are vulnerable to such events and the ability to withstand them is bolstered by mutual support and by effective relationships. In Bromley-by-Bow in the 80s and 90s, no such support networks existed, but with the creation of many formal and informal organisations and the reinforcing of existing institutions, it has begun to build them. It is early days, but as Jane Jacobs observed in American Cities, the connections and relationships they engender should create a protective net, making the community better able to deal with its problems.



Where local institutions already exist in a community, regeneration will destroy them. Holly Street has experienced complete redevelopment twice in 35 years, so it has few community resources to call on. Bromley-by-Bow, has only experienced partial regeneration and that was just after the Second World War. Several of the witnesses support the idea of phased, small-scale development, so as to build on rather than destroy any social capital or community spirit that already exists. Such small-scale regeneration has happened by default in Bromley-by-Bow and it would perhaps have helped prevent the problems experienced by Holly Street.

*Health inequality*

Just as Andrew Mawson believes in the transformative effect of social enterprise – better to get up and do something than sit around and talk about it – he also believes that ill-health and apathy are strongly connected. His intention in creating ‘the first integrated health centre in Britain’, was to address the causes and effects of poor health under one roof. *Life is an integrated process – it stands to reason that in order to assess the health of a person in Bromley-by-Bow or any other inner-city area, it would be necessary to deal with every aspect of that person’s life, to take a holistic view of the individual in his or her particular environment, living in his or her particular community*<sup>10</sup>. Depression has been a severe problem in Bromley-by-Bow and a radical step was needed: *Our doctors... would be able to prescribe a hundred different activities each week, alongside the usual medical model of treatment. These would include art courses, access to community care, an allotment and countless other enterprising possibilities*<sup>11</sup>. The BBBC now also gives patients access to education and training through its own community college, which has 750 local students.

Michael Marmot has shown that health is an indelible marker of a successful community, and that having a sense of purpose and control has a dramatic effect on both health and longevity. It is therefore useful to be able to compare the health and life expectancy of the populations of Holly Street and Bromley-by-Bow. (In fig 4. below, a rate of 100 denotes the Standard Mortality Rate for men and women in the UK; rates above or below this line represent a deviation from the norm – above 100 represents higher mortality than expected, below 100 is lower than expected.) Mortality rates for all causes for 2007 are fairly comparable. For men the figure is 117.8 in Holly Street (Queensbridge) and 122.8 in Bromley-by-Bow; for women it is 88.9 for Holly Street and 84.6 for Bromley-by-Bow. Women in both communities have fairly good health. However it is much more telling to compare the same community four years apart, in 2003 and 2007:

*Fig 4: Mortality rate:*

|                             | <i>males</i> |             | <i>females</i> |             |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
|                             | <i>2003</i>  | <i>2007</i> | <i>2003</i>    | <i>2007</i> |
| Queensbridge (Holly Street) | 117.8        | 117.0       | 107.1          | 88.9        |
| Bromley-by-Bow              | 137.4        | 122.8       | 129.8          | 84.6        |



In a period of four years, the health of men in Holly Street has remained unchanged, whereas in Bromley-by-Bow it has improved by 15 points. In Holly Street women's health has improved by about 18 points, while in Bromley-by-Bow the improvement is 45 points – a dramatic change. Life expectancy figures are equally revealing:

*Fig 5: Life expectancy:*

|                             | <i>males</i> |             | <i>females</i> |             |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
|                             | <i>2003</i>  | <i>2007</i> | <i>2003</i>    | <i>2007</i> |
| Queensbridge (Holly Street) | 74.3         | 74.9        | 80.4           | 82.1        |
| Bromley-by-Bow              | 72.5         | 74.1        | 79.3           | 83.6        |
| <i>National</i>             |              | <i>77.4</i> |                | <i>81.6</i> |

In four years life expectancy in Holly Street has increased by 6 months for men and 21 months for women, while in Bromley-by-Bow it has increased by 18 months for men and 51 months for women. This increase means women in Bromley-by-Bow now have a life expectancy comparable to women in Hampstead Village.

Health and life expectancy for men in Holly Street since its redevelopment has been running against the national trend for significant improvement, while women's health is more or less in line with national trends. Although in absolute terms men and women's health in Bromley-by-Bow has in the past been worse than in Holly Street, the improvement in health, particularly for women, is way in excess of national trends and much better than predicted. It is tempting to conclude that, as Michael Marmot's research suggests, the improved health and life expectancy in Bromley-by-Bow reflect the improved state of the community and people's growing sense of inclusion and self-determination. Similarly the relative lack of improvement in health in Holly Street possibly reflects the community's continuing social problems and people's inability to deal with them.

*Wellbeing* People's sense of wellbeing is a measure of their resilience combined with favourable external conditions (New Economics Foundation). This suggests that a belief that life is getting better and feelings of satisfaction and happiness are inextricably linked to people's environment and their ability to engage with it and control it. As several of the witnesses have explained, lack of control and insecurity are major features of the social exclusion experienced in poor communities and crime levels are a good indicator of this. Feelings of wellbeing are compromised when people feel threatened or unsafe. Both communities experience crime well above the national average, although in line with inner-London boroughs with similar levels of deprivation. In 2006 Bromley-by-Bow had higher levels of burglary (theft from breaking and entering) than Holly Street, but lower levels of robbery (theft from another person); however Holly Street had 25% more violent crime than Bromley-by-Bow and four times as much drug-related crime.



Holly Street 2006. Guardian Online



*It would be naive to believe that investing in youth facilities will solve all Holly Street's or Hackney's problems. But it would be a start. While Hackney's politicians rub their hands at the prospect of the Olympics and other high-profile developments, they ignore the very people they say 'regeneration' is supposed to help. Meanwhile, innocent people die and potentially good kids get sucked further and further into trouble.*

Carl Taylor<sup>12</sup>

Fig 6: Crime 2006 (per 1000 people)

|               | Holly Street | Bromley-by-Bow |
|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| Burglary      | 14.83        | 19.3           |
| Violent crime | 38.5         | 29.9           |
| Drug offences | 23.0         | 6.0            |

Source: Metropolitan Police Crime Statistics

It is inevitable that the presence of crime and anti-social behaviour in a community dents confidence and inhibits social interaction. The design of the new Holly Street Estate carefully incorporated attractive open spaces, including a well-overlooked playground within a garden square and a large 'wilderness' adventure playground. But on a summer afternoon, 18 months after the murder of Nyembo-Ya-Muteba in Evergreen Square, these areas are deserted. The youth workers said that with so little to do locally the kids go elsewhere, but if they do hang out other people tend to steer clear of them, or stay indoors. *Most of the time they're not even up to anything, but they behave as though they own the place.* The threatening environment is more imagined than real, yet it has a direct impact on how residents perceive the place. Elizabeth Burton found that the built environment influences people's 'satisfaction with the neighbourhood', but it seems it is not the built environment itself, but the image people have of it that's significant to their sense of wellbeing. This further suggests that changing the environment cannot in itself resolve problems of disaffection or change negative perceptions of a place.

In Bromley-by-Bow on the same afternoon, people were criss-crossing the small new park between Kingsley Hall and the Bromley-by-Bow Centre; a couple of women were chatting on a bench watching a third weed a vegetable patch. It's an improbable, but welcoming scene. The Centre has an open door policy during working hours and in four years they claim there have been no thefts.



*Bromley-by-Bow's empty precinct 2009*

## *Economic factors*

### *Diversity and density*

Busy high streets are important to community survival, say Jane Jacobs and Anne Power. The shopping precinct in Bromley-by-Bow is drab, evidently poor and largely inactive. Just a handful of people are going about their business – shopping tends to be done through the underpass in the Tesco megastore. There is in fact little evidence of any work going on here. Yet two streets away the Bromley-by-Bow Centre is a hive of activity. It is evident that this is the place generating energy within the community; it draws people in from all around and as it does so it literally expands. Initially there was just the church, and when activities spilled over they designed a purpose-built centre, which then bought the surrounding land to create a park, and then placed a social enterprise centre in the park. The many business start-ups incubated by the BBBC have at least in part been self-funded; the businesses generate training, local jobs and income, which in turn funds community services and projects. The benefits to the local economy are tangible: since 2000 there has been a 22 percent increase in the employment of disadvantaged groups and a 49 percent increase in self-employment. A significantly higher proportion of adults are economically active than in Holly Street. But there is nevertheless a sense of fragility – if it were not for the Centre would this growing community edifice come tumbling down?

The Holly Street estate is by-passed by Queensbridge Road and Kingsland Road and there is no reason for non-residents to enter it, despite the traditional street layout – the tidy brick terraces give it an air of graceful detachment. It has a nursery, but no school or shops and most activity seems to centre on the GP surgery. Push open the Community Centre door and a receptionist asks you politely what you want. There are no other business premises and little potential for the ‘close-grained’ diversity that might bring businesses or jobs into the community. The decaying fabric of Bromley-by-Bow more obviously lends itself to adaptability and the creative use of leftover space. Out of the original church building, for instance, has been fashioned a flexible space for worship by all faiths, leaving room for the nursery round the perimeter (with all the joinery made in local workshops). The light industrial units along the Limehouse Cut, and vacant spaces between them, offer further opportunities.

With the need for the regeneration in Bromley-by-Bow now acknowledged, (including plans for 3,800 new homes by 2016 as part of the Olympics legacy) the balance of redevelopment and renovation is being debated. The density of Bromley-by-Bow is already greater than Holly Street, but to continue to pull down the 50s tenements, or 60s slab and point blocks, would displace a significant proportion of the local population and risk uprooting the new shoots of a potentially successful community. Andrew Mawson is fearful of the alternative: *If you visit some of the flats that are currently being built by housing associations in some of our poorest neighbourhoods, you can see the next phase of poverty housing being built, at great expense, right before your eyes*<sup>13</sup>. He is very critical of CABI for its failure to monitor the quality of design. As Anne Power’s cohort of mothers said, *cheaply-built ‘affordable homes’ have poverty written all over them.*





*Kingsley Hall. Gandhi Foundation*

*Gandhi planting a tree at Kingsley Hall. Gandhi Foundation*



### *Physical factors*

*Familiarity* When the bomb-damaged Victorian villas of Queensbridge were pulled down in the name of social reform and replaced with what was to become one of the worst slums in London, Holly Street was robbed of its identity. As Peter Guillery suggests, a sense of place and a sense of belonging are inseparable and mutually dependent. Even the notorious snake-blocks eventually became local landmarks and when they too were pulled down, destroying the community for the second time, the remaining tower block became the sole survivor. Fought for by the community elders who still inhabit it, its familiar face looks down protectively on the new community. A symbol of defiance, of the stubborn determination of local people, it can be seen for miles around. Familiar buildings and spaces engender a sense of identity and a collective recognition that, Elizabeth Burton and Jane Jacobs insist, should not lightly be destroyed.

For Holly Street it is perhaps too late, but Bromley-by-Bow contains buildings, institutions and fragments that are either of significance to people now, or reveal a rich past, and they should be enshrined and enhanced in any future development to protect its sense of identity. These distinctive elements are community assets – components in the mental map people have of their home environment and it is the community that can best identify them. A collaborative historical survey would reveal pubs in continuous use since the 1850s (six of which have closed in the last fifteen years), rare glimpses of the Limehouse Cut (Bromley's historical water frontage was obliterated by the Blackwall Tunnel Northern Approach), the hidden allotments behind the Devon's Café, remnants of St Leonard's Priory churchyard (all that remains of the Norman nunnery), views of the Great Eastern Railway Bridge and its pedestrian arches, the distinctive ornate lampposts in St Leonard's St (the only reminder that this was once Bromley's high street), and the open space in front of the Rose and Crown (once the bowling green and later a meeting point for suffragettes).

There's a useful precedent: When Doris and Muriel Lester, well-known Christian Socialists, travelled through the 'squalid' East End by train in the 1910s, they decided to do something about it. They took over a disused chapel in Powis Street and founded Kingsley Hall, a centre for 'educational, social and recreational purposes'. By the 1930s, in a new building designed by Charles Voysey, Kingsley Hall had become a state-of-the-art community centre intended to raise the aspirations of local people. Mahatma Gandhi stayed here on his visits to London as did the Jarrow marchers in 1935. Derelict until the 1990s, a symbol of the neglect and failed aspirations of the area, it has been revived as a community centre and the Gandhi Foundation, and is an important landmark of ethnic diversity and cultural identity.





*Behind the church were two acres of wasteland, one of the original 'green lungs' of East London. Billy, a construction worker, is also an epileptic and depressive so he could no longer get work. He wanted to plant a meadow. Fine, I said, if you look after it. Billy rebuilt the park and in so doing rebuilt his life. The responsibility gave Billy respect and self-esteem, the park gave the community a beautiful and well-used public space.*

Andrew Mawson



*Billy's Park behind the Bromley-by-Bow Centre*

Andrew Mawson believes that environments have a *profound affect on how we are as human beings and how we relate to each other*. As he began to create the new facilities for the Bromley-by-Bow Centre, outsiders anticipated low-cost buildings adequate to the needs of a poor community, but he was determined to produce buildings of exceptional quality. *As I began to deliver this I realized that people took it as a sign of respect for themselves and their children – they felt they were being taken seriously. When we are careful about the way we create a physical environment, when we pay attention to every detail of it, people start to think about themselves and each other differently... In sharp contrast to the cheap, degenerate environment of the surrounding area that only reinforces the endemic sense of failure... the physical environment of the Centre has been designed to reflect the high value placed on the people who use it<sup>14</sup>.*

Buildings can affect our state of mind, from hopelessness and depression to optimism and happiness – not through their physical presence and form (although this has its own effects), but through intricate social and psychological connections and disconnections. Elizabeth Burton discovered from alzheimers sufferers that familiarity and the features that make up our individual 'spatial maps' are as representative of a place as the physical arrangement of streets and spaces. When buildings 'inspire', 'impose', or even 'threaten', they are triggering these associations and references, they are not just imparting visual experiences.

The making of a happy community is not directly dependent on, and does not result from the built environment, because it is subject to a different and quite independent set of social and psychological references and influences. It is as if community and environment exist on parallel planes, between which points of contact trigger various causes and effects. New environments are immediately at a disadvantage because pre-existing points of contact might have been destroyed and new ones not yet created.

This might explain why the well-planned redevelopment of estates (or schools for that matter) cannot influence social success on its own. Redevelopment is not restorative or transformative of community. A community's wellbeing and stability must be addressed before the built environment and carefully sustained through any process of change. As Charles Campion has found, there needs to be a solid social basis to build on, the impetus must come from within and people need to be fully engaged all the way through the process. Once the new community is in place, social cohesion must be encouraged and supported until it becomes self-sustaining. Otherwise, as in Holly Street, the foundations of a new community will not be able to withstand any significant knocks.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> Ken Gilmore, Holly Street Residents Committee
- <sup>2</sup> Joan Lefevre, longterm Holly Street resident
- <sup>3</sup> Mawson, A. *The Social Entrepreneur*. p. 69.
- <sup>4</sup> Diane Abbott MP. Hansard: Jan 2007 : Column 989
- <sup>5</sup> Steve Curtis, Cityzen Youth Project
- <sup>6</sup> Rt Hon. Hazel Blears MP. *Speech to the English Partnerships Open Meeting 2008*
- <sup>7</sup> Peter Sutton, Editor, *Hackney Independent*. 2006
- <sup>8</sup> Jacobs, J. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. p. 57
- <sup>9</sup> Steve Curtis, Project Director, Cityzen Youth Project
- <sup>10</sup> Mawson, A. p.110
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 89
- <sup>12</sup> Carl Taylor, *Hackney Independent*. 2007
- <sup>13</sup> Mawson, A. p.83
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112



## *Conclusion*

It would be difficult, from this investigation, to make definitive statements about how to create happy communities, or to be prescriptive about the role architects play in the process. It has however been possible to make some significant points about the nature of communities and the factors that influence them, for good and bad, and to answer, if only in part, my initial question about the relevance of the built environment to the social sustainability of communities. My intention was to compare the success of two deprived inner-city communities, by highlighting their similarities and differences. This has achieved its aim and has proved revealing. Although it is simplistic to make pronouncements based on a sample of two, a comparison between similar sorts of community, in similar areas, in the same city, has also provided a model for a wider application, using a broader range of examples. It would be instructive to make further comparisons: between a deprived community and one that is better off, for instance; or between an urban and a rural community. It is important to be able to factor in both social and cultural differences.

There is nevertheless sufficient evidence to identify some essential components of successful communities and to suggest a series of steps to improve our chances of creating them.

A community is a complex social construct that evolves over time and is vulnerable to internal and external pressures. It is a separate entity from the built environment; and the factors that determine whether a community will be sustainable are not wholly dependent upon the built environment. Social sustainability is contingent upon the symbiotic relationships between various separate elements. This means that the act of development or redevelopment cannot on its own determine whether a community will succeed or fail. The community should take priority; its social framework must be considered alongside its physical environment – the one cannot be resolved without the other. Similarly, with an existing community, the social issues that already affect it, as well as its future social needs, should be addressed. Otherwise there is a serious risk that investment in redevelopment will be wasted and the results socially damaging.

Politicians, developers and architects have an unreasonably optimistic view of the role of architecture, because there is no evidence to suggest that the built environment on its own can have a transformative effect on a community:

– for a successful community to continue to thrive after redevelopment, its members must be immersed in the process and retain a degree of control and autonomy. It can, however, easily be destroyed by redevelopment – through lack of involvement and control; through the displacement of people; through the destruction of familiar institutions and loss of the sense of place

– a failing community will simply continue to have all the problems it had before unless or until they are successfully addressed





The built environment and the way it is designed has a significant impact on communities to the extent that it can damage and enhance them. In already deprived communities, both stigma and poor physical conditions can contribute to a downward spiral, through alienation, isolation and depression. A badly designed new environment can restrict a community's ability to thrive, by hindering movement and social connections, or by failing to provide a sense of personal safety or identity. A well-designed environment can, conversely, encourage good communication and a sense of place, and even inspire – although this is less to do with aesthetics than the arrangement and quality of spaces. Changes and additions to an existing environment can equally enhance legibility and cohesion and draw out qualities and features that are already valued.

In *The Cost of Bad Design* CABE says *the characteristics of 'well-designed places' are well understood and can be known and applied by good designers*. They are listed as: continuity and enclosure, quality of the public realm, character, ease of movement, legibility, adaptability, diversity and inclusiveness. These are the generalities of architecture – very broad and inevitably not case-specific. It is also telling that the list barely acknowledges the social role of design. It is this failure to take social issues into account that creates false expectations and undermines the creation of sustainable communities. The design of places is a social science and there are social factors at play over which designers have little control. So where does this leave architects? Their role is crucial, but they are not sole operators. They must recognize themselves (and be recognised by others) as being an integral part of a social continuum, not heroic individuals acting from a position of enlightened detachment. Projects should be viewed holistically so that social context, historical context, economics and environment can together inform design; architects, Charles Campion suggests, can provide vision by looking beyond the physical boundaries and extending the realm of the possible. But this needs to be grounded in the material and social facts.

Because of the chronic shortage of homes, the majority of new communities will continue to house the least well off on large estates. If the built environment is to improve the quality of people's lives, there needs to be a better understanding of what makes a happy community. It is not sufficient for architects to be intuitive – research needs to produce evidence of what makes communities thrive, to close the gap between the designer and the user. It is essential to avoid repeating mistakes and to learn from the things that have worked, through developing mechanisms for the measurement of success. Beyond defining terms, there are some specific factors that appear to increase the chances of creating a sustainable community:

- continuity and stability are essential, so redevelopment should be phased, to avoid displacing the existing community
- a failing community will not recover, with or without redevelopment, unless the impetus comes from within, engages a significant proportion of the community and has continuing support and resources



- development should be genuinely collaborative and involve residents in the earliest stages of conception and design, to allow the maximum degree of choice and autonomy
- small-scale, infill social housing developments in already sustainable communities have the greatest chance of success
- mixed communities, in terms of wealth, ethnicity and land-use, are more likely to thrive than those that are not. It is therefore essential to address the mix in anticipation; and to understand the social make-up of an existing community, through a social survey
- communities are more stable if they can accommodate changes in people's circumstances, so buildings and spaces should be adaptable. Flexibility also encourages a range of uses by different age and social groups
- local landmarks and institutions create a powerful sense of place and identity and should be capitalised upon and not destroyed. An historical survey can identify the places of value to local people

Clearly some of these points are already acknowledged by politicians, developers and designers, but they are not applied collectively or consistently. As CABE points out, new development is often dominated by short-term interests, or good intentions compromised for reasons of economic or political expediency.

In the drive to produce 3 million new homes by 2020, the Government and local authorities (backed by the Sustainable Communities Act) expect 'built environment occupations' to take a lead in creating cohesive communities in which people want to live and work. It is clear that this is a role that architects on their own do not have the tools to deliver. It is worrying that this false expectation is backed by such vast sums of money, and even more concerning that people are being misled about the extent to which the built environment can transform failing communities, or form the basis of new socially sustainable ones. Design can play an important part, but the process must become more socially responsive and collaborative. Professional training needs to acknowledge the social role of architecture and universities need to adopt a more socially aware approach, so that future architects and planners can understand how places work, how people relate to their environments and can be involved in the process of shaping them.

With the wellbeing of 6.6 million people (or a tenth of the population) at stake, to create sustainable environments for sustainable communities is extremely important. The architect is fundamental to the process, but does not stand alone. It is essential for the profession to take a lead in acknowledging the collaborative nature of architectural endeavour and, moreover, to ensure that the architect and the profession as a whole is not stigmatised for failures over which they actually have little or no control.



## *Appendix*

### *1. Conversations with witnesses and others*

Michael Marmot, November 2008, at the LSE

Elizabeth Burton, July 2008, at Oxford Brookes University

Anne Power, September 2008, attended seminar at The Local Wellbeing Conference, Westminster

Peter Guillery, September 2008 at English Heritage

Charles Campion, October 2008 at John Thompson Associates

John Bancroft. June 2008, at his home in Surrey

Alan Colquhoun, September 2008, over dinner in London

The conversations with John Bancroft and Alan Colquhoun about working with the LCC in the '50s were very enlightening. Both men are now in their 80s, but I found their recollections of the most significant period in 20th century social housing extraordinary – for their depth and for their frankness. It is clear that both men felt entirely committed to the social purpose and value of their work; and both articulated the overwhelming significance of Le Corbusier and the excitement he engendered about the future of architecture.

### *2. L.E. White's report for the National Council of Social Service, 1950*

I would like to draw attention to L.E.White's prophetic 1950 report: *Community or Chaos?*, a publication buried in the LSE's British Library of Political and Economic Science. It is too long to include in the appendix, but below I have reproduced a significant extract. This piece of work is clear evidence that following the Second World War the creators of the welfare state were fully aware of the social problems of poor communities concentrated in inner-city and suburban estates. His conclusions are every bit as valid now as they were at the time. His concern was how to make housing estates 'living communities'





### *The Lack of Social Amenities*

The failure to make provision for the social needs of the people was common to almost every inter-war housing estate. Although the houses were sound and well planned no thought was given to the basic problem of how this tidy collection of individual homes could grow and develop into a living community of neighbours. In fact it might almost be said that the estates were planned so as to make the development of community as difficult as possible, for the whole apparatus of community life which is taken for granted in old established neighbourhoods was missing.

The following comparison between social provision in a small established town of only 2,500 people and a housing estate of twice that population, illustrates vividly this fundamental need of the estates. The comparison was made in 1939, five years after the building of the estate had started.

|                                    | <i>Small<br/>Town</i> | <i>Housing<br/>Estate</i> |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Schools: Nursery and Infant .. ..  | 1                     | 1                         |
| Primary .. ..                      | 3                     | 1                         |
| Secondary .. ..                    | 1                     | 0                         |
| Churches and Chapels .. ..         | 11                    | 0                         |
| Public Halls .. ..                 | 1 (500)               | 0                         |
| Public Houses .. ..                | 4                     | 0                         |
| Hotels .. ..                       | 7                     | 0                         |
| Post Office .. ..                  | 1                     | 0                         |
| Cinemas .. ..                      | 1                     | 0                         |
| Libraries .. ..                    | 1                     | 0                         |
| Parks and Recreation Grounds .. .. | 3                     | 1                         |
| Youth Organisations .. ..          | 7*                    | 5*                        |
| Adult Organisations .. ..          | 15*                   | 8*                        |

break...

### *The Segregation of Classes*

Of all the many problems which arose from the building of the new estates, perhaps the most serious was the extent to which they accelerated the process of social segregation which had been going on since the Industrial Revolution. Until 1919 the process had been slow, and arose from the spontaneous actions of private individuals. Now, however, it was to be developed on an enormous scale by official government action. Thomas Sharp describes this dramatically in *Town Planning*. "To-day there is a large scale physical segregation of the various social classes of the community that is almost as effective in stopping intercourse as the electric-charged barbed-wire barriers of a concentration camp. And that in fact is what many of our towns and suburbs largely are to-day—social concentration camps: places in which one social class is concentrated to the exclusion of all others."

"... Around the great cities we have enormous one-class communities (if they can be called communities) the like of which the world has never seen before; Becontree . . . where no less than 120,000 working-class people live in one enormous concentration: . . . Norris Green one of many Liverpool Corporation Estates housing 50,000 working-class inhabitants. . . ."<sup>1</sup>



This segregation has had most unfortunate effects on the new estates. The building of a municipal estate always caused bitter resentment in suburban areas where middle-class people with their own houses feared that deterioration of the district would affect the value of their houses. They also disliked the standards of behaviour of the newcomers. The resentment was mutual and a rigid class barrier was erected. Efforts were sometimes made to keep the new residents and their children out of local organisations. In some cases, notably at Watling,<sup>1</sup> outside hostility served to draw the new tenants together and inspired the first beginnings of the community spirit.

Since the tenants on one-class estates were all drawn from the same income group, with similar grades of occupation, and roughly the same type of background, it was inevitable that the life of the community would be less rich and varied than for instance in a town where widely different types meet. No provision was made for teachers, doctors and other professional people to live on these estates, to become members of the community and play a part in building up the social life of the neighbourhood. In such circumstances, and against every sort of discouragement and difficulty it was remarkable how much real talent and leadership emerged from the humblest and most ordinary people. The only people with any leisure were the unemployed and there were no retired people to give of their time and their money to build up local organisations, even if there had been any buildings in which to house them. But there is no doubt that lack of leadership was a marked characteristic of the "one-class" estates and was largely responsible for the difficulties experienced in building up community life and activity. This was of course particularly true on estates which were developed as slum clearance schemes, where not only was leadership obviously hard to find, but where so many of the problems already discussed were present in an acute and intensified form.

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#### *Civic Boundaries*

It is usual to find in many small towns and other long established communities an intense local patriotism. The bigger the city the more diluted becomes this sense of "belonging" until it becomes impossible to feel any real affection for a vast agglomeration of suburban houses with neither form nor shape nor visible beginning nor ending, devoid of history or tradition and with no strong local associations to give it life and character. The difficulty about the new housing estate is that it does not belong anywhere. It has no independent, corporate existence of its own, yet it is not an organic part of the parent city. In this sense it might appear to the cynic to be the true habitat for a rootless generation, which has cast off its old traditions and has acquired no new values capable of building a society which will endure. It is not an area of local government, and possesses no organs of government in the accepted sense of the term. It is hardly surprising therefore that apathy towards local government is another distinguishing feature of the housing estate.

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The nature of the problem varied according to the size of the estate, for there were two main types. A few were large enough to be considered as geographical and social units on their own, but the majority were comparatively small, consisting of perhaps 500 families or less, and the problem there was to integrate them into the social life of the rest of the neighbourhood. This was never easy, for the very physical appearance of these tall new blocks tended to isolate them from the surrounding property, and there was a tendency for their inhabitants to share this isolation. These new tenants were usually strangers to one another. There was nowhere on the estate for them to meet socially, although there were facilities in the neighbourhood for commercial entertainment.

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The answer which finally emerged—the "neighbourhood-unit"—was the product of many minds.<sup>1</sup> It evolved from an intensive study of the faults and deficiencies of the inter-war estates, and it was therefore the very antithesis of all that those estates had been. It was also a conscious endeavour to recover much that was worthwhile in the old village tradition and translate it into modern urban terms. It could be applied equally as a principle of planning to the reconstruction of "blitzed" or "blighted" central areas, or to the planning of new estates or satellite towns. Like the old village, its modern urban counterpart would be limited in size by recognisable physical boundaries, arterial roads or railways now replacing hill and stream as dividing boundaries. In the old areas the problem would be to re-discover the ancient communities—villages long ago swallowed up by the engulfing town—to define their boundaries and emphasise the individuality and tradition which once they had possessed.





The population, too, would be limited perhaps to 5-10,000, so that people would not be lost in the mass. In contrast with the one-class estates there would be a wise mingling of people to produce a socially balanced community with a diversity of occupations and income levels. A population so mixed would require a variety of accommodation ranging from bachelor flats to houses with four or more bedrooms, and there would be special provision also for old people. Houses, flats and sweeping terraces would intermingle to give a pleasing variety of architectural types. Profiting by the mistakes of the inter-war estates, the planners realised that each estate would need within its own boundaries all the essential neighbourhood services—schools, churches, branch library, clinics, playing fields and open space, and places of refreshment and entertainment. All these amenities would be close at hand since no part of the neighbourhood would be more than ten minutes walk from another. Suitable light industry might be located in a small industrial area screened from the residential area by a green strip or parkway.

At a focal point of the neighbourhood would be the Community Centre, designed and constructed so that it could be largely managed and run by a community association representative of the people and organisations of the neighbourhood. Providing accommodation for neighbourhood organisations of all types and offering individual membership to all regardless of race, class, creed or party, such a Centre would become an outward and visible symbol of the spirit of community.

#### *Post-War Block Dwelling Estates*

Because of the lack of housing sites there has been a great increase in the number of these estates, and with the densities envisaged for the central areas in the County of London Plan, it is obvious that many more must be built. It is disturbing therefore to record that their social and community problems remain as difficult and intractable as ever. Although the tenants are drawn from more varied social classes, than on similar estates before the war, leadership for community development is less easily found than on the cottage estates. This is particularly true of the estates in the old slum areas. Although the L.C.C. in co-operation with the London Council of Social Service, are giving a great deal of attention to the problem, no really adequate solution has yet emerged although it can be claimed that wherever it has been possible to provide premises, there are hopeful signs for the future. On the smaller estates, great efforts are being made to encourage tenants' clubs in the hope that these will be integrated later into a community association for the wider neighbourhood. Even where premises are available, leadership is often a critical problem. There will be other difficulties to face in the future. We have already noted the tendency of block-dwellings to stand out from the rest of the neighbourhood. If a successful tenants' club is formed, patronised exclusively by the residents in the flats, this division tends to be emphasised. Sometimes a solution can be found in siting the club carefully so that it will attract equally the new and the old residents. Ideally there should be no restrictive conditions of membership which would exclude the residents from the surrounding neighbourhood. For the same reason it may be well to avoid the term "Tenants' Club" and use a title such as "Community Club" instead.



rewarded. Groups and community associations which have used enterprise and determination (sometimes, in their dealing with authorities!) are in the main those which now enjoy some premises of their own, however inadequate. Moreover certain important concessions are made to voluntary organisations such as community associations which provide voluntary labour in connection with their building schemes. There is ample evidence to show that not merely is this an ideal way to foster the community spirit, but when the buildings do finally materialise as the result of such self-help, the people feel a sense of pride and ownership which they would not feel towards a more elaborate building which had been given to them without effort on their part.

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Community is a living and vital reality, but because it is of the spirit, free and intangible, it cannot be planned, any more than freedom can be planned. But, just as in a democracy planning can, and should be designed to ensure the maximum freedom of the individual, so we can plan and order our physical and material environment in such manner as to encourage and favour the growth of community, or to retard it. Whilst appreciating fully the gravity of the material and economic crisis through which we are passing, we may well remind ourselves that our deepest crisis is a spiritual one. "Man does not live by bread alone." Can we afford to postpone once more the opportunity to begin rebuilding the fabric of our urban civilisation on surer and more lasting foundations? The choice is ours to make.

### CAN COMMUNITIES BE PLANNED?

We have traced the emergence of the neighbourhood-unit and the development of the idea of the planned community. It is important to remember that this idea which has caused such a profound change in all our thinking about housing and town planning, was accepted practically without challenge—presumably since all the evidence seemed to lead in the same direction. It is being woven inextricably into the pattern of all our future urban development in the reconstruction plans of so many of our cities, in the lay-out of housing estates and in the design of the New Towns. It is difficult therefore to realise that the neighbourhood unit remains an untried theory. Because of the difficulties and delays in post-war housing, no complete neighbourhood-unit has yet been built, so that we have no practical experience on which to work.

The basic assumptions are that it is possible to plan for the good community, that community can be based once again on locality, and that our modern urban civilisation can best be rebuilt by recovering all that is worthwhile in the small "primary" group with its face to face contacts, as typified in the village tradition. Are these assumptions sound or have they been accepted too easily?

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