The Origins of the Double Stigma of Large Post-War Council Estates in the UK

1945 - 1978

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A Master's Thesis submitted to the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages Faculty of Humanities

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

11.12.2018
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11.12.2108
Abstract

Inhabitants of large post-war council estates are subjected to a double layer of stigma: one attached to the tenure of council housing, and one attached to the specific council estate on which they live. The present thesis investigates the origins of this double stigma. Contrary to many studies focusing on the period after Margaret Thatcher’s Housing Act 1980 to account for the increasing marginalization and stigmatization of council housing and council estates, the present thesis finds that the origins of the stigma of both were well established by the late 1970s, the implication being that the increase in marginalization and stigmatization after 1980 followed patterns that were established before that time. The origins of the stigmatization of the tenure of council housing is found in a set of interlinking processes occurring since the early 1950s which had the accumulated effect of residualizing the sector, meaning that the sector increasingly became dominated by households on low incomes. The stigma of large post-war council estates derives from a multitude of factors that impacted negatively on the image of council estates. Some of these factors were single events, like the Ronan Point disaster and the Pruitt-Igoe implosions, while others were long-term structural and societal factors, such as the increasing rejection of the Modernist project of urban renewal and the shift in emphasis towards the conservation of existing inner-city neighbourhoods. However, the decisive factor in entrenching the low position held by the large post-war council estates in the urban hierarchy is found to be the negligence of central and local government to respond adequately to early signs of social breakdown on estates. The convergence of the two stigmas is then to be found in the so-called “era of mass housing” between the late 1950s and early 1970s, when a massive expansion of the housing programme coincided with a narrowing of the scope and role of public housing provision. The widespread disaffection with the workings of slum clearance and the dismissal of the style and form of Modernist mass housing schemes translated into a general rejection of the whole council housing programme. The residualisation of the council housing sector as a whole was mirrored in the increased concentration of vulnerable households on large post-war council estates.
Acknowledgements

There are many people that have supported me through this project, but none so much as my dear sister Kristin. We both know that without her vital assistance at key moments and caring encouragement throughout the process this thesis would never have seen the light of day. I am truly grateful for her support.

The other person that has been absolutely vital in bringing this project to its completion is my eminently skilful supervisor, Matthew Williamson. His diligent, competent and persistent feedback has been the decisive factor in bringing this project from a set of very loose ideas into a finished thesis.
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Introduction

Inhabitants of large post-war council estates in the UK today are subjected to a double layer of stigma: one attached to the nature of their tenancy and one attached to the type of council estate on which they reside. Since the 1970s, the most stigmatized neighbourhoods in Britain have increasingly corresponded with tenure, so that the most stigmatized neighbourhoods of British cities are often large post-war council estates (Hastings & Dean, Challenging Images: Tackling Stigma Through Estate Regeneration, 2003). Moreover, council housing itself has attained a problematic image, corresponding with its gradual movement during the post-war period from a universal welfare service catering to a broad cross-section of society into the residual “tenure of last resort” it has become today (Power, 1998). Consequently, the inhabitants of large post-war council estates are stigmatized for being council housing tenants as well as being council estate dwellers. The aim of the present thesis is to investigate the origins of this double stigma. While a large body of scholarship accounts for the marginalization and stigmatization of council housing by pointing to the housing reforms enacted during Margaret Thatcher’s first period as Prime Minister, notably the Right to Buy-scheme introduced in the Housing Act 1980 (Forrest & Murie, 1983; 1988; Hodkinson, 2011; Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013; Farrall, 2015), the present thesis argues that stigma had become attached both to the tenure of council housing and to large post-war council estates before that time. The increasing stigmatization of both in the period after 1980 would then follow patterns that had already been well established by the late 1970s.

Uttering the word “council estate” in contemporary Britain is likely to invoke a specific set of images: bleak, repetitive high-rise towers and slab blocks of inhuman proportions, about as far away from the traditional English cottage dwelling as one might get. This image is based on a stereotypical conception of council estates that does not reflect the enormous variety of council estates from different periods that exist in Britain today. It is a particularly intriguing question why the most recent and most thoroughly planned estates in Britain are also the most stigmatized. They came about in a time of great expectations, signalling a belief that a more equitable future could be planned and designed using revolutionary new technologies. Ideas derived from the international Modernist movement linking social progress with rationally planned environments came to be adopted by British local authorities as a justification to
embark upon the most fervent period of municipal housing construction in the twentieth century. The resulting council estates have become part of British popular culture: from the futuristic Thamesmead estate forming an appropriately dystopian backdrop to Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* to the inner-city concrete jungles featured in innumerable grime and hip-hop music videos, the council estate is mobilised as a symbol of urban decay and alienation, criminality, poverty, race relations, gang culture and, ultimately, the failure of the welfare state.

An analysis of the stigma of large council estates is complicated by the fact that a stigma can be both the result of and a cause for decline. Stigma plays a distinct role in the furthering of an estate’s downward spiral of decay. Several studies have pointed to the fact that once a stigma has been attached to a certain area it is very hard to remove (Wassenberg 2013, p. 192; Atkinson and Kintrea 2000). Area-based regeneration programmes tend to avoid direct engagements with the question of how to improve an estate’s image, assuming that the reputation will improve automatically once the physical conditions have been enhanced (Hastings, 2004). However, the evidence shows that even substantial regeneration initiatives often fail to make lasting improvements to an estate’s reputation (Shaw & Robinson, 1998; Cambridge Policy Consultants, 1999) Even though the actual situation in the area improves, the stigma may persist for a very long time. This makes it even more important to understand how stigma arises and how it remains an enduring feature of an estate.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter one below introduces the main theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of stigma and relates these to questions of housing. A working definition of stigma is established before some important distinctions to the phenomenon are made. The concept of residualisation is accounted for and argued to be the main driving force behind the increased stigmatization of the tenure of council housing. Thereafter the two most influential theoretical frameworks made in the field of comparative housing studies are explained: Michael Harloe’s “mass” and “residual” models for social rented housing, and Jim Kemeny’s conceptualization of “unitary” and “dualist” rental housing systems. A combination of the two frameworks produces a “residual dualist” scenario for rented housing, which is argued to be the scenario in which the social rented sector is most prone to be stigmatized. Finally, the chapter introduces the concept of image as the most central analytical category for investigating how council estates become stigmatized, and distinguishes between an external image and an internal image. The
most stigmatized estates are found to be those in which a negative external image is confirmed by an equally negative internal image.

Chapter two is a historical narrative of the development of council housing from the end of the Second World War to the late 1970s. The aim here is to uncover the main factors leading to the stigmatization of council housing. The chapter argues that a residualisation of the council housing sector can be detected from the early 1950s onwards due to interlinking processes including the lowering of standards; the promotion of homeownership; renewed efforts of slum clearance; a political convergence on the residual role of council housing; and a narrowing of allocation policies. The cumulative effect was to stigmatize council housing to a degree from which it has never recovered.

Furthermore, a decisive factor in the stigmatization of council housing was the experiences made during the last major expansion of the council housing programme in the period between the late 1950s to the early 1970s, often referred to as the “era of mass housing”. This is the subject matter of chapter three. The chapter recounts how the technological impetus of industrialised system building techniques coupled with the ideological support of the Modernist movement in planning and architecture led to the proliferation of large council estates throughout Britain. Emergent problems with system building and increasing rejections of the Modernist project led to a stigmatized external image of council estates. However, the most significant factor for the stigma of large post-war council estates is found to be in the unresponsiveness of the expanded council housing sector in the face of emerging problems of crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour on many estates. Instead of mitigating such problems with the appropriate levels of management and the adequate provision of amenities, local authorities used race relations and homelessness legislation introduced in the 1970s to fill up vacancies on difficult-to-let estates. The result was to increase the polarisation of the most vulnerable households on the least desirable estates.

Chapter four is a case study of one particularly notorious post-war council estate, the Doddington and Rollo estate in Battersea, South London. The aim here is to show how the stigmatizing factors discussed in chapters two and three were manifested in one specific inner-city London estate. The case study introduces a distinction to the category of the external image that seems to have been overlooked in the literature on stigma and housing estates: external images can either be specific to the estate, or non-specific to the estate. In the case of the Doddington there were a large number of stigmatizing factors bearing on the
external image specific to that estate. Combined with a rapidly deteriorating internal image and a negative external image, both shared with a number of similar estates, the stigmatization of the Doddington would progress faster and further than other estates.

The conclusion draws on the findings in chapter one through four and finds that the two stigmas converged during the “era of mass housing”. During this period, a massive expansion of the housing programme coincided with a narrowing of the scope and role of public housing provision. The widespread disaffection with various aspects of the municipal housebuilding programme translated into a general rejection of the whole council housing programme.

Terminology
Council housing is the uniquely British term for social rented housing, reflecting the fact that in Britain the system for social rented housing has historically been administered by local authority councils. Even though the term is still used in common parlance to refer to social rented housing, it is strictly speaking a misnomer – transfers of large amounts of the stock to arms-length housing associations and the private sales of millions of dwellings through the Right to Buy policy during the last thirty years means that only a small proportion of the homes originally built by local authorities are still administered by the councils. The same applies to council estates – although many flats on a council estate may have been transferred to housing associations or sold privately, most people in Britain today refer to them as council estates. The correct terms in use today are “social housing” and “housing estates”. However, throughout the period in question, the vast majority of dwellings meant for social rented housing were still owned and managed by local authority councils. The present thesis therefore invariably uses the terms council housing and council estates.
1 Theories of Stigma and Housing

Introduction

This chapter introduces the theoretical frameworks and concepts used in the present thesis to explain the origins of the double stigma of post-war council estates. The first part of the chapter accounts for how the phenomenon of stigma was first conceptualised in the academic literature. A working definition of the phenomenon is established, distinctions relevant for the present purposes are made and some of the connections between stigma and housing are explored. Thereafter the concept of residualisation is discussed. A central argument to be made in the present thesis is that the problem of stigma is intimately linked to processes of residualisation. The following section introduces two of the most influential theoretical frameworks made in the field of comparative housing studies, which the following chapters will use when analysing the role of council housing and how this changed over time. The final section narrows in on the generation of stigma towards large post-war council estates by exploring the roles of image and reputation.

Stigma

Ervin Goffman’s essay *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities* (1963) initiated the first wave of academic scrutiny on the nature, sources and consequences of stigma. Goffman explicitly defines stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” to the degree that it reduces the subject “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discredited one” (p. 3). After Goffman’s initial conceptualization, the phenomenon of stigma was applied within a whole range of academic disciplines including medicine, sociology and psychology. Consequently, a variety of elaborate or alternative definitions of stigma beyond that which Goffman developed have emerged. An elaborate definition established by Jones et al (1984) aligns most closely to the purposes of the present thesis. This definition uses as a starting point Goffman’s observation that stigma can be seen as the relationship between an attribute and a stereotype. The attribute is conceptualised as a “mark” that links a person to one or a set of undesired characteristics, or stereotypes. By this elaboration of the concept of stigma, council estate tenants have two distinct marks that may give rise to any number of stereotypical beliefs: the nature of their tenancy, and the place they live. These are the two dimensions of the double stigma: the stigma attached to tenure of council housing, and the stigma attached to large post-war council estates.
By this it is clear that the inhabitants of large post-war council estates are subjected not to a stigma, but in fact a set of at least two stigmas. An important element for Goffman was how different types of stigmas have different levels of visibility, relating to “how well or how badly the stigma is adapted to provide means of communicating that the individual possesses it” (1963, p. 64). The distinction is important because one dimension of the double stigma, that which is attached to an individual’s tenancy, is not necessarily visible. Given the large variation within the council housing stock, not all council homes are explicitly identified as such. However, the bulk of the large post-war housing estates build between the late 1950s and the early 1970s are unmistakably council housing estates. This rings true today even though many flats on estates are no longer in local authority ownership – many flats have been sold into private ownership under the Right to Buy (RTB) policy, and still more have been transferred to not-for-profit housing associations. Nevertheless, the large post-war housing estates are still invariably referred to as council estates in common parlance today. Given that the RTB was introduced in 1980, and housing associations were negligible until the late 1970s, those that lived on large post-war council estates during the time period covered in the present thesis bore the indistinguishable mark of being council housing tenants. This brings forth another distinction made by Goffman between the discredited and the discreditable. The discreditable is able to manage the information about the stigmatized mark by having the option “[t]o display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not let on; to lie or not to lie: and in each case, to whom, how, when and where” (Goffman 1963, p. 57). The discredited, on the other hand, can “assume his [sic] differentness is known about already or is evident at the spot” (p. 14). Inhabitants of large post-war council estates, assuming that his or her place of residence is disclosed, will by this distinction fall into the category of the discredited and cannot escape the stigma attached to council housing.

The discussion now turns to the particular circumstances in which stigma has been known to arise and how these intercept with problems of housing. To capture the nature of stigma more precisely, Link and Phelan (2001) distinguish five interrelated components which converge to produce stigma. The first component consists of the labelling and distinguishing of human differences. For council housing tenants, this may entail a labelling of people based on their economic capacity to secure a descent home for themselves and their family. In short, council tenants today can be assumed to be poor simply because they live in council housing. As chapter two below recounts, this was not always the case – the specific role of the tenure of council housing has changed over time. In the second component, people are subjected to
negative stereotypes by the dominant cultural beliefs of their society. The very strong English preference for the single-family “cottage” home is one such dominant cultural belief. This belief may distinguish those that live in flats on council estates as ‘outsiders’. Another cultural belief in post-war Britain was that decent and affordable housing for a broad spectrum of society should be provided by the state, and that living in a home provided by the state was normal. Concurrent with the decreasing attractiveness of renting a home provided by the state was the rise of homeownership. The desirability of owning one’s own home is perhaps one of the most dominant cultural beliefs in Britain today, and a crucial factor in the stigmatization of council housing. The third component consists of categorizing people in distinct categories which serve to separate “us” from “them”, as in the distinction between “homeowner” and “council tenant”. Here the distinction between the discredited and the discreditable comes into play, as individuals carrying a stigmatized mark may wish to exercise some level of information control so as to avoid the disclosure of their “separateness”. In the fourth component, the person subjected to stigma experiences a loss of status and discrimination that directly affects his or her life chances in areas such as education, health, and social status. Studies have consistently showed that this is the case for many council estate tenants, and particularly tenants residing in large council estates that have a poor reputation. For example, in a study by Wood and Vamplew (1999), residents of a large council estate in Teesside responded that their place of residence limited their job prospects and their ability to obtain credit, and that it reduced the quality of services such as policing and education. Finally, stigmatization is entirely dependent on power. It is social, economic and political power that allows labelling processes to occur. As Link and Phelan put it, “it takes power to stigmatize” (2001, p. 375). One recent example is the then Prime Minister David Cameron’s deployment of the term “sink estate” in the run-up to the general election in 2016 (Cameron, 2016). More generally, evidence shows that most media publications of council housing are negative, and that even positive stories often refer to earlier negative stories in order to justify their newsworthiness (Dean & Hastings, 2000). It is the dominant cultural and societal groupings, such as politicians and journalists, who apply stigma to more vulnerable groups, such as council housing tenants.

Residualisation

A central argument to be developed in the ensuing chapters is that stigma in the context of housing is closely related to the concept of residualisation. It is generally agreed that a
process of residualisation has been in effect in the UK public housing sector for a long time. Malpass and Murie (1982) define residualisation in the public housing sector as “the process whereby public housing moves towards a position in which it provides only a ‘safety net’ for those who for reasons of poverty, age or infirmity cannot obtain suitable accommodation in the private sector”. Residualisation then occurs when the difference in the socioeconomic characteristics of those entering the public housing sector compared to those leaving results in a narrower social and economic base in the sector viewed as a whole. Stigmatisation increases as more socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are concentrated in council housing. The specific role that council housing assumes is therefore the most crucial aspect of residualisation. Central to the argument here is that the role of council housing (as with the other types of tenures) is not given – it is socially, economically and politically constructed. The aim of chapter two is to show how policy pressures between 1945 and 1978 had the outcome of changing the role of council housing from providing housing to a broad spectrum of the population into housing more exclusively those unable to provide housing through the private market.

Much research on residualisation of council housing in the UK has centred on the effects of the Right to Buy (RTB) policy initiated by the Conservative government in 1980, which obliged local authorities to offer sitting council house tenants the opportunity to buy their council home at a reduced price (Forrest & Murie, 1983; 1988; Farrall, 2015) Generally popular amongst tenants and politicians alike, the scheme has resulted in more than 2.5 million dwellings being transferred from public to private ownership since it was introduced (McKee, 2010). As early research by Forrest and Murie (1988) showed, the scheme has contributed substantially to the residualisation of council housing as those who purchased were systematically more affluent than those who remained. However, this well-researched aspect of residualisation in council housing falls outside the scope of the present thesis. The aim here is to show how the council housing sector became residualised in the period between the end of the Second World War and before the advent of the RTB, the implication being that the residualisation that occurred after 1980 exacerbated tendencies that were firmly established before that time.

The Stigma of Council Housing and Council Estates

The academic field of comparative housing studies has developed a set of conceptual frameworks intended to facilitate the comparison of the types of housing systems that have
emerged in different countries. Various approaches have been developed in this field, of which the two most influential frameworks have been advanced by Michael Harloe (1995) and Jim Kemeny (1995). Chapter two applies both of these frameworks to account for the rising level of stigmatization in the UK council housing sector during the time period in question.

Michael Harloe’s book *The People’s Home? Social rented housing in Europe and America* (1995) compares social rented housing in six countries stretching back to the late nineteenth century in order to provide empirical evidence for his theory about the development of social rented housing. From Harloe’s extensive review of the countries during different time periods emerges a distinction between two models of social housing that he argues to have been in existence in western societies roughly at the same time: the mass model and the residual model. In a mass model of social housing, the government initiates large volumes of new construction, but does not designate this housing stock specifically to low-income groups. Instead, this large body of construction is meant to provide housing for a large section of the population. Subsidies in the mass model are mainly generic, meaning that central government subsidies are meant to subsidize the construction of housing and not to subsidize individual households on the basis of any type of needs testing. The mass model is “abnormal” according to Harloe, emerging only when varying combinations of social, economic and political circumstances limit the scope for private provision and when this limitation is of strategic significance for certain aspects of the maintenance and development of the capitalist social and economic system (p. 7).

In all the countries under review in Harloe’s book, the mass model of social rented housing has occurred two times: one short period after the First World War, and a longer, more extensive period after the Second World War. Harloe then goes on to argue that the countries converged in a direction towards a residual model starting in the mid-1970s (p. 543). In the residual model of social rented housing, construction programmes are small-scale and focused specifically on the needs of the lowest income groups. The social housing sector in a residual model provides housing for politically, socially and economically marginalised groups, normally on a means-tested basis, and is therefore more likely to carry a stigma. Although Harloe identifies a convergence towards the residual model across all western industrialized countries, the development is an uneven one because “nationally specific differences continue
to affect the pace and the nature of residualisation” (p. 546). Furthermore, he contends that in Europe, the trend towards confining social housing to a residual role “developed first and furthest in Britain” (p. 212). One aim in chapter two is therefore to account for the specific circumstances which led the UK council housing sector to move from a mass towards a residual model during the post-war period.

While Harloe looks specifically at systems for social rented housing, Jim Kemeny’s book *From Public Housing to the Social Market: Rental Policy Strategies in Comparative Perspective* (1995) has a wider scope by comparing the entire rental housing sector, both public and private, across different western European countries. From this work emerges another twofold framework in which Kemeny distinguishes between a unitary and a dualist rental housing system. In a unitary system, typified by Sweden, The Netherlands and Germany, the market for rented housing is structured in a way which allows for competition between non-profit renting and profit-renting. This means that in a well-developed unitary market, the non-profit rental stock provides a viable alternative to the profit rental stock and can compete for the same clients. The non-profit sector in a unitary system is therefore not geared specifically towards lower-income groups. According to Kemeny, unitary rental systems do not show a general tendency towards marginalisation and stigmatization of the social rented sector (1995, p. 143). In a dualist system, on the other hand, the government prevents social rented housing from competing with the private rental market by keeping social renting as a tightly controlled state sector. Kemeny (1995) presents case studies of Australia, New Zealand and the UK to exemplify dualist rental systems. Social rented housing in a dualist system is used as a safety net reserved for groups in society who are unable to access housing on the free market. The social rental sector in a dual system is therefore most likely to carry a social stigma – if a person is housed in the social rented sector, the person can be assumed to be relatively poor or otherwise disadvantaged. Hoekstra (2009, p. 58) tested Kemeny’s theory against empirical evidence and found that dualist rental systems show a greater degree of residualisation than integrated rental systems.

Of all the four possible scenarios that emerge from these two sets of models it is clear that the most stigmatized social housing sectors will emerge in societies where the housing system has the characteristics of a residual model for social housing and a dualist rental system. In what can then be referred to as a “residual dualist market” scenario, the social housing sector is barred from competing with profit-renting and serves primarily as a safety net for the most
vulnerable groups in society. Social housing in a residual dual market scenario is likely to carry a stigma because social housing is strongly associated with poverty and disadvantage. The historical narrative in chapter two describes how housing policy and practice in the UK during the post-war decades led to a housing system that by the end of the period showed most of the characteristics of Harloe’s residual model and Kemeny’s dualist system. Social rented housing in the UK, council housing, therefore emerged from the period as a stigmatized housing tenure.

When turning to the question of the origins of stigma attached to large post-war housing estates, which is the subject matter of chapter three, the concept of image becomes central. However, as Dean and Hastings (2000, s. 13) argue, it is not appropriate to describe estates as having an image; one should rather consider that estates have fractured images. Different individuals will perceive an estate differently. People that know the estate very well, such as its inhabitants or those that work there daily have an internal image of the estate, while outsiders have an external image of the estate. Furthermore, the most stigmatized estates are those in which the internal and external images are comparably negative – that those that have an intimate knowledge of the estate project an equally negative image of it as those that perceive it from a certain distance. While the internal image is most likely based on personal experience of the actual physical and social characteristics of the estate, the external image, Dean and Hastings argue, is more likely to be based on stereotypes. The case study in chapter four somewhat challenges this latter notion of external images being based on stereotypes. The external image is here divided into two sub-categories: external and non-specific image, and external and specific image. Factors impacting the external and non-specific image can have a stigmatizing effect on the estate’s external image but are also equally stigmatizing for a wider selection of estates, while factors that influence the external and specific image have negative consequences for the external image of one particular estate. The case study shows that the factors influencing the external and specific image of that particular estate cannot be labelled as mere stereotypes.

Finally, the external image is also based on a comparison between areas – the image of the estate is shaped by how it is perceived hierarchically in relation to other areas. Forrest and Kearns describe this phenomenon as a “strongly comparative psychological landscape in which each neighbourhood is known primarily as a counterpart of some of the others” (2001, s. 2135). Sometimes this means that an estate will be unfairly stigmatized because it is
situated adjacent to affluent areas. Such estates become particularly visible and intrusive when compared with its surroundings. The case study in chapter four provides an example of an estate that quickly became stigmatized both internally and externally, and the stigma was exacerbated as a consequence of its location adjacent to affluent areas.

Conclusion

Stigma is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which lies at the heart of questions about inequality and social exclusion. The present thesis bases the understanding of stigma on the elaborated version of Goffman’s initial conceptualization developed by Jones et al (2001), where stigma is seen as arising when one or a set of “marks” are connected to a specific set of stereotypes. Inhabitants of post-war council estates will by this definition have two stigmatized marks attached to their housing situation, corresponding to the two sides of the double stigma: one being the nature of their tenancy, and the other being the specific council estate on which they live. These can be further distinguished by the level of information control that the individual has over their stigmatized marks. The mark of being a council housing tenant is not necessarily visible and so the individual has some level of control over its disclosure. These are labelled as discreditable. Inhabitants of large post-war council estates, however, have very little control over the level of disclosure since the large post-war council estates are easily recognizable as being council estates. These are labelled as the discredited and cannot avoid identification, neither with the stigma attached to the reputation of the specific council estate they inhabit nor the stigma attached to the tenure of council housing. Furthermore, the concept of residualisation has been discussed and found to be a principal cause for stigmatization of the council housing sector since it leads to a concentration of disadvantaged households in the sector. The analytical frameworks developed by Michael Harloe (1995) and Jim Kemeny (1995) provide the crucial theoretical categories for analysing differences and continuities between different housing systems. A combination of the two frameworks gives rise to the category of a “residual dual system” for rented housing, which is the scenario in which the social housing sector will be most vulnerable for stigmatization. At the level of individual estates, the concept of image is the central analytic concept. An estate’s image positions the estate in the hierarchy between neighbourhoods and between individual estates. The image is shaped internally or externally, and the external image is found to be either specific to the estate or non-specific to the estate.
2 The Stigmatization of Council Housing

Introduction

The thirty-odd years between the mid-1940 to the mid-1970 stand out as the period of the fastest economic growth in European history, which led French economist Jean Fourastié to name the period the glorious thirty (Fourastié, 2014). One of the main features of this period was the comprehensive structure of universal public social services that goes under the name of the welfare state. The principle of universalism was especially central for the distribution of its services. As the pioneering British social researcher Richard Titmuss pointed out in 1967, “there could be no sense of inferiority, pauperism, shame or stigma in the use of a publicly provided service; no attribution that one was being or becoming a ‘public burden’” (quoted in Page, 2015, p. 32). Some of the welfare state services, such as state education and the National Health Service, have achieved this to a reasonable degree – these do not carry a sort of stigma which shuns the middle class from benefiting from their services. However, in the case of council housing, the universalist principle has proven decidedly unsuccessful. It is widely assumed today that council housing carries a social stigma. This is most recently evidenced by the government’s Green Paper A ‘New Deal’ for Social Housing (MoHCLG, 2018), in which the first of five core themes is “tackling stigma and celebrating thriving communities”. This chapter investigates the reasons for how stigma became attached to council housing during the “glorious thirty”. It argues that, contrary to much previous research on the topic which locates the reasons for stigma in the neoliberal housing reforms enacted after Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in 1979 (Forrest & Murie, 1983; 1988; Hodkinson, 2011; Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013), council housing was firmly established as a stigmatized form of tenure before Thatcher took office. The changes in housing policy that were initiated in 1979 have only exacerbated tendencies towards stigmatization of the council housing sector that were already present before 1979. The main reason for the generation of stigma is found in the phenomenon of residualisation, which has occurred through dynamic and interlinked processes involving tenure restructuring, slum clearance efforts, and changes in housing policy and practices.
Britain emerged from the Second World War with the worst housing shortage of the twentieth century. Statistics from the War Office show that upwards of 450,000 dwellings had been destroyed or made uninhabitable by wartime bombardment, with a million more sustaining lesser damage. Meanwhile, the scarcity of labour, capital and resources had slowed down the construction industry so much than only 200,000 new dwellings had been constructed during the six years of hostilities (War Office, 1944). Changes on the demand side further complicated the picture, with early marriages and family dissolution during the war years increasing the number of newly formed households by nearly 2 million (Lowe, 2011, p. 85). Moreover, much of the existing stock of homes, numbering around 12 million in total, was in a poor condition. For example, 60% of dwellings did not have hot running water, and two million homes had no electricity or gas (Holmans, 1987, p. 138). With this backdrop, it is not surprising that public opinion polls in 1945 showed that the majority of the electorate saw housing as the single most important issue (Harloe 1995, p. 282). Both parties responded duly and made housing a key talking point: the Conservative election manifestos in the first four post-war elections (1945, 1950, 1951, 1955) highlighted housing as the major social issue, and it figured first in the Labour manifestos of 1945 and 1955 (Perry, 1986, p. 222). When Labour won its landslide victory in 1945 and could form its first majority government, council housing became a central part of its wider strategy of social reforms which would later be referred to as the welfare state.

At no point in time during the post-war period was council housing less stigmatized than during the post-war Labour government. It enjoyed support from both parties as the chief means to tackle the housing crisis. Two aspects in particular would ensure the popularity of council housing during this period. The first of these was a sharp rise in standards for new council homes. In 1942, the Ministry of Health appointed the Dudley Committee in order to prepare for a general rise in housing standards after the war. The committee issued its Dudley Report in 1944, which recommended a range of improvements from earlier council house standards: floor areas were increased; larger households were to have a downstairs WC; parlours were dropped in favour of larger single living rooms; the old scullery was replaced by a fitted kitchen; electric or gas cookers were made mandatory, and houses were to be fitted with an outbuilding meant for storage or the pursuit of hobbies (Lowe 2011, p. 88). The recommendations put forth in the Dudley Report were swiftly translated into ministerial policy through the 1944 Housing Manual (Ministry of Health, 1944). Another housing manual
published in 1949 recommended a wider variety of dwelling types and yet another rise in space standards, which reportedly reached an all-time high (Park, 2017, p. 222; Ministry of Health, 1949). The sharp rise in the quality and size of council homes during this period was a powerful means of reducing stigma. People entering the council housing sector could expect the standard of their new home to be much higher than what the private rented sector could provide, with added benefits of affordability and security of tenure.

The second and most important reason for the low level of stigma attached to council housing during this period was that central government construed it as a tenure catering for all segments of society. This was chiefly the work of Welsh Labour politician Aneurin Bevan, who as minister of health became responsible for the housing brief. A devoted socialist with a decidedly working-class background, Bevan was a strong supporter of council housing and intended to revive it as a permanent and universal service. Bevan envisioned council housing as a service catering for all social classes, and it should not become socially divisive – his vision was a post-war society “where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street” (Quoted in Foot, 1973, p. 78). This principle was made official government policy when Bevan had the phrase ‘working class’ removed from the subsidy legislation in 1949 (Malpass, 2005, p. 65). Council housing now received subsidies to construct houses for “general needs” rather than being targeted specifically on working-class households. This universalism, coupled with the rise in standards, made sure that council housing in this period avoided being stigmatized by an association with poverty and dispossession. In fact, as it could be expected to provide an affordable and good quality home with a high degree of tenure security, it was the “tenure of choice for many working-class households” (Pearce & Vine, 2014, p. 659).

However, two aspects of the Labour housing policy in this period would have long-term consequences in contributing to the future stigmatization of council housing. First of these was the resistance against a revival of the private rental sector. A government report issued in 1944 had pointed to a cross-party consensus on the need for a big increase in the supply of privately built homes for rent (Central Housing Advisory Committee, 1944, p. 25). However, when the coalition government proposed a post-war subsidy for private builders, Bevan remarked that “the only remedy the Tories have for every problem is to enable private enterprise to suck on the teats of the State” (Quoted in Foot 1973, p. 74). The Opposition criticized this “doctrinaire approach” (Malpass 2005, p. 70), but Labour refused to accept any
subsidies for private builders. The effect of this in the long term was to reduce the capacity of the private rental sector to accommodate lower income households. This role would therefore increasingly fall on the council housing sector. The second aspect was Bevan’s firm resistance against the establishment of government-sponsored housing associations (Malpass, 2005, p. 68). In line with the framework for rental housing systems developed by Kemeny (1995), these would have contributed to organizational innovation after the war and could have led to the development of a “unitary” rental system in which private and public bodies could have competed for the same clients. By barring entry for private non-profit providers of affordable housing, Britain would develop what Kemeny calls a “dualist” system, of which one of the main characteristics is the tendency of the public housing sector to assume the role as a “welfare safety net” and thereby subject it to stigmatization.

Nevertheless, these structural aspects would not have any significant effect in terms of stigma for another couple of decades. In the early 1950s, council housing was a tenure catering to a broad section of the working class, and not specifically skewed towards the least well off. Two studies confirm this latter point. Gray (Gray, 1979) uses figures from the Family Expenditure Survey to show that in 1953, only 16% of families in the bottom quarter of the income distribution were council tenants, while Bentham (1986) shows that in the same year, the average income of council tenants was only slightly below the median. Moreover, it is safe to assume that a family moving into the council sector in this period was likely to move from an old, run-down privately rented accommodation into a home of a much higher standard without any of the negative stereotyping that was later to develop. Therefore it is appropriate to regard the early 1950s as the “benchmark against which to measure subsequent changes as the process of residualisation gathered pace” (Malpass, 2005, p. 82).

1951-1964: The Conservatives narrow the scope

The emphasis on the numbers built was enhanced when the Conservatives won the 1951 general election. Their election manifesto pledged to build 300,000 units every year, and the new Minister for Housing and Local Government, Harold MacMillan, accepted that local authorities had to make up for a substantial amount of this. Council housing would therefore expand considerably and remain a significant part of total housing output throughout the conservative period, despite its traditional scepticism to a large state and their support of individual choice and private market solutions (Lowe, 2013, p. 90). However, the way in
which these numbers were met would set local authority housing on a path towards residualisation, marginalisation and stigmatization from which it has never recovered.

The first thing Macmillan did in order to achieve his ambitious target of 300,000 was to lower the general standard and size of new building. He readily admitted in his memoirs that a promotion of “the simpler house” was one of his main objectives when he first became minister (De Lund, 2016, p. 160). His projected target would be met already in 1953, a year ahead of predictions (Malpass, 2005, p. 73). Considering the fact that council housing remained dominant in terms of completed dwellings – an estimated three-quarters of all completions came from local authorities between 1951 and 1955 (Shapely, 2017, s. 38) – the high standard in council housing that Bevan had initiated was now being reversed. Simultaneously, the ideological impetus for owner occupation continued with renewed force. MacMillan and the Conservative’s stance on home ownership was outlined in a 1953 White Paper:

> One object of future housing policy will be to continue to promote, by all possible means, the building of houses for owner occupation. Of all forms of saving, this is one of the best. Of all forms of ownership this is one of the most satisfying for the individual and the most beneficial for the nation. (MoHLG, 1953, para. 7)

A Conservative preference for private ownership is, of course, not surprising. It is consistent with the party’s traditional stance on public versus private solutions. However, the fact that the government was pressing the local authorities to construct a record-high number of council homes while simultaneously expressing a clear preference for home ownership undoubtedly contributed in creating a stigma towards the public housing sector. The more home ownership was endorsed as the most “satisfying” and “beneficial” form of tenure, the more council housing tenants could be assumed to be housed in the public sector because they were unable to take advantage of the benefits of home ownership.

Another major contributing factor to the generation of stigma towards council housing in this period came with the resumption of slum clearance as the Tories returned to power in 1955. Slum clearance was subsequently carried out on an unprecedented scale, and slum clearance schemes were carried forward for the next twenty years, profoundly changing the face of all major British cities. In terms of numbers, around 600,000 dwellings were demolished in the ten years after 1955, with another million destroyed by 1974 (Power, 1993, p. 190). The effort
was announced by Macmillan in 1954 with the accompanying statement that “local authorities and local authorities alone can clear and re-house the slums, while the general housing need can be met, as it was to a great extent before the war, by private enterprise” (Cited in Lowe, 2011, p. 92). Macmillan’s quote reveals two important aspects that bear directly on the generation of stigma towards council housing. First, it picks up the notion, harkening back to the experience of the 1930s, that local authority housing is meant to replace slum housing, and thereby to house former slum dwellers. In addition to shaping the public perception of what council housing is for, slum clearance has also been hugely significant in changing the socio-economic profile of the tenure, as it was bound to draw in a considerable amount of low-income households. Secondly, Macmillan’s use of the phrase “general housing needs” goes directly against Bevan’s vision of a universal council housing sector. It was now the private sector, and not local authorities, which was expected to cater for “general needs”. These principles were made official legislation by the Housing Subsidies Act 1956: central government subsidies to local authorities for the redevelopment of slum cleared sites were increased, while subsidies for general housing needs construction were abolished (Cox, 1993, p. 62). Moreover, size standards for council homes were yet again lowered, now falling from an average of 98 square metres in 1949 to 83 square metres by 1959 (Malpass, 1987, p. 147). These measures narrowed the scope of council housing considerably. Bevan’s vision of council housing as an inclusive and universal service of high standard was beginning to crumble.

The Conservative government moved ahead with a range of schemes during the late 1950s and early 1960 intended to expand demand for home ownership. Development charges and building controls were abolished, reducing the cost of new building; stamp duty was removed for cheaper houses; and local authorities were encouraged to increase their mortgage lending activity at the lower end of the market (Malpass, 2005, p. 91). The effect was a considerable reduction of entry barriers to a level where it was increasingly affordable for working-class families, especially families of skilled and routine non-manual labourers. The abolition of the Schedule A tax on owner occupied properties from 1963 was an especially effective measure which created a considerable subsidy to homeowners (De Lund, 2016, p. 36). While the Government’s preference for home-ownership had been clearly expressed for over a decade by this time, it was now being supported by a whole range of tangible subsidizing policies. The effect was a considerable rise in the pace of residualisation of council housing as the families who had the means to do so would increasingly leave the sector. Britain was turning
into a “home-owning society”. The drawback was an increasingly stigmatized council housing sector perceived as a safety net reserved for households unable to participate in the massive movement into homeownership.

1964: New approach for Labour

Housing was yet again a key issue in the election of 1964, and Labour won on a manifesto that promised the construction of 500,000 houses. However, compared to the 1945 government, their policy stance on housing was now radically different. Labour had for a long time been regarded as the “party of council housing”, but during the 1960s they increasingly started to distance themselves from this image. An early sign of this new approach came in the 1965 Housing White Paper:

The expansion of the public programme now proposed is to meet exceptional circumstances; it is born partly out of short-term necessity, partly out of the conditions inherent in modern urban life. The expansion of building for owner occupation on the other hand is normal (MoHLG, 1965)

Interestingly, not only did Labour feel the need to justify an expansion of the public housing programme, they also gave it a set of defined roles such as meeting a “short-term necessity” and responding to the “conditions inherent in modern urban life”. Their statement in this White Paper clearly reflects a new position for Labour in which the public housing programme is contrasted with the more “normal” expansion of homeownership. The distance from the Bevan tradition could hardly be more clearly pronounced. Merrett claims that the “main shift was to accept the residualist principle of Toryism” (Merrett, 1982, p. 42)

However, considering the wider housing situation at the time reveals that their new position was at least partly a result of electoral necessity: as Lowe (2013, pp. 98-100) shows, by the mid-1960s, almost a majority of voters were homeowners, while the nation was reaching the end of the post-war housing shortages. Nevertheless, the 1965 White Paper clearly signalled that the residualised concept of council housing now dominated in both major political parties. Judging by the size of the council housing program it was still within the confines of Harloe’s “mass” model, but the rhetorical emphasis had now shifted towards a “residual” role for council housing.

The boost in council housing production that Labour had promised soon became a victim of economic difficulties. Between 1964 and 1967, the British economy became embroiled in a
whole series of sterling crises, forcing the Wilson government to devaluate the pound in November 1967. It was now becoming apparent that the British government, along with other western European governments, continually had to keep in mind how domestic policies would impact international opinion, especially the opinion of the key decision-makers in the International Monetary Fund (Clift & Tomlinson, 2008, p. 545). Cuts in public expenditures duly followed from 1968 onwards, including cuts in local authority housing production (Malpass, 2005, p. 95). The promise of 500,000 new dwellings was quietly dropped from all consequent policy statements (Lowe, 2013, p. 98). However, Labour did manage to demolish much of the remaining slum areas, and most of the displaced people were now being rehoused in high-rise, high-density council estates. As the next chapter will lay out in more detail, the “high-rise experiment” was now increasingly being criticized as the social and physical cost of living in high-rise estates was becoming apparent for tenants and housing experts. The partial collapse of a system-built tower block in Newham in 1968 accelerated the criticism to a national level, as it disclosed the scandalously low standards in construction of many of the new system-built council estates (Griffiths, 1968). As Dunleavy (1981, p. 354) argues, the sweeping style of slum clearance and the spread of large-scale construction schemes throughout the 1960s contributed significantly to the delegitimization of council housing as a whole. Much of the population now associated council housing with the much publicized problems of high-density system-built council estates.

The late 1960s saw the first major change in the allocation policy for council housing, which would directly affect the social composition of the sector. It was only after the government issued the Cullingworth Report in 1969 (Central Housing Advisory Committee, 1969) that local authorities began to allocate council homes explicitly based on the level of “housing need” among the applicants. Up until this point, allocation policies had tended to favour households of moderate income which could be expected to contribute positively to the neighbourhood. For example, the Scottish Housing Advisory Committee explicitly stated that preference should be given to “skilled workers needed by industry and others whose rehousing would benefit the community” (Scottish Housing Advisory Committee, 1950). Waiting time and various screening mechanisms were used effectively to prevent access by some of the poorest groups. As Damer (1976) has shown, in addition to simple queuing systems, which favoured those that had the means to wait, more explicitly judgmental criteria such as assessments of the housekeeping standards of applicants were widely used when allocating council homes. However, after the Cullingsworth Report, it quickly became
practice to grant tenancies to the poorest and most vulnerable tenants. This tendency was compounded in 1977 when the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act made it compulsory for local authorities to provide long-term secure tenancy for the “unintentionally homeless” in their constituency. The Homeless Persons Act was, in the words of John Boughton, a “well-meaning socialist measure” (2018, p. 143). However, similarly to slum clearance, one of its main consequences was a contribution to the stigma of council housing both in a practical and a psychological sense: council homes were now increasingly being reserved for the most disadvantaged households, while sending the message that the role of council housing was to accommodate those that could not secure a home through the private market.

The cumulative effect of the rise of home ownership, slum clearance and narrower allocation policies was a considerable quickening of the pace of residualisation in the council housing sector. A number of studies have attempted to quantify this tendency. Bentham (1986) used Family Expenditure Survey data to show that the proportion of households in social housing belonging to the lowest income quartile increased by 140 per cent between 1953 and 1983, while those from the highest income quartile decreased by 66 per cent. Holmans showed that, in 1962, only 11 per cent of council tenants were economically inactive, a number that had almost tripled by 1978. Furthermore, the percentage of all welfare benefit recipients rose from 21.5 per cent in 1954 to 58.9 per cent in 1978 (Holmans, 1987, p. 167). These figures clearly illustrate how the evolution of housing policy since the early 1950s had resulted in council housing becoming a residual “tenure of last resort”. As residualisation rose, so did the level of stigmatization. By the mid-1970s it was clear that council housing was the most stigmatized of all tenures, so much so that Griffiths, for instance, could assert that “all council houses carry a social stigma” (1975, p. 10)

Conclusion

While it is common to associate the increasing residualisation and decreasing popularity of council housing to the years after Thatcher took office in 1979, this chapter has argued that the broad factors leading to a stigmatized council housing sector were well established before the general election of 1979. In many respects, it is more appropriate to look at long-term continuities than changes when accounting for the declining popularity of council housing. First, the near sole reliance on local authorities to provide affordable housing throughout the period meant that the British rental housing market aligned closely to what Kemeny (1995) calls a “dualist” system. The main consequence of the “dualist” system in terms of stigma has
been the increasing tendency of social rented housing to assume the role of a “safety net” once the crudest post-war housing shortages were resolved. Second, one of the more long-running continuities has been the assertion that the private market should provide for most people most of the time. The year 1954 marked the end of the long post-war transitional phase in which council housing was construed as a tenure catering for all segments of society. Governments of all persuasions have since, implicitly or explicitly, sought to reserve council housing as the tenure catering for those that are unable to access housing through the private market, thereby generating a stigma based on the association between poverty and council housing. Third, while the output of council house completions remained high until the mid-1970s, the growth of home ownership was even higher. The obverse of the growth in owner occupation was the continued residualisation of council housing. As wider segments of society were given the opportunity to buy their own home, those that remained in council housing were increasingly those that for different reasons were unable to reap the benefits of home ownership. Meanwhile, the sweeping style of comprehensive slum clearance as it was practiced from the mid-1950s and through the 1960s had the twin consequence of gathering the pace of residualisation while forging a psychological link between council housing and slums. Finally, the perceived failures of the “high-rise experiment” added another layer of stigma on the whole council housing sector, which is the topic of the next chapter.
3 The Stigmatization of Large Post-War Council Estates

Introduction

Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, governments across Western Europe and America became engaged in an unprecedented drive to pull down the slums left over from the industrial revolution and replacing them with high-density housing estates. Today, many of these housing schemes rank among the most stigmatized residential areas of their respective societies. The public housing projects of North America and the banlieues of the Parisian suburbs have risen to international infamy as bywords for enclaves of social and economic deprivation. The council estates scattered across the British Isles are perhaps less known internationally but they share all the physical, social and economic characteristics of the projects and the banlieues, and they are no less stigmatized within Britain as being among the least desirable places to live. This chapter investigates the origins of this stigma, focusing on the period between the emergence of mass housing schemes from the late 1950s up to the mid-1970s, when this type of residential development was already deeply discredited. When large post-war council estates first appeared they were hailed as potent symbols of technological optimism. The people in charge of their proliferation had great confidence in the power of planning, believing that design and engineering would help bring about a more equitable future. The fact that they were initially shrouded in such optimistic fervour made their eventual fall from grace even more spectacular. By the end of the period in question, it was clear that many large post-war council estates suffered from a complex set of physical and social problems. Terms such as ‘failed’, ‘problem’ and ‘sink estate’ came into both common and academic usage. Moreover, mass high-rise solutions as a whole were charged with “discrediting the legacies of the modernist era” and they became “associated with the failures of direct state intervention” (Paddison, 2001, p. 92). All of this certainly affected the experience of the inhabitants of council estates, who often had a different picture of daily life on their estates than that of the surrounding society. The first part of this chapter accounts for how new technologies in the construction industry came to be adopted by a powerful consortium of actors with mutual interests in speeding up the production of affordable housing units, and how this ultimately led to the stigmatization of council housing in general and council estates in particular. The second part deals with one of these groups of actors, the Modernist architects and planners, who provided the necessary rationale on which the spread
of mass housing estates could be justified. The eventual rejection of Modernist planning and architecture would be crucial in advancing the stigma of council estates. However, as the last part of the chapter demonstrates, the ultimate cause for the stigmatization of large post-war council estates is to be found in the unfitness of local authorities to take on the role as landlords on such a scale as this last great expansion of the council housing program had forced them to adopt. The massive housing output had not been accompanied by the necessary investments in management, maintenance and adequate amenities to support communities on such a scale as these new large council estates required.

The Rise and Fall of Industrialised System Building Techniques

The principal motive for embarking on mass housing schemes was the need to address acute and long-standing housing shortages. As described in the previous chapter, Britain emerged from the Second World War with much bomb damage to its existing housing stock and a serious backlog of housing shortages carried forward from 1939 due to limited new building during the war. This situation was compounded by major demographic changes and the resumption of slum clearance initiated by Harold Macmillan in 1954. The political salience of housing was such that both parties became embroiled in what is sometimes referred to as the “numbers game” (Esher, 1981, p. 75; Power, 1987, p. 286). As described in the previous chapter, the Conservatives won the 1951 general election on a promise to construct 300,000 units every year. Between 1951 and 1966, in terms of the size of the housing program, “the only party political difference concerned who could build the most” (Malpass, 2005, p. 93). The Labour 1965 White Paper promised the construction of 500,000 units per year by 1970, “and more thereafter” (MoHLG, 1965, para. 1), only to be topped by the Conservatives in the run-up to the 1966 general election promising 500,000 by 1968 (Dale, 2012, p. 166).

Conveniently for policymakers committed to the numbers game, the construction industry was developing new forms of innovative technologies that enabled building in volumes and at speed. In what became known as “industrialised system building techniques”, the production of housing estates was rationalised along factory lines by prefabricating whole sections of the building and joining the sections together at the construction site. The prediction was that industrialised building would increase quantities while reducing costs and construction time. By the early 1960, a powerful identity of interest had developed between the major stakeholders in the provision of low-income accommodation: large local authorities, central government, influential segments of the design professions and a few large building
contractors were “bound together by a common belief as to the nature of modern building, which was reinforced by a contempt for traditional methods” (McCutcheon, 1992, p. 354).

However, the way industrialised system building was implemented during this period would have great consequences for the future stigmatization of post-war council estates for a number of reasons. First, council estates effectively became testing grounds for these new methods of construction. Therefore, nascent problems with system building would be inextricably linked to council estates. Both the off-site prefabrication and the on-site fitting of building components required a level of precision that was often beyond the competence of the unskilled labour force that substituted traditional building crafts on these new forms of construction sites. The result was a large number of poorly fabricated and/or fitted components, greatly contributing to the high maintenance costs of many 1960s tower blocks (Scott, 2018, p. 6). As Power (1993, pp. 198-99) has shown, poor materials coupled with poor supervision of the building process often resulted in an array of problems on system-built estates: faulty heating, water penetration, noise problems, and, crucially, an insufficient number of bolts holding the prefabricated panels in place.

The real danger of industrialised system building became starkly apparent for the whole nation on the 16th of May 1968 when the 22-storey Ronan Point tower in Newham partially collapsed. The incident was triggered when an elderly woman on the eighteenth floor lit her gas cooker. An explosion occurred, leading to the progressive collapse of all the living rooms on one corner of the tower. The total death toll was four people, but it would have been much higher if the explosion had occurred later in the day, as most people were still in their bedrooms. The media, of course, “gave saturation coverage of the issue” (Dunleavy, 1981, p. 242; Three Die as Tower Block Collapses, 1968; It Collapsed Like a House of Cards, 1968). The Ronan Point disaster signalled the end of the construction of high-rise residential towers, and contributed more than any other single event in Britain to the stigma of living in this type of high-rise system-built towers.

Moreover, an unhealthy close relationship developed between councils and building firms as the contracts for system-built council estates became larger and more complex. The building industry was quickly dominated by a handful of big companies offering their own patented variants of system building, the largest being Wimpey, John Laing, Taylor Woodrow and McAlpine (Power & Houghton, 2007, p. 61). These and other companies used their extensive resources to finance networks of local and regional PR firms, which in turn provided various
forms of hospitality and other kinds of incentives to local councillors and council officials in the aim of securing contracts for their clients (Scott, 2018, p. 10). This form of corruption was dramatically illuminated in a series of high-profile criminal trials in the 1970s (McCutcheon, 1992). The two most notorious figures of these corruption trials, architect John Poulson and leader of the Newcastle City Council T. Dan Smith, would later have their activities fictionalized in the BBC drama series *Our Friends in the North*. That the corrupt practices of certain councils and firms were brought to national attention would seriously undermine the reputation and thereby increase the stigmatization of system-built council estates. The case study in chapter four below provides an illustrative example of this type of corruption in the awarding of local authority housing contracts.

The Rise and Fall of Modernist Planning and Architecture

An additional and crucial motive for the application of industrialised system building in the construction of large council estates was the immense influence of the Modernist movement in architecture and urban planning. The term ‘Modernism’ (the capital M is used to distinguish the architectural movement from the wider philosophical movement) started to appear as a label for a loosely allied group of designers, architects and planners within European arts and humanities in the period 1919-1930. The movement was diverse and had plenty of internal disagreements, but certain generalizations can be made. First, the movement insisted on a revolutionary new role for the architect and the planner. As Glendinning and Muthesius (1994, s. 2) argue, these professional actors were now “able to direct the course of innovation in everyday life to a degree not dreamt of by their forebears in the profession”. Modernism was spearheaded by famous architects such as Walter Gropius, Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, but the single most influential person within the movement was Charles Edouard Jeanneret, who went by the name of Le Corbusier. His followers in the CIAM (*Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne*) group joined him in insisting that architecture could solve the social and human problems of the time. For the Modernists, most problems in society were thought to be caused by a deficiently designed environment, and therefore “man’s condition could be improved through a new architecture which represented true and fundamental meanings” (Gold, 1984, p. 376). The city of the future would be created through the harnessing of new materials and advanced technology, using comprehensive and rational schemas involving single-use zoning and efficient transport systems. The industrial workforce was then allocated to specific residential zones where they would be housed in estates of flat-roofed and unornamented blocks of flats. In his most
influential book, *Vers une Architecture*, (1923), Le Corbusier famously made the case that a house is a machine to live in. In fact, all architecture should be completely machine-like and produced by industrial mass-produced methods. “Form follows function” was the central design principle of Modernism – ornamentation was deemed archaic and superfluous and should therefore be rejected. Rationality, symmetry, order and technological optimism were at the basis of all Modernist conceptions about the ideal future city.

Modernist ideals became immensely influential in British architectural schools after the Second World War. As architect Peter Cook (1983, p. 32) writes: “Rushing back to qualify as architects, the first post-war generation were full of enthusiasm for technology (…). To suggest a better and special world was no arrogance. Soon there were two essential sources of inspiration – Corb and Mies”. Frederic Osborn, the “grand old man” of British planning at the time, wrote to Lewis Mumford, his American counterpart, in 1952 about the British Architectural Association School: “the young men under his [Le Corbusier’s] influence are completely impervious to economic or human considerations. It was just as if I had, in my youth, questioned the divinity of Christ” (Quoted in Hall, 2002, p. 237). These young architects soon came to dominate the Architect’s Department of the London City Council (LCC), which by the 1950s had become, “without hyperbole, the foremost architectural practice in the world” (Boughton, 2018, p. 105), and would therefore set the standard for the practice of most local authorities in Britain.

Since large post-war council estates became so closely aligned with the tenets of Modernism, the eventual rejection of Modernist architecture and planning would contribute significantly to their stigmatization. Critiques revolving around the extreme uniformity of urban forms and the rejection of traditional urban life inherent in Modernism started to appear alongside the spread of Modernist council estates. The first critiques revolved around Modernism’s disregard for communities. Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s ground-breaking ethnographic study *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) compared the district of Bethnal Green with the Greenleigh council estate in an outer suburb. Even though their former neighbourhood was labelled as a slum, the inhabitants seemed to be satisfied with the neighbourliness and close-knit community spirit of their area. This is juxtaposed with the problematic loss of this network of relationships as people were forcibly moved out of their area and into estates such as Greenleigh. The study formed a nascent attack on the centralized
bureaucracy of housing policy from the mid-1950s onwards, and the devastating effects that large-scale slum clearance had on urban communities.

Published in America but equally influential in the UK was Jane Jacob’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1962). It had the same basic message as *Family and Kinship*, but her emphasis was on the built environment itself, arguing that traditional street patterns stimulated close communal interactions. Jacobs’ book was a forceful attack on urban planning and the Modernist project. Planning, she argued, was “essentially paternalistic, if not authoritarian” (Jacobs, 1962, p. 17). She ridiculed the Modernist followers of Le Corbusier as egotistic and self-absorbed: “No matter how vulgarized or clumsy the design, how dreary and useless the open space, how dull the close-up view, an imitation of Le Corbusier shouts ‘Look what I made!’” (p. 19). The ultimate villain of her polemical attacks was Robert Moses, the New York City planner famous for bulldozing large parts of old Manhattan neighbourhoods to give way for expressways and housing projects. The criticism was equally fitting for British advocates of Modernist city planning such as Robert Matthews, Chief Architect and Planning Officer to the LCC from 1946 to 1953 and a leading proponent of Modernist housing, or Dame Evelyn Sharpe who, acting as the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government quoted a poem on the beauty of high-rise towers at the opening of the Royal Institute of British Architects’ (RIBA) 1955 symposium on high flats. Jacobs’ book was a vehement criticism of the type of birds-eye view arrogance that these Modernist reformers represented.

Even though these intellectual attacks on Modernist city planning reflected a genuine dissatisfaction with how urban renewal schemes were unfolding, they also contributed to the stigmatization of council estates. Nostalgia for the past advocated by middle-class intellectuals surely did not help the working-class inhabitants who were trying to adjust to their new environments. As Hall (2002, p. 243) argues, “just like the high-rise enthusiasm itself, the attack on the genre was driven by intellectual fashion”. In the same manner as the proponents of Modernism had little concern for the users of their proposed designs, these attacks resonated more with their middle-class readers than with low-income households. The ultimate irony of Jacob’s prescription, which more or less amounted to keeping neighbourhoods the way they were before slum clearance, is that the inner-city areas where original Victorian and Georgian housing was preserved are the areas that have experienced
the most intense gentrification since and are, or course, completely out of reach for all but the most affluent households.

In a much more dramatic and widely dispersed fashion, the planned demolition of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis in 1972 would ensure that the image of Modernist housing estates was irredeemably damaged. The 33 11-storey high-rise slabs completed in 1956 were arguably the most comprehensive adaptation of Le Corbusier’s vision for housing projects ever built. Soon after its construction in the late 1950s, the housing project was seen as notorious symbol of failed public policy and architecture, plagued by problems of crime and vandalism. The iconic image of the first of Pruitt-Igoe’s high-rise buildings in mid-implosion was diffused around the world (von Hoffman, 2012).

Architectural theorist Charles Jencks declared the starting date of the demolitions, July 15th 1972, as the day that “Modern architecture died” (Jencks, 1977). Due to the international and ‘decontextualized’ nature of Modernist design, it only takes a very short leap of the imagination to see the similarities between American public housing projects such as Pruitt-Igoe and British post-war council estates.

The Pruitt-Igoe-incident triggered a new line of inquiry into the failures of Modernist mass housing projects which attempted to forge a link between the design of estates and the supposed anti-social behaviour of their inhabitants. This approach was initiated by architect and city planner Oscar Newman who developed his ‘defensible space’ theory in the early 1970s, inspired by the image of the imploding Pruitt-Igoe project (Newman, 1972).

Newman’s starting point was the statistical fact that larger public housing projects in America had higher crime rates than smaller ones, and he set out to find causal explanations for this fact. Newman argued that there was a relationship between design and behaviour, contending that areas where residents had little control over the space, such as communal walkways, underground parking garages and garbage rooms, were prone to anti-social behaviour. The solution was then to redesign the buildings in order to minimize indefensible space and maximize defensible space. In Britain, geographer Alice Coleman built on Newman’s work by studying occurrences of anti-social behaviour on council estates such as littering, vandalism and graffiti and correlating this with various design features (Coleman, 1985). Coleman took Newman’s theory one step further by contending that Modernist design principles actually produced anti-social behaviour. Her work was taken very seriously in Britain, and some British local authorities tried to ‘Colemanize’ their worst estates. However,
the positive effects of these efforts proved minor. Peter Hall (2002, p. 461) describes how the Westminster housing authority tried to reduce crime on their Mozart estate by removing overhead decks, fencing in blocks to separate them, and modify staircase entrances along the lines advocated by Newman and Coleman. However, a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 1995 concluded that the benefits had been short-lived: burglaries, assaults and street robberies were back to ‘normal’ levels just five months after (Fordham, 1995). Several other studies have shown that estates that are similar in design do not follow similar declining trajectories (Musterd, 2009). Coleman’s study has been carefully dissected and her conclusions proven spurious (Ravetz, 2013), while Newman revised his theory in a later work, acknowledging that social factors were more important than physical ones in causing anti-social behaviour (Newman, 1981). The case for “design determinism” had proven inconclusive. Rather than providing answers to the intractable problem of anti-social behaviour on large housing estates, these studies can only be seen as contributing to the stigmatization of council estates by shedding yet more negative focus on their appearance and by depicting their inhabitants as mere victims of their physical surroundings.

By that time, however, the tide had turned decisively against the sweeping style of slum clearance and mass housing construction. The TV drama Kathy Come Home by director Ken Loach had brought the harsh exclusions caused by clearances and mass redevelopments to national attention (Loach, 1966). A new emphasis was signalled already in the late 1960s when the government issued the White Paper Old houses into new homes on the rehabilitation of existing homes (Department of the Environment, 1969). The White Paper introduced General Improvement Areas (GIA), which could attract completely new subsidies in the aim of improving the houses and the environment of old neighbourhoods instead of the comprehensive redevelopment that had become the norm since the war. The GIA proved particularly popular amongst inner-city local authorities who were now given the opportunity to retain and uplift their existing communities through thorough renovation of the built environment. Meanwhile, the publication of a book by the German-born British economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher created the philosophy of “small is beautiful” among community activists (Schumacher, 1973). Schumacher’s book became highly influential for modern environmental thinking by expounding the argument that attention had to be paid to the local human scale of communities. In other quarters the feelings were running even higher. For example, architectural historians Colin Amery and Dan Cruickshank’s The Rape of Britain described the redevelopment of city centres as “an officially sponsored competition to see
how much of Britain’s architectural heritage could be destroyed in 30 years” (Amery & Cruickshank, 1975, p. 10). Other books such as *Form Follows Fiasco* (Blake, 1977) and *The Failure of Modern Architecture* (Brolin, 1976) were of less scholarly significance but attested to the widespread rejection of the Modernist project. Even leading proponents of Modernism like Robert Matthew were now converting to the new emphasis on conservation. Having led the work in the comprehensive redevelopment of the Gorbals area in Glasgow, which in time developed into some of the most notorious council estates in the UK, Matthew was able to secure the Georgian heritage of the Edinburgh new town in the 1970s by actively campaigning for its conservation (Grindrod, 2013, pp. 346-7). By the mid-1970s the antipathy towards comprehensive redevelopment had moved well beyond the circles of academia and special interest groups. For example, when appearing on the television talk show *Parkinson*, actor Kenneth Williams, famous nationwide for his frequent appearances in the *Carry On* film series, delivered a forceful outburst against “the dreadfulness of the Elephant and Castle, which used to be a place of humanity and warmth and people, and is now just a concrete desert and a mess and an absolute disgrace” (Quoted in Grindrod, 2013, p. 348). The Elephant and Castle area in south London had just been redeveloped and was now completely dominated by the massive Heygate estate, demolished in 2013. There is no record of to what degree the residents of the Heygate estate agreed with William’s statement, but it is clear that his tirade expressed a stigma attached to large Modernist council estates that had now been diffused onto the general public.

**Management, Amenities and Allocation Policies**

However forceful the rejections of Modernism eventually became, any considerations of design were of secondary importance compared to proper investments in housing management and the provision of adequate amenities to support community life on large estates. There are examples of Modernist high-rise developments that have developed into thriving communities. One is the *Unité d’Habitation* in south Marseille, one of the very few architectural schemes that Le Corbusier was actually allowed to implement during his lifetime. This single-slab “vertical village” containing 1600 people has all the hallmarks of Modernist design principles that have been so much reviled in other places, such as long deck-access walkways, raw and exposed concrete and repetitive patterns, but it also incorporates an internal shopping street, recreational grounds, a children’s nursery and a swimming pool on the roof and generous surrounding park land. Moreover, and perhaps consequently, it is occupied by a middle-class clientele and it has received “unprecedented
sums of public money for its restoration” (Hall, 2002, p. 247). Another classic example is the very conspicuous and unmistakably brutalist Barbican estate in central London. The Barbican could easily be mistaken for a post-war council estate erected at the height of the system building drive, but the three tower blocks and thirteen terrace blocks, home to some 4000 people, were built privately and have maintained a high level of maintenance and custodial service, ensuring a high-quality environment virtually free of crime and vandalism (Nash, 2013).

It is with respect to management and amenities that British post-war council estates can truly be said to have failed. In 1976, in the face of growing discontent about the performance of council estates, the government’s Department of the Environment initiated an inquiry into difficult-to-let estates, publishing its findings in 1981 (Burbidge, Wilson, Kirby, & Curtis, 1981). The report revealed that too few people wanted to live on post-war council estates, especially the system-built ones, and the accounts of mismanagement “shocked politicians, building professionals and councils alike” (Power & Houghton, 2007, p. 82). Shortly after, Anne Power published a series of articles (Power, 1984; 1987) commenting on the findings in the report. The essential problem, according to Power, was that central government had provided local authorities with the means to become very efficient builders, but practically no means for them to assume the role as landlord on such a scale as the volume of building required. The housing stock of individual councils had grown exponentially since the war: starting with a national average housing stock of 1,400 in 1945, by 1975 the national average was 14,000 and for metropolitan boroughs 38,000 individual dwellings (Power, 1984, p. 359). The mismatch between the dedication to build and the reluctance to manage was starkly evident by the fact that throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, the government had about two hundred advisors on building and only one advisor on housing management (Power, 1987, p. 286). The centralised bureaucracy of housing management was complex and confusing – in some London boroughs, as much as twelve different departments could be responsible for delivering services to one particular estate. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the systems of education and health, housing management carried no enforceable standards, no inspectorate, and no statutes regulating the responsibilities of local authority landlords. By virtue of the sheer size of their housing stocks, a massive bureaucratic system, and a social and welfare role in uprooting demolished areas and rehousing vulnerable households, local authorities proved incapable of delivering effective management services. This proved particularly disastrous on the larger and more unpopular council estates, whose low demand
resulted in many empty lettings and a concentration of the more desperate households. Unguarded council estates with empty dwellings proved a prime target for vandalism, enhancing the already poor image of the estates.

New legislation offered a solution for local authorities sitting on large stocks of unpopular and hard-to-let council estates. First the Race Relations Act came in 1976, outlawing all forms of racial discrimination in all facets of life, including the access to housing. Then, in 1977, the Homeless Persons Act obliged local authorities to house the unintentionally homeless as a matter of priority. Although prioritising the groups in the greatest need seems legitimate, the way local authorities responded to these Acts would have grave consequences in terms of increasing the stigma of council estates. A survey by the GLC (Parker & Dugmore, 1976) showed how ethnic minority families who for a long time had been overtly excluded from council housing were now invariably being offered flats on the most unpopular estates. The “statutory homeless” as well would help fill up the growing number of vacancies in unpopular areas. These new homeless were disproportionately from vulnerable groups such as single parents, children leaving care and people with severe mental health problems (Power and Houghton, 2007, p. 83). These legislations, although well-meaning, would accelerate a process of residualisation between council estates. The result was predictable: the most vulnerable households in society were concentrated on the least popular estates, and the least popular estates were now invariably the large system-built Modernist estates. Those that were labelled “hard-to-let” in the mid-1970s would remain enclaves of social deprivation for the rest of the century (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998).

Conclusion

The aim of the present chapter has been to uncover the origins of the stigma attached to large post-war council estates. It is clear that some of the causes for stigma were embedded in the pressures and influences that led local authorities to adopt large council estates as the primary means by which to get rid of the remaining slums and to alleviate the post-war housing shortage. The way new and untried methods of industrialised system building were carried out on a vast scale would lead to an array of unexpected structural defects and would eventually come to a halt with the Ronan Point collapse. By that time, however, a large amount of system-built estates had been finished and many were still being erected. The image of the partially collapsed tower would cast a veil of stigma on all of them. Furthermore, the appeal of Modernist planning and architecture declined rapidly as the damage of the Modernist
approach to urban regeneration on both communities and the built environment became apparent. This triggered a reaction in the form of a new emphasis on conservation of existing communities as opposed to wholesale clearance. The more the virtues of small communities were expounded, the more stigmatizing light was cast upon the clean-sweeping style and top-down approach of Modernist housing schemes. The Pruitt-Igoe implosions triggered lines of enquiries into the relationship between design and behaviour that were appealing and influential, but ultimately inconclusive, arguable more effective in magnifying the stigma already attached to Modernist housing than offering anything in the form of tangible solutions. However, all of these factors were only secondary compared to the failure of local authorities to assume the role of landlords on the scale required by the massive increase in their housing stocks. It appears almost unbelievable today, but the optimism surrounding Modernist mass housing developments was so strong that it was assumed that the communities contained within them would largely take care of themselves. Of course they did not, and the failure to respond to emergent problems of vandalism, crime and anti-social behaviour on large estates by devising grass-roots, participatory and accountable management structures confirmed the popular belief that large estates had become abandoned enclaves of social malaise. In fact, the response to the growing number of vacant flats on difficult-to-let estates was to fill them up with those households which the local authorities were forced to house by the introduction of homelessness and race relations legislation. These were often the most vulnerable households in society, and thereby in need of the most meticulous and sensitive housing management, which the local authority system of central housing management was incapable of providing.

To return to the concept of fractured images discussed in chapter one, we see that a range of factors converged in producing a stigmatized external image of council estates: single events like Ronan Point and Pruitt-Igoe; the association between estates and slums; attacks on the genre itself and on the workings of slum clearance policies, first by intellectuals and later by a wider segment of society. However, such negative imaging could have been counteracted by responding with intense grass-roots management strategies, the provision of adequate amenities, and more sensible allocation policies to create more stable communities on large estates. When such measures failed to materialize, the external image of council estates was confirmed by an equally negative internal image.
A Case Study of the Doddington and Rollo Estate, Battersea

Introduction

The present chapter is a case study aiming to investigate how the nationwide tendencies discussed in the preceding chapter were manifested in one particular estate situated in the northern part of the inner-city London area of Battersea. The North Battersea area today is a visual microcosm of the nationwide residualisation of council housing described in chapter two. Its remaining pockets of local authority housing are increasingly left with the role of catering for “problem tenants” from other areas (Hall, 2007). Within the hierarchy of estates in the region, the Doddington and Rollo estate (from now on the Doddington) is widely considered to be the least desirable. It surfaces in the national media quite regularly for reasons of crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour. It belongs to a group of large post-war council estates that were virtually stigmatised by the day of the official opening, and continue to perpetuate stereotypical beliefs and conceptions about council estates to this day. The aim of this chapter is to uncover the origins of the Doddington’s stigma. The borough councils under which the Doddington was planned and constructed, first Battersea and then Wandsworth after 1965, have rich histories of public housebuilding schemes stretching back to the early days of council housing in Britain. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Progressive-controlled borough responded to squalor and overcrowding by building the much lauded Latchmere and Town Hall estates, attracting visits from foreign planners and a request to join the city planning exhibition in New York in 1909 (Thom, 2013b, p. 33). Why the Doddington should become such a stigmatized estate is therefore a particularly intriguing question, seeing that the boroughs could draw on nearly a century of experience with constructing successful council estates. This chapter will first situate the Doddington in its wider geographical and historical context and briefly recount the events leading up to its completion in 1971. The next section will account for the main factors contributing to its stigma that emerged during its first decade of existence. The last section discusses these problems in relation to their impact on the estate’s image and in light of the wider challenges facing the public housing sector during the period. The discussion suggests a new dimension to the category of external image that seems to have been overlooked in the literature on
stigma and housing estates: factors that influence an estate’s external image can either be specific to the estate or non-specific to the estate. The conclusion is that the stigma attached to the Doddington developed faster and further than other large post-war council estates because it had a number of stigmatizing factors that impacted its external and specific image as well as its internal image. These factors then compounded the stigmatizing effect of factors that were not specific to the estate, thereby exacerbating the stigma of the Doddington and contributing to its present-day status as one of the most notorious council estates in Britain.

Geographical and historical context

Battersea is an inner-city neighbourhood on the south bank of the Thames just south of Chelsea. It was a borough on its own accord until it was incorporated in the much larger London Borough of Wandsworth during the London government reorganization of 1965. The area has a long and rich history of intervention to improve housing conditions, stretching back to Victorian philanthropic societies in the nineteenth century and continued by a very active borough council and the LCC (later the GLC) during the twentieth century (Hall, 2007, p. 16). Most of these efforts were concentrated in the low-lying and distinctly working-class North Battersea, which became physically separated from the more affluent South Battersea by nineteenth century railway building. Firmly under Labour control from 1901, the Battersea Borough Council responded to the continuing spread of industries along the river by building much public housing. However, similarly to the post-war situation described in chapter two, most estates built in the period up until the 1930s were only affordable to skilled artisans and upper-working-class families (Hall, 2007, p. 17). Slums developed as poorer people congregated in derelict housing in the lower-lying, damp and polluted land closer to the railroads. Clearance schemes for this whole area, stretching the entire southern flank of Battersea Park Road, were developed in the 1930s but were cut short by the Second World War (Thom, 2013a, p. 18). The early stage of the borough’s planning for the area reflects the nationwide ambiguity surrounding the form that post-war reconstruction would take: The borough first planned in 1944 for the area to cater for an “undoubted preference for houses or maisonettes rather than block dwellings” (Battersea Borough Council, 1944), but by October 1945 the plan had changed to a “complete redevelopment of the area on modern lines by the construction of multi-storied flats, terraced houses, shopping centre, educational and recreational facilities, etc.” (Battersea Borough Council, 1945). As a result of Battersea’s wholehearted adoption of the emphasis towards “modern lines” and its vigorous commitment
to comprehensive slum clearance schemes, the lower part of North Battersea has the highest amount of post-war council estates in Battersea today.

The Doddington sits in the south-eastern corner of this area, comprising six long slab blocks rising between ten and fourteen storeys and a group of lower blocks of eight to six stories, 970 individual dwelling units in total. It is flanked by the heavily trafficked Battersea Park Road to the north and elevated railway tracks to its immediate east and south. It is easily recognized as a council estate built at the height of the post-war industrialised building drive by features such as its chequered colouring, serving to distinguish each prefabricated wall section from each other; the external walkways linking every other floor of the largest slab blocks, conforming to the Modernist ideal of “streets in the sky”; and the massive external service towers of raw concrete lining the northern ends of all the high-rise blocks. The largest blocks appear like the archetypical Corbusian slabs with unmistakable Brutalist features. Professor of architecture Peter Carolin has recounted the power struggle that occurred within the feverishly progressive Architectural Department of the LCC between a “hard” faction influenced by Le Corbusier and a “soft” faction adhering to Scandinavian empiricism (Carolin, 2008, pp. 106-7). The Doddington clearly reflects the ideals of the “hard” faction, which came to dominate the department towards the latter end of the post-war housing drive. The slabs are arranged according to the so-called Zeilenbau pattern: “a rather horizontal layout of slab blocks arranged in parallel to maximize sunlight orientation, without any regard for existing streets or contexts” (Guillery, 2010, p. 173).

Two distinct processes are discernible from the various municipal housebuilding schemes executed in the area between the immediate post-war years until planning on the Doddington started in 1964. One is a gradual movement away from “traditional” architectural features towards the “modern” lines anticipated by the council in 1945. Parallel to this is an increasing reliance on private contractors to fulfil the various stages of the construction process. In the Battersea edition of The Survey of London, Colin Thom (2013a, p. 18-19) details the development of the municipal housing projects in the area. When the area west of the future site of the Doddington was developed between 1948 and 1951, it included certain traditional features such as pitched roofs and embellished balconies, while the planning phase was carried out exclusively by the Council’s in-house engineers and the Surveyor’s staff. An adjacent scheme finished just shortly after would more clearly show the way ahead: designed by private architects and built by private contractors, the Rollo (Street) estate was crowned by
the eight-storey Rawson Court which, quite spectacularly for the time, rested on a frame of steel and concrete instead of the traditional load-bearing bricks. These tendencies of increasing private-sector participation and modern techniques and aesthetics were continued and enhanced with every new municipal construction scheme executed in the borough throughout the 1960s, culminating in the Doddington estate.

Planning for the Doddington started when the “numbers game” that had dominated central government housing policy since the mid-1950s had reached its peak and the enthusiasm for industrialised building in delivering the numbers was at an all-time high. Labour won the 1964 general election with a manifesto promising 500,000 new houses, and in Battersea the government found a Labour council determined to lead the way in delivering on the promise. Before Battersea’s housing committee was subsumed by Wandsworth in April 1965 it could report that 1,354 dwellings were under construction, adding that “the Council will be very much concerned with industrialized building” (Quoted in Thom, 2013b, p. 40). In 1967, Wandsworth as a whole had the target of over 5,000 dwellings to be completed within two years (Thom, 2013b, p. 40). Given that the annual output for the whole GLC during the late 1960s remained around 5,000 and 6,000 (Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994, p. 312), these numbers were extremely ambitious.

Battersea also attests to the fact that the building of large council estates was a source of pride for individuals and groupings within the municipalities. In 1964 the borough had reached the last phases of the overall development of the area in question, and Battersea’s Housing Committee “wished to crown the site with a spectacular memorial” (Thom, 2013a, p. 21) before the borough was slated to be subsumed by Wandsworth the following year. This “spectacular memorial” was to be the Doddington estate. The new Wandsworth Borough’s Housing Committee could confidently boast to a local newspaper in 1966 that “this will be the largest industrialised building project yet undertaken in the London area” (Quoted in Thom 2013a, p. 23). Senior executive of the construction company, Sir John Maurice Laing, exulted that “we have thrown down the gauntlet to London” (Quoted in Thom, 2013a, p. 23). These statements attest to the confidence surrounding large-scale industrialised building projects at the time, and how large council estates became a source of competition between municipalities. The enthusiasm for scale and efficiency that systems building seemingly promised was therefore high when the council awarded private contractor Laings the £6.19
million contract to build the Doddington using their Jesperson 12M pre-cast building system, seemingly after a competition involving several firms and methods of industrialized building.

The Stigmatization of the Doddington Estate

Work on the Doddington had merely begun when factors leading to its stigmatization began to unfold. The Ronan Point disaster occurred only two weeks after the ceremonial stone-laying at the Doddington’s construction site on 4 May 1968, triggering a national panic about all types of system building. Details of the Ronan Point disaster were broadcasted to the national public, and evidence of severely substandard workmanship was uncovered during the initial inquiry of the collapse (Griffiths, 1968). Although the Jesperson 12M system was not seen to be at fault, all aspects of the Doddington were subjected to inspection and some modifications were made, including an enforcement of all joints between panels and the exclusion of gas from all flats (Thom, 2013a, p. 23). However, the stigma that Ronan Point had cast upon all system-built schemes in the country was beyond physical repair. Estates such as the Doddington were now in the unfortunate situation of having to be completed at the same time as Ronan Point was bringing industrialised system building into severe disrepute. A few years later the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis would in a similar fashion add yet another layer of stigma on the Doddington. The slab blocks of Pruitt-Igoe that were imploded on live television in 1972 bore a striking resemblance to the larger slabs at the Doddington, and they were clearly constructed according to the same Modernist principles. While Ronan Point signalled the end of system-built high-rises in Britain, Pruitt-Igoe delegitimized Modernist design principles worldwide. Both events would have lasting negative effect on the Doddington’s image.

The architectural press mounted an instant and sustained attack on the estate. Already in 1970, as the first tenants were moving in to their new homes, the *Architectural Review* ran an article describing the estate as “grim, brooding” and “unbearably oppressive”, adding a note on the unfortunate effect that the disregard for context inherent in the Zeilenbau pattern of arrangement had on the Doddington: “the effect of angling these towering tenements at the railway is to make the din reverberate from block to block (…). The tenants at Doddington Road had better be stone deaf” (The Pitiless Economics, 1970). Thom argues that the Doddington became an “aunt sally for the new-found zeal of the architectural press in attacking high-rise and industrialized building” (2013a, p. 24). Its status as a failure in architectural circles was sealed when acclaimed architectural historians Bridget Cherry and
Nikolaus Pevsner gave the following verdict in the authoritative Pevsner Architectural Guides: “The grey chequered concrete slab blocks marching beside the railway are a chilling monument to that mistaken era of high-rise and industrialized building (…). The homely brick details of the low shops (...) cannot compensate for the arid, empty spaces over the car parks, the bleak upper access ways, and the inhuman scale of the whole conception” (Cherry & Pevsner, 1983). The architectural criticism of the Doddington clearly went beyond mere dissatisfaction with its architectural expression; it was also construed as a symbol of the worst excesses and failures of the era of mass housing. The Doddington indeed became a “spectacular monument”, although far from the kind envisioned by Battersea’s Housing Committee in 1964.

The Doddington’s role as an embodiment of all that went wrong with the post-war drive for industrialised housing was complete when the estate took centre stage in the first of the series of corruption scandals that would terminally blight the reputation of local authority housing. In January 1970, Wandsworth’s Town Clerk started investigations into the activities of Labour councillor Sidney Sporle. Sporle was a well reputed alderman who had grown up in the slums of Battersea. As mayor of Battersea and later chairman of the Housing Committees of Battersea and Wandsworth, Sporle was committed to improving the housing conditions of his home borough. As Thom (2013b, p. 38-9) argues, faster progress in housing became an obsession for Sporle, and the tempo of reconstruction in Battersea was greatly accelerated during his period as chairman of the Housing Committees. Sporle in some ways personified the post-war housing drive: his linking of progressive socialist ideals with the promises made by Modernists and new technologies is a plain expression of the “technological shortcut to social change” referred to by many housing scholars as a driving force behind the spread of system-built council estates (Etzioni & Remp, 1973; Dunleavy, 1981, p. 100). “This is socialism”, Sporle told a local newspaper in 1965, “three years ago we were building 250 new homes each year, now we shall build a thousand or more a year” (Quoted in Thom 2013b, p. 39).

Six years later, while the last remaining tenants were moving into the newly finished Doddington estate, the sincerity of Sporle’s egalitarian ideals was severely compromised as the details of the corruption scandal were laid bare for the national public. “Ex-Mayor Lied in Housing Contract” cried the Evening Standard at the start of the trial at the Old Bailey on the 12 February 1971. It was revealed that Sporle had received £500 for awarding the contract for
the Doddington to Laing’s, and another 1000£ regarding the drainage contract (Boughton, 2018, p. 132). Furthermore, Sporle and his wife, also a Wandsworth councillor, had accepted gifts such as theatre tickets to London’s West End. The case attracted widespread attention in the national press. The Daily Express ran a series of articles named the “Graft Bargain” story with headlines such as “Jury told of free trips to Paris and nights out in the West End” (1971). The Times followed suit: “Free Weekends in Paris for Councillors, Crown Alleges” (1971). Sporle was eventually jailed for four years for taking bribes (Boughton, 2018, p. 133).

According to Jones (Jones, 2016), the case attracted more attention than what would be normal in such cases because the trial linked Sporle to the wider network of corrupt activity in municipal housebuilding promoted by T. Dan Smith and John Poulson. At the centre of it all stood the newly finished Doddington estate, representing not only the failed social and architectural outcomes of the period of mass housing but also the corrupt practices that large-scale industrialised housing schemes attracted.

A final factor with negative effects on the external image of the Doddington relates to its location. The fact that it is located very close to the main railway line between the Clapham and Victoria stations means that it is highly visible for the tens of thousands of commuters that frequent that line every day. Around the time when the Sporle corruption case was directing the national media’s attention to the Doddington, this location must surely have added to its overall stigmatization. More importantly, however, is the fact that the long-term process of gentrification began to change the demographic landscape of North Battersea from the 1970s onwards. The transformation was sudden and dramatic. In the 1960s, Battersea had become a rather tough neighbourhood. John Walsh, who grew up in the area, described it in the 1960s as “a dump, a service area for Clapham Junction (…) a stridently working-class and immigrant neighbourhood (…) a tough, coarse-grained part of inner suburbia” (Walsh, 1999, p. 52). However, during the 1970s, Battersea started to be attractive as a residential area especially for young professionals from West London areas like Fulham and Chelsea, finding cheaper accommodation but still close enough to the centre, which explains its 1980s nickname “South Chelsea”. By 1974 it was reported that:

An increasing number of young professional people have moved into the area. A whole range of shops and services have sprung up to serve them, like wine bars, specialist and antique shops, which also have the effect of squeezing out those that
previously met the needs of the existing population (Beresford & Beresford, 1978, pp. 24-25)

Taking into account Forrest and Kearns’ notion of a “comparative psychological landscape” (2001, p. 2135; see chapter one) that shapes an area’s image by how it is perceived in relation to surrounding areas, the stigmatization of the Doddington should be expected to have increased proportionately to the gentrification of the rest of North Battersea. The gentrification process was exacerbated after the Thatcher government’s promotion of council house sales since 1980 (Hall, 2007, p. 17), but the origins of the process can be traced back to the 1970s. The rising affluence of its surroundings increased the Doddington’s conspicuousness and lowered its assigned place in the urban neighbourhood hierarchy.

While all of the above factors would severely damage the external image of the Doddington, the internal image as well turned negative immediately upon completion. Various structural deficiencies started to appear while the flats were being occupied between December 1969 and February 1971. The blocks were fitted with an ambitious central heating system that quickly began to show signs of chronic failure. At one point, 400 of the 970 flats had lost all heating, and the council had to keep two plumbers on permanent standby to attend to problems, while many households simultaneously had the unpleasant experience of having to cope with recurring severe backflows of sewage (Boughton, 2018, p. 131). Thom (2013a, p. 24-25) recounts how, in a manner symptomatic for the period, the government failed to respond to the estate’s rapid decay. Already by 1972 the Doddington tenants’ association told a local newspaper that the estate was turning into a slum. Although the initial structural defects played a major role in their assessment, the main problem was seen by the tenants’ association to be the lack of adequate social amenities on the site. “There were no facilities at all for children and young people, and no community centre”, Christine Eccles observed after having directed a community theatre group on the estate in 1974 (Eccles, 1974). The association called for a public enquiry into the estate in 1976-7, only to be rejected by the government. Some minor remedial works were conducted but had little effect in terms of improving the general situation. The estate, it seems, was abandoned by the council. One Wandsworth member of staff recalled how “the council officers themselves had lost confidence in the estate. They just couldn’t cope with the sheer volume of problems” (Quoted in Thom, 2013a, p. 24). Concurrent with the nationwide tendency described in chapter three, it was the inadequacy of amenities and management that had the most damaging effect on an
estate’s internal image. The damage done to the Doddington’s internal image was clearly of a lastingly sort: by 1984 it was reported that as much as a third of the tenants were on the housing transfer list (Thom, 2013a, p. 24). Only in 1985, on the occasion of the opening of a Resident’s Centre, could the then chairman of the tenant association, Dave Vider, say that “[f]or the first time, the Council really seems to be trying hard to make the Doddington a decent place to live” (Major Opens New Centre, 1985). While all of the factors bearing on the Doddington’s external image may have influenced their decision to want to move out of the estate, the council’s blatant disregard for the tenant association’s calls for improvements must surely have been a decisive factor.

Specific vs. Non-Specific External Image

A case of bad timing is one way of accounting for the stigmatization of the Doddington. When it was conceived in 1964, Britain was about to embark upon the most intense period of municipal housing output in the post-war period. Enthusiasm was high for the promises of Modernism and new technologies to get rid of the slums and provide more and better housing for all. However, by the time it opened in 1971, the whole approach of “comprehensive redevelopment” as it was performed by local authorities during the height of the post-war housing drive was beginning to fall into serious disrepute. The Ronan Point disaster had already triggered massive qualms about industrialised system building, intellectuals had been mounting attacks on the devastating effects of slum clearance on local communities for over a decade, and the political tide as well as popular opinion had turned away from mass housing towards the conservation of old neighbourhoods.

However, a more productive way to understand the origins of the stigmatization of the Doddington is to analyse the stigmatizing factors by taking into account Dean and Hasting’s (2000, p. 13; see chapter one) notion of estates having fractured images containing both internal and external images. While the internal image is formed by inhabitants and daily users of the estate, and thereby likely to be based on its actual physical and social characteristics, the external image is based on how outsiders perceive it. Furthermore, the stigmatizing factors that have been discussed above reveals an added dimension to the category of the external image that seems to have been overlooked in the literature on stigma on housing estates: factors that influence an estate’s external image can either be specific to the estate or non-specific to the estate. Factors that are specific to the Doddington shape the external image of the Doddington without having consequences for other estates, while
factors that are non-specific shape the image of the Doddington while simultaneously shaping the image of a wider selection of council estates. The internal image will always be specific to the Doddington, seeing that the internal image is formed by inhabitants and daily workers through their personal experiences with that particular estate. However, similar factors as those affecting the internal image of the Doddington can of course be found elsewhere, which lends the possibility of assessing the degree to which these factors are represented across a wider selection of council estates. The following analysis will then be based on a framework of three categories of images: external and non-specific, external and specific, and internal.

Starting with the external and non-specific image, the Ronan Point disaster and the Pruitt-Igoe implosions both impacted the external image of the Doddington, but these were far from specific to the Doddington. Ronan Point affected the external image of all system-built housing estates, and the Pruitt-Igoe implosions impacted the image of all large housing developments built according to Modernist ideals. However, the Doddington was in an especially vulnerable position in relation to these events: to Ronan Point because it still had to be constructed in the wake of the collapse using a similar type of system building technique, and to Pruitt-Igoe because of its similarity in form and arrangement. Nevertheless, this vulnerable position was shared by a number of estates being constructed in Britain around the same time and was therefore not specific to the Doddington.

The stigmatizing factors that shaped the external image of the Doddington while also being specific to the estate were the attacks from the architectural press, the gentrification of the surrounding area and the corruption case. These factors had a negative impact on the external image specific to the Doddington. The factors most clearly shaping the Doddington’s internal image were the initial structural deficiencies and the lack of adequate amenities. While the details of these factors are exclusive to the Doddington, they are also commensurate with nationwide tendencies described in chapter three: various structural deficiencies and inadequacies appeared on a vast number of system-built estates, especially those built towards the latter part of the period of mass housing. Furthermore, in addition to poor management, the lack of adequate amenities was found in the previous chapter to be one of the main factors for shaping an estate’s internal image in a negative way.
Conclusion

Contrary to claims made by many scholars researching the stigma of housing estates (Wassenberg, 2013, p. 227; Hastings and Dean, 2004, p. 13), the external image of a council estate is not always based on simple stereotypical beliefs. By subdividing the category of the external image into a specific and a non-specific image, this chapter shows that those factors impacting the external and specific image of the Doddington cannot be labelled as mere stereotypes. While the architectural criticism was surely based on the highly subjective sensibilities of professional actors, the criticism itself had a negative effect on the external image of the Doddington that was highly palpable. Furthermore, the stigma derived from the gentrification of the surrounding area was not based on a stereotypical belief but on a process which can be evidenced by empirical data. Finally, the stigma arising from the corruption case would have a profound impact on the external image of the Doddington based on facts that have been tested in the court of law and therefore far from stereotypical. All of these factors may of course have generated stereotypes, such as the belief that corruption was a factor in all large post-war council estates, but the factors themselves were not based on stereotypical beliefs.

In conclusion, the stigmatization of the Doddington aligns with the factors that led to the stigma of large post-war council estates in general. It had a vulnerable position vis-à-vis the factors that were non-specific to the estate itself, notably the Ronan Point disaster and the Pruitt-Igoe implosions, which it shared with a number of other estates built during the same period according to the same design principles. The negative effect on its internal image deriving from the structural deficiencies and the lack of amenities also aligns with nationwide tendencies for estates built at the height of the post-war housing drive, and the council’s failure to respond to the tenant’s warnings about the declining trajectory of the estate was symptomatic for the period. The stigmatization of the Doddington developed faster and further than comparable estates because of a potent set of factors that had a negative effect specifically on the image of the Doddington which compounded the factors impacting its external non-specific and its internal image.
Conclusion

The aim of the present thesis has been to uncover the origins of the double stigma attached to large post-war council estates. The double stigma refers to the stigma attached to the tenure of council housing in one end, and the stigma attached to large post-war council estates in the other. Chapter two concludes that the tenure of council housing became stigmatized through a set of interlinking processes including the promotion of home ownership as the most “normal” and beneficial form of housing tenure; a political convergence towards a narrowing role of council housing as a “safety net” as opposed to a universal welfare state service; and the increasing role of local authorities in conducting mass schemes of comprehensive slum clearance. The cumulated effect of these pressures was to set council housing on a path of residualisation from which it has never escaped. The stigmatization of council housing therefore originates from pressures and influences that led to a strong association between council housing and disadvantage.

Chapter three concludes that the stigma of large post-war council estates derives from a multitude of factors that impacted negatively on the image of council estates. Some of these factors were single events, like the Ronan Point disaster and the Pruitt-Igoe implosions, while others were long-term structural and societal factors, such as the increasing rejection of the Modernist project of urban renewal and the shift in emphasis towards the conservation of existing inner-city neighbourhoods. However, the decisive factor in entrenching the low position held by the large post-war council estates in the urban hierarchy was found to be the negligence of central and local government to respond adequately to early signs of social breakdown on estates. The centralized bureaucracy of housing policy was well suited for propelling British council housing into “the most significant housing programme of the Western world” (Power, 1987, p. 285), but much less so to perform the role of landlord presiding over such a massive stock of council homes which the era of mass housing had left them with. This conflict of demand between the pressures for massive outputs and the welfare responsibility for the communities rehoused on large estates was exacerbated by the introduction of race relations and homelessness legislation during the 1970s. Instead of responding by devising sensitive and responsive management and allocation structures capable of supporting such vulnerable households, local authorities used the new legislation to fill up vacancies on the most unpopular and hard-to-let estates and thereby intensify their stigmatization. Lacking in adequate social amenities and with a system of management far
removed from the estates themselves, many large council estates developed into pockets of social and physical decline, often surrounded by areas experiencing increased gentrification. The very scale of the housing programme prevented local authorities from responding adequately to their role as social welfare landlords. Serially produced mass housing schemes originally intended as an equalizing welfare measure ended up as repositories for those left out from participating in the general rise in prosperity.

The convergence of the two stigmas is then to be found in the era of mass housing, when a massive expansion of the housing programme coincided with a narrowing of the scope and role of public housing provision. The widespread disaffection with the workings of slum clearance and the dismissal of the style and form of Modernist mass housing schemes translated into a general rejection of the whole council housing programme. The residualisation of the council housing sector as a whole was mirrored in the increased concentration of vulnerable households on large post-war council estates. The increasing marginalisation and stigmatization of council housing and council estates that occurred after 1980 followed entrenched patterns of urban stratification that were well established by the 1970s.

The Doddington and Rollo estate is a particularly illustrative case study in this sense. The criticism of the estate itself became a criticism of the shape and form that council housing adopted during the era of mass housing. The estate stood to represent all that went wrong during the period: it was too large and too intrusive, poorly managed, built and maintained, abandoned by the council and superseded by its surroundings. Every single day tens of thousands of commuters would pass it by train, perhaps reflecting over how public construction projects on such a massive scale could lure even well-respected figures such as Sidney Sporle into a web of corruption.

The residualisation of council housing does not necessarily have to be an altogether negative thing. For example, when poor and vulnerable households transfer from the private rented sector into council housing they contribute to the residualisation of council housing, but those households gain a security of tenure and affordability which the private rented sector lacks. At the opposite end of the residualisation process, council housing has given a great number of households the stability and predictability needed in order to participate in the rising levels of affluence that society as a whole experienced during the “glorious thirty”. For most households, the eventual transfer into homeownership has been the principal means for
becoming stakeholders in this rise in prosperity. For these reasons, council housing can be seen as being a victim of its own success. The problem, however, is that the stigma that developed decreases the chances for the preceding generation of council housing tenants to do the same thing. The stigma of council housing can keep people in council housing. Therefore, if a residual approach to council housing is desirable, this has to be integrated with effective strategies that counter stigmatization so that these households may more fully enjoy the many benefits that council housing offers. The findings in the present thesis suggests that the most effective way to combat a stigmatized image of an estate is to counterbalance the negative external image by devising a positive internal image through grass-roots and participatory management structures, adequate provision of social amenities, and sensitive allocation policies.
References

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Secondary Sources:


