Urban Nightmares and Dystopias or Places of Hope?
Gerry Mooney

Estate: An Intimate History
Jynsey Hanley, Granta Books, 2007

Back to ‘Workhouse Social Welfare’?
English Housing Minister Caroline Flint’s suggestion in February 2008 that unemployed council and housing association tenants (collectively termed ‘social housing’ tenants) must now sign ‘commitment contracts’ requiring them to seek work for the privilege of living in a council house smacks of successive generations of social welfare policy which, over the period of the past four hundred years or so – and certainly going back to the Elizabethan poor relief reforms. Her proposal to have council tenants sign ‘commitment contracts’ requiring them to seek work for the privilege of living in a council house smacks of successive generations of social welfare policy which, over the period of the past four hundred years or so – and certainly going back to the Elizabethan poor relief reforms – have sought to focus attention on those deemed to be ‘unsuitable’ for work. This in turn has come to be associated largely, though by no means exclusively, with the council estate. More recently, following the Government in London launched the Youth Crime Action Plan for England and Wales which promises to further extend the targeting of ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem’ families and the parents of unruly children. Among the sanctions announced include possible eviction of the ‘workless’ council estate where ‘benefit’ and ‘dependency’ cultures endure, and in which crime and delinquency apparently flourish, and “‘dependency’ cultures endure, and in which crime and delinquency apparently flourish, and where council estate residents for being contributors to ‘their’ own misfortune, evidenced by claims about local law enforcement agencies, to blame victim blaming and individualist understandings of the moral panic over the urban poor and welfare dependency. Such discourses, the city or the ‘urban’ is an important socio-psychological function for the construction of particular locales, and the term ‘socially excluded’ and there’s no need to apply”.

‘Nightmares’, ‘Dystopias’ and Moral Panics
While the spectacle of the council estate plays an important symbolic role in such representations and discourses, the city or the ‘urban’ is an ever present backdrop. In other significant ways this also echoes a long history of anti-urban sentiment which together with anti-poor discourses have come to be entangled in different and complex ways to construct particular locales as dystopian and pathological. Steve Macek’s ‘Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City’, provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the ways in which a climate of fear and hostility to the city has been part of popular imaginings in the United States over the past two decades. In particular, he is concerned with the ways in which conservatives (including journalists in leading US newspapers) have been successful in constructing and representing “the nation’s cities as violent and out of control, as populated by murderers, muggers, drug addicts and lowlifes, as places where the rules of normal, decent behaviour no longer apply”. Such sentiments have been further articulated, as emphasised, by a complicit mass media and by Hollywood to conjure up a vision of another America wherein “apocalyptic social decay, wanton violence and depravity” became the staples of rolling news reportage, newspaper story backdrops and popular films. Macek argues that the effects of such imagery was to shock suburban America, which he claims was still influenced by the 1950s and 1960s ideals and imagery of ‘traditional American family values’. The ensuing culture of fear around urban decay and disorder that both reflected and fuelled a new wave of anti-urbanism was to find policy outcomes that have become all too apparent on both sides of the Atlantic, lending support and legitimacy to “an expanded police state coupled with a stripped-down welfare apparatus”. Urban Nightmares is a very readable chronicle of the moral panic over the urban poor and marginalised which has come to be the dominant story of US urban life in recent times. All the familiar ingredients of an underclass ideology are to be found in this proliferating discourse: moral breakdown, flawed lifestyles, dysfunctional families, violence and welfare dependency. Such ways of thinking were to find inauspicious expression in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, as part of a concerted effort by conservative politicians, city elites, property developers, and of course local law enforcement agencies, to blame explicit sections of New Orleans’ impoverished residents for being contributors to ‘their’ own predicament. Bubbling beneath the surface, race and the racial disparity of income was a key issue. However, as Macek argues, this was euphemized in different ways, for instance, ‘the inner city’ or even in the term, ‘underclass’. Such linguistic turnings of phrase ‘performed an important socio-psychological function for the white middle class in that it provides them with a series of code words that permit the expression of deeply felt anti-black and Latino sentiment with little self-consciousness or embarrassment’.

Territorial Stigmatisation
Flint is but one in a long and growing line of politicians, policy-makers, journalists and commentators who indulge in the popular pastime of territorial stigmatisation: “Over the last two decades the gap between these worst estates and the rest of the country has grown... It shines us as a nation, it wastes lives and we all have to pay the costs of dependency and social division.” Tony Blair, 1998

“The truth is that council housing is a living tomb. You dare not give up the house because you might never get another. And staying is to be trapped in a ghetto of both place and mind.” Will Hutton, 2007

...there are thousands of people across Britain eking out lives...marked by violence, educational underachievement, unemployment, sickness and disease...At the heart of a thriving city in Britain lies a second city, hidden from visitors’ eyes.” Amelia Hill, 2003

“Ghettoes of the workless and the hopeless.” Polly Toynbee, 1998

In these brief extracts there is a shared view across the mainstream political spectrum of the council estate as a place of ‘worklessness’, ‘benefit dependency’, anti-social behaviour, and ‘moral decline’ – of hopelessness and despair. These are the kinds of locales increasingly identified by politicians and policy advisors as places where moral breakdown is translated into social breakdown. This is nothing less than an antipathy to working class cultures and to working class life, an antipathy which in many respects not that dissimilar from the anti-working class hatred that is central to ‘underclass’ ideologies. Such ideologies construct the impoverished poor as a group cut-off from ‘normality’, as the authors of their own misfortune, evidenced by claims about the disorganised, deviant and depraved lifestyles of those deemed to be part of such an underclass. Dress it up any way you wish, by all means use the term ‘socially excluded’ and there’s no need to make reference to ‘the underclass’. But there’s no escaping that what we have in these brief comments is the continuing prevalence for a place and people stigmatisation that is shaped and influenced by decades of conservative thinking about poverty and disadvantage. In this approach structural factors such as class, racism and state oppression are completely neglected in favour of an attack and demonisation of public welfare as a major factor that underpins the reproduction of poverty, family dysfunctionality and which contributes to wider issues of law and order, community fragmentation and breakdown. We find ourselves in a position now, once again, of having to rebut such ideas and discourses, to reject victim blaming and individualist understandings wherever they emerge.

“Simply” an exercise in thinking ‘outside the box’

Flint expressed some initial surprise that council tenants are more likely to be unemployed than other sections of the population and that poverty and unemployment have come to be associated largely, though by no means exclusively, with the council estate. More recently, following the Government in London launched the Youth Crime Action Plan for England and Wales which promises to further extend the targeting of ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem’ families and the parents of unruly children. Among the sanctions announced include possible eviction of the ‘workless’ council estate where ‘benefit’ and ‘dependency’ cultures endure, and in which crime and delinquency apparently flourish, has become a recurring story across swathes of television documentaries and dramas, popular fiction, travelogues and cinema. But, more significantly, over the past decade the ‘moral panic’ that dominated the ‘Tories’ administrations has become increasingly central to New Labour’s electoral and policy making rhetoric. It is this which has provided the backdrop for Flint’s assertions – and which helps to inform a range of more punitive government approaches to crime and indeed to increasing criminalisation.

While the spectacle of the council estate plays an important symbolic role in such representations and discourses, the city or the ‘urban’ is an ever present backdrop. In other significant ways this also echoes a long history of anti-urban sentiment which together with anti-poor discourses have come to be entangled in different and complex ways to construct particular locales as dystopian and pathological. Steve Macek’s ‘Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City’, provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the ways in which a climate of fear and hostility to the city has been part of popular imaginings in the United States over the past two decades. In particular, he is concerned with the ways in which conservatives (including journalists in leading US newspapers) have been successful in constructing and representing “the nation’s cities as violent and out of control, as populated by murderers, muggers, drug addicts and lowlifes, as places where the rules of normal, decent behaviour no longer apply”. Such sentiments have been further articulated, as emphasised, by a complicit mass media and by Hollywood to conjure up a vision of another America wherein “apocalyptic social decay, wanton violence and depravity” became the staples of rolling news reportage, newspaper story backdrops and popular films. Macek argues that the effects of such imagery was to shock suburban America, which he claims was still influenced by the 1950s and 1960s ideals and imagery of ‘traditional American family values’. The ensuing culture of fear around urban decay and disorder that both reflected and fuelled a new wave of anti-urbanism was to find policy outcomes that have become all too apparent on both sides of the Atlantic, lending support and legitimacy to “an expanded police state coupled with a stripped-down welfare apparatus”. Urban Nightmares is a very readable chronicle of the moral panic over the urban poor and marginalised which has come to be the dominant story of US urban life in recent times. All the familiar ingredients of an underclass ideology are to be found in this proliferating discourse: moral breakdown, flawed lifestyles, dysfunctional families, violence and welfare dependency. Such ways of thinking were to find inauspicious expression in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, as part of a concerted effort by conservative politicians, city elites, property developers, and of course local law enforcement agencies, to blame explicit sections of New Orleans’ impoverished residents for being contributors to ‘their’ own predicament. Bubbling beneath the surface, race and the racial disparity of income was a key issue. However, as Macek argues, this was euphemized in different ways, for instance, ‘the inner city’ or even in the term, ‘underclass’.

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In an evocatively entitled section which explores ‘The Cinema of Suburban Paranoia’, Macek neatly considers the important ways in which these visions of an urban nightmare influence mainstream US cinema. These sentiments are echoed in films such as ‘Batman’ (1989), ‘Boogie of the Vanities’ (1990), ‘Grand Canyon’ (1991), ‘Judgement Night’ (1993) and ‘Seven’ (1995), among many others. Here, urban violence, gang warfare and the stock story of apocalyptic urban social breakdown provide the backdrop. But if the racialised discourse is couched in other terms, on the blogosphere, web, and in video home entertainment systems, such sentiments are rarely hidden but given much more of a voice. Many video games (the Grand Theft Auto series or
A Failure of American Liberalism?
The dominance of conservative and right-wing views circumscribing the city, disadvantage, and poverty, is accompanied for Maciek by the collapse of US liberalism. In particular, the Clinton Presidency was held to be particularly culpable of surrendering to conservative ideologies, reflected in the 1994 ‘Crime Control Bill’ and then in 1996 the ‘Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act’. These two acts played to conservative-inspired fears of urban breakdown, dependency and worklessness. But the liberal reformer went beyond the Clinton administration, a ‘victim-blaming discourse’ gripped liberal thinking. This was reflected in “It is not British civilization that aids, the ‘moral poverty’ which in turn fed a language which spoke of ‘criminogenic environments’ and ‘superpredators’ (or in the term favoured by right-wing commentators: ‘superpredators’) but which also deployed a range of ‘biologically-derived’ metaphors which worked to demonize teenage mothers, and alsounky youth.

The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of ‘cultures of poverty’ arguments, for example) was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the ‘inner-city’, contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of the ‘suburbs’. All this reminds us of the close interconnections between the constructions of particular places and particular kinds of people and populations as problematic.

Particular Kinds of People in Particular Kinds of Places

“Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Estates mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless poverty, failure, anarchy, a life of squalor induced by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity.”21 “...you only have to say the word ‘estates’ for someone to infer a vast amount of meaning from it. It’s a brusque in the form of a word; it hits the nerves that register shame, disgust, fear and, very occasionally, fierce pride.”22

Resident Evil (for example) rely on stereotypical imagery of the urban or Latino gangster, for instance. But the reality of council estates not only reflect but also serve to reproduce anti-urban visions of social breakdown, anonymity and violence.

Council estates have long been vilified, likewise estate residents have rarely been viewed in positive terms: ‘sink estates’, ‘problem estates’, ‘deprived’ and ‘degraded’ estates. As in the USA, a decade or so there has been a growing consensus among right and left-of-centre politicians, policy-makers and political commentators on council estates. Take the following from ‘leftfield’ journalist and commentator Will Hutton in the aftermath of several teenage murders in South London in February 2007:

Urban Apartheid UK Style

“Council estates are nothing to be scared of unless you are frightened of inequity. There is a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter.”23

Jenny Hanley, ‘Estates: An Intimate History’

Hanley recounts the infamous story of Cutteslowe Walls. Cutteslowe was an area of Oxford where adjoining council and private estates were built in the early 1930s and accommodated a growing population of the town, then prospering on the expansion of the first generation of motor factories. These two estates were closely distinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1934 two walls (one metal and one brick) across the verges and gardens between the two estates to completely isolate the council tenants. This illegal wall stayed put until the late 1950s. This was nothing less than an exercise in class segregation – class apartheid. Hanley is well aware that Britain is a class divided society – even if her understanding of class is somewhat vague and undeveloped. In other places it reads almost as a Weberian notion of status – for Weber, as a third category distinct from ‘class’ and ‘power’, ‘status’ was understood in relation to ‘respect’ and ‘prestige’: status groups were hierarchically arrayed on the basis of distinctive lifestyles, consumption patterns, and modes of conduct or action, and therefore the inconsistency between someone’s social status and economic class (status inconsistency) might have strong effects on people’s behaviour. She is clear that Thatcherism in the form of ‘right to buy’, lack of investment, and the ensuing realisation of council estates has contributed to the problems of concentrated poverty and social inequality and other social problems. Her solutions entail the redesign of council housing, giving tenants a greater say in the day-to-day running of their estates and building ‘community’ in the estates – though critics of council estates frequently complain that they have too much community, but of the wrong kind. But it also calls for a complete restructuring of council housing; seeing it as an ‘integral part’ of the national housing stock which she claims will help to remove
the negative associations and views that it is “second class” housing.

To return to the idea of a workhouse social policy: As New Labour becomes increasingly more punitive around benefit entitlements, with recently announced plans6-10 to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, at a rate of £1.70 per hour! And with council tenants now being told by Caroline Flint that their tenancy may depend on them taking up paid employment, policing, regulating and disciplining poor people is increasingly the order of the day.

**Landscapes of Class**

“...these entrenched quarters of misery have ‘made a name’ for themselves as repositories of all the urban ills of the age, places to be shunned, feared and deprecated. It matters little that the discourses of demonisation that have mushroomed about them often have tenuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such negativised areas of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurfacing prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants. ...”

Loïc Wacquant, “Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium” The “urban outcasts”11 of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff of parody, of ridicule but also of vicious class hatred. As such the class-basis of these discourses are somewhat neglected by both Macek and Hanley. The construction and representation of particular places as problems does not happen in isolation from the wider class relations which permeate society and which underpin right-wing and conservative ways of thinking (as well as shaping some of the ‘left’ of centre discourses highlighted here).

The idea of the ‘ghetto poor’12 or ‘slum poor’ has a long and pernicious history in examples in late nineteenth century middle class concerns with ‘the rookeries’ of London) and while the language might have changed – the sentiments and way in which this discourses carry are only too evident in the context of the neo-liberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such poor and disadvantaged groups are portrayed as recalcitrants, as in some ways less adaptable and ‘conservative’ in that they are unwilling to change to face new challenges.

The ways in which disadvantaged locales are constructed and represented often act as euphemisms for problem people. The use of such euphemisms reminds us again of the ways in which US liberals couched their embracing of conservative ‘blame the victim’ discourses in a range of figures of speech. But hidden not so far beneath the surface is a pathological view of working class life. As Chris Haylett has forcefully argued: “The issue then, is not so much the existence of working-class conditions (of hardship, exploitation and so on) as the particular ways in which they are problematised and the solutions attendant upon these ways of thinking. Put bluntly, where working-class identities and cultures and the processes through which they are constituted are not seen to warrant debate, target problems easily become targetted lives, little more than the adjuncts of rationalistic theory and policy-making. It would seem that this elision, practised by politicians and theorists alike, is partly about a troubled approach to relationships between class and culture. Working-class cultures are positioned at the apex of those troubles, as problematic, in need and usually in receipt but not capable of giving or teaching anything of worth to dominant centres of value (public space, political institutions, middle-class ways of being).”

At least Hanley holds on to the idea that council estates can be places that can offer hope and they can be places of resistance. Indeed, if council housing were the uniformly appalling places they are thought to be, why have many tenants fought and voted against council stock transfer? Council housing has played a significant historic role in meeting the housing needs of millions of people in the UK. What is needed now is a vast investment in remaking council housing, not its complete and utter destruction – but this is also tied to a wider commitment to re-establishing welfare and social need as a right, not a punishment! This, of course, would have to include the reintroduction of the basic democratic mechanisms of local government that have also eroded. As Macek shows in the context of the contemporary United States, free market policies have failed. In the face of the celebration of the market by New Labour, such ‘solutions’ are also failing here in the UK.

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**Notes**


3. Many benefits and social policies are more complicated than they used to be, having an array of eligibility criteria and conditions attached to them. Drug users risk benefit cuts: Jobcentre staff will be able to withhold cash and force claimants to attend treatment programmes, The Observer, Sunday July 20, 2008 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jul/20/drugpolicy.welfare?gusrc=rss&feed=uknews

4. The Blair government created 3,022 new criminal offences in nine-years from starting office in May 1997, one for almost every day it had been in power and twice the rate of the previous Tory administration. “Blair’s ‘frenzied law making’: a new offence for every day spent in office”, The Independent, Nigel Morris, Wednesday, 16 August 2006.


11. The nature of paid employment today is that benefits are workers are themselves are in receipt of benefits. In the face of mass privatisations of sections of the Department for Work are unprecedented in their scale. Their functions of jobcentres, Mark Serweta of The Public and Commercial Services union was reported in the Guardian as saying: “We have far too many members administering government benefits that they also have to claim just to scrape together a living.” The Guardian, Tuesday February 17, 2004 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/feb/17/uk.whitehall


15. Macek, p.65

16. Macek, p.65


18. Macek, p.135

19. Macek, p.110

20. Macek, pp56/58


22. Hanley, p.20


25. Hanley, p.11

26. Hanley, p.149

27. Hanley, p.4

28. Hanley, p.5


