Urban nightmares and dystopias, or places of hope?

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2008 Unknown

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://www.variant.org.uk/issue33.html

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
Urban Nightmares and Dystopias: or Places of Hope?

Gerry Mooney

Estate: An Intimate History
Jonsey Hanley, Ganta 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) may now regard their homes as ‘workhouses’ – widely criticised, or alternatively dismissed, as ‘simply’ an exercise in thinking ‘outside the box’, ‘thinking the unthinkable’ or ‘blue skies thinking’ – has been well received and widely reported. It is significant that her Cabinet colleagues were keen to distance themselves from her. Flint’s ideas were, nonetheless, only too indicative of a deep-seated way of thinking about poor and impoverished people that has an enduring legacy in the UK – and across much of the Western world. 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 ‘the workless’ council estate where ‘benefit’ is central to ‘underclass’ ideologies.1 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 workless’ council estate. There’s no escaping that what we have in these brief comments is the continuing prevalence for a people and place stigmatisation that is shaped and influenced by decades of conservative thinking around 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 courses, to reject victim blaming and individualist understandings wherever they emerge.

‘Nightmares’, ‘Dystopias’ and Moral Panics

While the spectre 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 has 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 (2006) 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.”2 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”3 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”.4

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 persuasive brew: moral breakdown, flawed lifestyles, dysfunctional families, violence and welfare dependency. Such ways of thinking were to find infamous 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 predicaments. 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, ‘urban’.5

Such linguistic turns 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’.

In an evocatively entitled section which explores ‘The Cinema of Suburban Paranoid’, 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), Bonfire 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 Macke 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 agenda went beyond the Clinton administration, a ‘victim-blaming discourse’ gripped liberal thinking. This was reflected in ‘It is not British civilization thatails the ides of the moral poverty’ which in turn fed a language which spoke of ‘criminalogenic environments’ and ‘supercriminals’ (or in the term favoured by right-wing commentators: ‘superepredators’) but which also deployed a range of ‘biologically-derived’ metaphors which worked to demonize teenage mothers and unruly youth.

The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of ‘disciplinary’ arguments, for example) was what was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the ‘inner-city’, contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of suburban US life. 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 petty crime, ‘social players’, ‘gangs’, the ‘loony bin’, the chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity.”

Post-1945 Britain; a need that the private sector – then as much as now – is unable and unwilling to meet. Housing the poorest sections of the population was always a laudable aim – even if many of the pioneering generations of tenants in the higher quality council estates in inter-war Britain were hardly the poorest citizens. In the aftermath of World War II up to the 1970s, the public sector provided housing for nearly half of the entire UK population, many living on the kinds of estates now the objects and subjects of middle-class sneering and vilification. Council estates were not always ‘blots on the urban landscape’! Hanley shows that council estates in the 1950s and 1960s, while often falling short of policy making ideals, were far removed from the slum landlordism which characterised the private renting sectors. Cottage-style estates mushroomed, mimicking in various but not always the ideals of the garden city movement of planned communities. But already in the 1950s ‘concerns’ were being voiced that council estates were characterised by extreme deprivation, despite their initial wide social appeal, were increasingly single-class locales.

By the mid to late 1950s and reaching a peak in the 1960s and early 1970s, high-rise housing (together with a penchant among some construction firms and architects for ‘deck-access’ type housing, typically in Manchester or Darney in Glasgow) demobilised the demise of council housing.

Under Thatcher and the Tories in the 1980s and 1990s, tenants ‘right to buy’ the home they were living in served to deplete council housing stock, it also hastened the rise in property prices through encouraging owner speculation. With remaining council housing stock concentrated in less well serviced areas with fewer employment opportunities, it also served to further isolate and stigmatise tenants, with remaining public sector provision seen as a residualised form of housing of the last resort for those who were not attractive propositions for market provision. This was closely followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by en bloc stock transfer of council housing ownership to a range of private registered social housing companies.

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

Council estate living can be tough – especially for those living on low incomes and in acute material hardship.

Urban Apartheid UK Style

“Council estates are nothing to be scared of, unless you are frightened of inequality. 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.”

Hanley recounts the infamous story of Cuttslowe Walls. Cuttslowe was an area of Oxford where adjoining council and private estates were built in the early 1930s. Accommodating the growing population of the town, then prospering on the expansion of the first generation of motor factories. These two estates were basically distinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1954 two walls (one of steel and one of metal) across the two estates and the ensuing residualisation of council estates

Hanley is absolutely right to talk of a sense of exclusion and of alienation but she is also right to say that there is a tendency here – and territory that I fear she is not always successful in traversing. Hanley is well aware that council estates have diverse cultures and multiple histories: there is little sense here of the idea of ‘the council tenant’ as a monolithic grouping. While she avoids the patronising and pathological frames of mind, as well as the underclass-inspired thinking that favours so much reportage of council estates. In talking of a ‘wall in the head’ or of council estates as ‘a state of mind’ there is a tendency to indulge in a pop-sociology of the kind that is increasingly common in social commentary and in policy-making discourses, such as ‘positive thinking’, that suggests all that council tenants need is the right attitude (being more aspirational!) and a more ‘forward looking’ frame of mind.

Council estate living can be tough – especially when living on low incomes and in acute material poverty – but to suggest that there is a council estate frame of mind (my words not hers) implies something that is not quite the norm; whatever that may be. As we have seen, language is an important part of the battle around poverty, inequality and social justice that can legitimise and exaggerate already prefigured prejudices. This means that we need to be continually alert to the ways in which it can be used to ‘other’ particular groups.

A Wall in the Head?

“To be working-class in Britain is also to have a wall in the head, and, since council housing has come to mean housing for the working class (and the non-working class), that wall exists unbroken throughout every estate in the land.”

Hanley’s ‘Estates: An Intimate History’

At the core of Hanley’s story is her description of the ways in which the monopoly of the built environment, which characterises many of the council estates dotted around the UK, helps to create and reproduce what she terms a “wall in the head”. Here we have the idea that council estate living is a state of mind, one typified by ‘invisible barriers’, ‘impermeability and knowledge’ and to social mobility. Council estates supposedly work to “speak the spirit, suck out hope and ambition, and draw in apathy and nihilism.”

One of the Cuttslowe Walls: (left) standing, (right) demolished.
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 plans5 to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, such as tidying parks, 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.

Landslapes of Class

..."these entrenched quarters of misery have ‘made a name’ for themselves as repositories for 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 no rigorous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such neighboring districts as the particular ways in which they are viewed, with reference to their class and culture. Working-class cultures are positioned about a troubled approach to relationships between class and policy-making. It would seem that this elision, problematised and the solutions attendant upon 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’ or ‘slum poor’ has a long and pernicious history of relevance in late nineteenth century middle class concerns with ‘the rookeries’ of London) and while the language might have changed – the sentiments in which it carries are only too evident in the context of the neo-liberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such poor and disavantaged groups are portrayed as recalcitrants, as in some ways less adaptable and ‘conservative’ in that they are unwilling to change in order 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 poverty welfare state policies have failed. In the face of the growing 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 total 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 been 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.

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 ameliorating 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 total 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 been 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.

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: Joceanet 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/drugs/policy-welfare?gusrc=rss&feed=uknews
4. The Blair government created 3,023 new criminal offences in nine-years from starting office in May 1997, one for almost every day that 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
8. Will Hutton, ‘Open the gates and free people from Britain’s ghettos’, The Observer, February 18, 2007
11. The nature of paid employment today is that benefits workers are themselves in receipt of benefits In the face of mass privatisations of sections of the Department for Work and Pensions, particularly the DWP as saying: “We have far too many members administering government benefits that they also have to claim to just to scrape together a living.” The Guardian, Tuesday February 17, 2004 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/feb/17/uk.whitewall
14. Macek, p.135-6
15. Macek, p.65
16. Macek, p.65
18. Hanley, p.7
19. Hanley, p.20
21. As Unison declared in 1999: the “Scottish Executive is budgeting for far more real cuts in public investment in social housing”, and “Past under-investment means there is a massive repairs backlog”. http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/response/ghosting.html
22. Hanley, p.11
23. Hanley, p.149
24. Hanley, p.4
25. Hanley, p.5