

***The Repoliticisation of High-rise Social Housing in the UK  
and the Classed Politics of Demolition***

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## ***The Repoliticisation of High-rise Social Housing in the UK and the Classed Politics of Demolition***

This paper explores the politics behind high-rise housing and focuses on Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, as a case study for exploring and understanding the impact and consequences of sustained disinvestment in social housing. There has been much investment in high-rise living in recent decades on a global scale, while dominant narratives that surround the discussion of social housing in the UK has denigrated high-rise blocks and mobilised negative narratives about the tenants they house. Stigma and polarisation often lead to what is seen as the only solution: demolition. However, the process of demolition is highly political, contextualised and highlights the classed nature of urban policy and of housing provision. This directly shapes the increasingly polarised landscapes of inequality which have become so pronounced in UK urban areas. The paper makes reference to the recent Grenfell Tower tragedy in the UK and the case of the Red Roads flats demolition in Glasgow to highlight the wider issues within the politics of social housing, the impact and consequences of sustained disinvestment in social housing and the inequality experienced within the social and geographical landscape.

**Keywords: Social housing, Glasgow, high-rise, class, stigma, urban renewal**

### **Introduction**

In the first two decades of this century there has been increasing attention on high-rise housing. In cities across the world, not least London, New York, and in many of the large cities of the global south, high-rise housing is being presented as meeting a need for particular forms of housing, as offering ways of regenerating particular urban districts and as a means of accumulating considerable wealth. In locations such as the Gulf States, in particular in Dubai and Abu Dhabi (Davis and Monk, 2008), large sums of money and huge resources are being spent in a global race with competitor cities such as Beijing, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta to construct the world's tallest buildings, presenting such locations as places of wealth, prosperity and economic success. Yet another estimate in early 2017 claimed that by 2020 more than 16,000 new skyscrapers will be in place across the world (Warnes, 2017).

In the UK much attention has focused on London where 455 skyscrapers were undergoing construction in 2016 (Scott, 2017). There is considerable media coverage, most of it uncritical, devoted to exploring the nationality, wealth and lifestyles of a relatively mobile group of hugely affluent group of people who traverse the world searching for the wealth-accumulating opportunities that 'vertical-living' (Perry, 2017; Usborne, 2017) can potentially generate.

The labels long used to describe these developments, for instance, 'high-rises' and 'multi-storeys' are rendered almost redundant, pushed aside by a new language that talks of 'luxury skyscrapers' and by claims that high-rise housing is now a key to urban 'renewal' and to the rejuvenation of run-down urban districts. That these new private developments are aimed at a particular segment of the population, the wealthy, is taken for granted, often left unsaid, as the costs of purchasing such housing is beyond the means of the vast majority of people in the contemporary city. Indeed, attracting the wealthy, the entrepreneurial, the 'creative classes' (Florida, 2014), is exactly what luxurious high-rise developments are intended to do. The glossy marketing brochures, videos and favourable media output that glamorises the high-rise lifestyles of the rich is accompanied by political and policy approaches to urban renewal that have different cities competing to attract the affluent.

That high-rise living can be dysfunctional and dystopian, as depicted by JG Ballard in his 1975 novel, *High-Rise* (Ballard, 1975), is rarely part of the dominant representations of privately constructed luxurious skyscrapers, but has been more and more attached to a very different kind of high-rise development. This renewed focus on high-rise housing has been brought under a different kind of scrutiny in the UK, with the devastating fire at Grenfell Tower in London on June 14 2017, resulting in the deaths of a minimum of 80 people (a figure that remains disputed at the time of drafting). There is, however, a significant difference from the world of the luxury, private high-rise and the dominant political, policy and cultural framing of the 'social' high-rise block, all too often embedded in narratives that are negative of social housing in general. The enduring legacies of the Conservative UK Government (including introducing the 'Right to Buy' council housing in 1980 for sitting tenants) has culminated in increases to poverty, inequality and a growing crisis of homelessness (Anderson, 2004). The Grenfell Fire represented, claims Boughton, 'a perfect storm of disadvantage', as disinvestment, the lack of inspection and regulation, poor quality refurbishment, the concentration of a population with huge social needs all combined to

contribute to the tragedy (Boughton, 2017). Grenfell has re-opened the wider issue of the politics of social housing in general and the growing housing crisis to be found across the UK today. This paper looks firstly at the politics behind high-rise housing and uses Glasgow as a case study for analysing the impact and consequences of sustained disinvestment in social housing. The paper offers examples that focus on how the inequality of the social and geographical landscape results in diverging experiences of different forms of high-rise housing.

We present thoughts and discussion based on documentary analysis of the policy, oral and visual history of Glasgow. We took a case study approach, looking at Glasgow City boundaries and the historical context of high-rise living post 1945. We employed oral history, visual and documentary analysis that looked at the wider Glasgow boundaries with particular attention to the Red Roads Flats. These included older Glasgow poetry, documentaries, policy documentation, photos and literature focusing on the working class in Glasgow. The paper is also informed from findings of the Beyond Stigma project that captured people's thoughts about the demolition of the Red Roads flats that coincided with the 2014 Glasgow Common Wealth Games. This included focus groups and deliberative diaries that were written by participants as the announcement and plans were made (see Mooney, McCall and Paton 2015; Paton, McCall and Mooney 2017 for more detail). This paper, therefore, brings together a wealth of different sources together to highlight the diverging and contrasting narratives around high-rise housing.

### **The Repoliticisation of High Rise Housing**

The wealth in privately developed high-rise housing and the contrast with social high-rise housing is not a universal or uniform one. However, there are shared stories of inequalities and social marginalisation: What could be termed 'vertical inequalities'. In some respects this is not a new departure. Many of the world's cities are characterised by increases in the income and wealth gap between rich and poor, a gap that has reached unprecedented levels (OECD, 2015). In London, for example, inequality has been linked to key housing trends where 'wealth disparities are inflated by increasing house prices' and a renewed suburbanisation of poverty (Travers et al, 2016). Further, such 'vertical inequalities' compound existing 'horizontal' inequalities – the unequal and uneven classed landscapes of

UK cities which has been laid down, layer after layer, over successive decades and generations.

Across the world high-rise housing is being constructed to attract particular groups of people: the global rich (Child, 2016). However, this is only one part of the unfolding politics of high-rise housing in what is increasingly referred to as the 'vertical city' (Graham, 2015, 2016). Security and segregation are suddenly in the limelight; how are the wealthy and their investments to be protected, not least from those deemed to be 'other', or defined in some way as a problem population. 'As safe as high-rise houses', in terms of both security but more so of wealth generating outcomes, is a key part of the story of the contemporary high-rise for the super-rich (see Atkinson, 2016; Atkinson et al, 2017; Burrows et al, 2017; and Watt, 2016). 'As safe as houses' is not a claim that can apply in the context of the future facing many high-rise social housing blocks and their tenants elsewhere in London (Polsky, 2015) and across the rest of the UK. These are the different worlds, the sharply diverging experiences of different forms of high-rise housing that comprise the unequal social and geographic landscape of cities today.

On June 14 2017, the devastating fire which engulfed a high-rise social housing block in the inner London borough of Kensington and Chelsea resulted in at least 80 deaths. The Grenfell Tower fire refocused attention on high-rise social housing in ways unseen in the UK for several decades. 'Grenfell' has crystallised the wider politics of housing and the growing debate around what is now widely regarded as a 'housing crisis' in the contemporary UK. This is a crisis in the availability of affordable to rent, and good quality, social housing. The Grenfell fire has refocused in new and unexpected ways, a submerged but long-existing debate around social housing in general, and its role in UK society, and around the social needs of the populations who tend to live in this housing tenure. The ways in which welfare has been regulated in the UK has resulted in far reaching changes to welfare provision with negative consequences for residents, not least those that relate to housing (Manzi, 2015). The result is that a larger section of the population live lives that are more risky, precarious and uncertain – and housing is a key element of this.

The focus and thread of this paper is primarily concerned with the politics of high-rise social housing in the UK. By politics we mean not only different policy approaches or the specific

policy focus of different local authorities or housing agencies, but the wider narratives, ideologies, inequalities and unequal social and economic relations that underpin housing in general. In particular the concern is to draw out the class dimensions of this. These have become manifest in particular ways in relation to high-rise social housing, exposed not least by the Grenfell Tower fire. Importantly, however, housing does not exist in isolation from other aspects of political and social life: housing policies are completely entangled with other policies and strategies, including taxation policy, welfare benefit provision and strategies of urban change. Further, and this is key to the unfolding argument in this paper, housing policies are also part and parcel of the dominant narratives of place; how places are imagined, invented, re-imagined and re-branded. Here territorial stigmatisation is part and parcel of wider class politics: how different sections of the population are represented, misrepresented and 'othered'. In the case of Grenfell, a racialised class politics in which certain groups are even blamed for systematic policy and governance failures (for example, see Horton, 2017) was all too evident. The paper focuses on high-rise social housing in Glasgow in the west of Scotland. Many of the themes and issues presented here in connection with Glasgow have also been included in the post-Grenfell Fire debate and are relevant to many other urban areas across the UK.

### **Glasgow and Grenfell: The Unequal Class Politics of High Rise Social Housing**

In multiple and overlapping ways, the recent story of high-rise social housing in Glasgow, along with Grenfell, have sharpened the focus on the perilous and precarious state of much of social housing in the UK today. While acknowledging that social housing policies are covered by different legislation across the UK, that housing is a devolved power under control of devolved Parliaments, which leads to contrasting policy approaches and narratives, nonetheless the wider politics of social housing shares important similarities on a UK-wide basis. In particular the growing crisis of affordability, the increasing threat of homelessness as a result of welfare benefit 'reforms' and the widespread shortage of social housing means that for many millions of its citizens, housing needs go unmet. The increasing precariousness of housing for the least wealthy sections of society mirrors the wider economic and financial insecurities that have intensified on the back of the various 'austerity' policies pursued by successive UK governments since 2000 (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Presented in cinemas across Britain during 2017 the critical documentary film,

*Dispossession: The Great Social Housing Swindle* (Sng, 2017; see also McCahill, 2017), exposed in stark terms the ways in which social housing is increasingly under threat. Long-term disinvestment, combined with the impact of welfare changes, for instance, the 'Bedroom Tax'<sup>i</sup>, a significant increase homelessness as well as a growing threat of homelessness due to a central 'underlying 'structural factor', that is the marked shortage of affordable rented accommodation (Fitzpatrick and Stephens, 2007; Shelter Scotland, 2017).

This speaks to a very different high-rise city from the city of super skyscrapers and high-value and high-cost developments highlighted above. This is also a city of high-rise housing - but a form of high-rise that in the first few decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is in serious decline across the UK: the mass social housing blocks that were built from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Regarded then as offering solutions to the problems of housing shortages, slum housing and severe overcrowding, high-rise council or local authority housing blocks were presented as a modernist answer to the housing problems that were viewed as being endemic in many cities across the UK in the post-1945 era, not least in Glasgow.

In the space of around 50 years, council/social housing high-rise developments have undergone a transition from being the solution to the post-war housing crisis to being a key element in yet another housing crisis, a crisis that began to unfold in many UK cities from around the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their story is not one of futuristic visions of urban cores dominated by privately built expensive and fully serviced housing, but a story of failure which has only one solution - large-scale demolition. This is underpinned by the stigmatisation of particular forms of housing, of particular places and through this the stigmatisation of particular groups of people (Hancock and Mooney, 2013). This stigma can create a 'spiral of decay' exacerbating problems, increasing the marginalisation of social housing and has a key part to play in urban 'renewal' processes in which demolition is often seen as the only solution (Wassenberg, 2004).

The city of Glasgow has long stood-out as a key location for the study of social housing, as well as urban change and urban social problems in general. High-rise social housing has been part and parcel of the post-war Glasgow housing experience. While exact figures are difficult to obtain, there is a general consensus that from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s,

the local authority, the Corporation of Glasgow, built more high-rise council-housing blocks than any other UK city, and possibly any European city. Between 1961 and 1968 alone, houses in high rise-blocks accounted for 75% of all council housing built during this period (Pacione, 2009: 144). This claim is also emboldened by the fact that Glasgow Corporation and its mid-1970s successor, Glasgow City Council, was the biggest social landlord in Europe by mid-1980s; a period in which over 60% of the housing stock was council housing, with around 186,000 housing units at its peak (Paice, 2008; Pacione, 2009). In 2006, there were over 200 high-rise blocks in Glasgow, containing 31,000 houses (otherwise referred to as 'flats'), accounting for 10% of the entire housing stock in the city (Kearns, et al, 2012: 105). In a city where housing has historically been the central issue in local politics, living in a council house - in a high-rise 'multi-storey' block or in one of the large outlying 'peripheral' council estates (or housing 'schemes', as they have long been referred to in Glasgow and across Scotland) - as opposed to a 'bought house' (that is owner-occupation), was increasingly the norm for successive generations of Glaswegians, starting in 1919 and developing through the 1920s and 1930s and then expanding in the first period of mass and large-scale council housing development in the city post-1945 (Paice, 2008).

Glasgow, therefore, provides an excellent case study through which to explore the ways in which high-rise social housing has been positioned as a 'failure' and large-scale demolition is presented as the only solution. Demolition has become central policy tool in narratives of urban 'regeneration' but, as Glynn (2012) notes, you 'cannot demolish your way out of a housing crisis'. The policy of demolition in this context is to reduce the amount of social housing overall. While this may be presented as an issue of poor design, it has little to do with faulty design as such but rather failures in management, maintenance as well as decades of sustained dis-investment (Glynn, 2012). Glynn (2012) offers the case study of a group of Dundee tenants campaigning against the demolition of their multi-storey block based on the reasoning behind the way that it was funded. Glynn (2012) notes the disparity and contrasting way in which multi-storey flats are funded:

*'While there are strong arguments against building more multi-storey housing, multi flats can suit some households' needs, and the multis that already exist provide compact living that can support local services and public transport, and that allows*



*savings in many areas—from street paving to rubbish collection. However, under the current regime, because these savings do not affect the housing department finances, they cannot be set against the extra costs associated with a multi, such as lift maintenance and a concierge system’.*

Disinvestment has been a continuing thread in the story of social housing policy since at least the early 1970s, though prior to this period there was mounting concerns that council housing, not least but not only high-rises, were being constructed with low-quality materials. There has been widespread neglect in terms of maintenance and upkeep, ensuring that social amenities are provided and in relation to providing new housing to rent to replace those sold, handed over to private developers or simply demolished. High-rise housing blocks were notorious as places of neglect by government at local and national levels. The political and policy context in Scotland after 2007, under successive Scottish National Party-led Scottish Governments, is on building new social housing stock (McKee, 2010). This is to be commended, and the policy approach to social housing in Scotland is more and more divergent from England, notably with regards to the decision of the Scottish Parliament in 2014 to abolish the Right to Buy policy, a decision which came into effect on July 31, 2016. However, the current stock itself must still be maintained. There are currently limited mechanisms that housing organisations can apply for that allows investment and maintenance in current stock. In Glasgow, for example, the iconic Glasgow sandstone tenements that were built 1840-1920 are potentially compromised in this way. The last major series of refurbishments took place in the 1970s and 1980s and are currently under increasing risk of demolition due to the costs of repair to stonework (GWSF, 2015). Demolition, therefore, is a complex situation that often is not about housing quality but based on the limitations of current funding regimes, disinvestment and justified by current notions of ‘problem areas’ and stigmatisation, denigrating narratives of place and of people.

### **The Changing Fortunes of High-Rise Council Housing in Glasgow**

With these narratives in mind, here we consider the unfolding story of the development and subsequent decline of high-rise social housing in Glasgow. In the section that follows, we locate this within the wider context of local and regional politics, housing needs and economic and social change in the greater Glasgow conurbation. From there we move to explore a particular - and widely referenced - example of high-rise housing ‘failure’, so-

called, the Red Road high-rise housing development lying between the Balornock and Barmulloch areas in North East Glasgow. The story of the 'Red Road Flats', as they were widely known, is a rich one and offers us a vivid example of the sharply contrasting fortunes of high-rise social housing in different periods, a story that is repeated across other parts of urban Scotland and throughout the UK.

The Red Road story allows us ways of opening-up the politics of social housing in relation to the future of high-rise developments. It also raises significant questions about the demolitions policy approach, and whether this works only to further exacerbate the housing crisis. This is also linked with those wider dominant narratives that speak of failure – of housing and of the tenants of social housing (see Johnstone and Mooney, 2007; Hancock and Mooney, 2013). Importantly, while much attention has been focused over successive decades on the building technologies and techniques deployed in their construction, as well as their location, physical lay-out, a lack of social amenities and so on, this is often at the expense of a focus on the stories, experiences and views of those who live in or lived in high-rise housing. The arguments that residents, current and former, often make to explain high-rise failure, if expressed in those terms at all, often conflicts with the narratives of politicians, planners and policy makers. Policies for high-rise housing, and for social housing in general, are inextricably also policies for particular groups of people - policies that are 'done' or 'applied' to specific sections of the population – and the dominant narratives of high-rise social housing failures are also essentially stories of the failure of particular groups of people. This is returned to below.

As has already been highlighted, Glasgow Corporation, informed by the values of municipal socialism, arguably constructed a greater number of public sector high-rise housing blocks than any other city in Europe in the post-1945 era. Attempting to address historic problems of slums and overcrowded housing, which following the Second World War were by far the worst in the UK, Glasgow Corporation embarked on a large-scale programme of high-rise development in the 1950s and 1960s. One of the earliest manifestations of this was the Moss Heights development in Cardonald, 6 miles South West from the city centre. Built over 1953 and 1954, they presented a vision of council housing for the city which would ultimately dramatically alter not only the urban skyline, but the entire social geography of housing in the city. Together with a large scale programme of low rise housing estate

development across the city, including four large 'peripheral' housing estates on the city's outer-edges (in Castlemilk, Drumchapel, Easterhouse and Pollok), by the early 1980s Glasgow Council managed around 186,000 units of vastly differing ages, quality and state of repair. Over 65% of Glasgow's population lived in publicly rented housing; that is council housing (Glasgow City Council, 2017).

However, with the implementation of the 'Right to Buy' council housing by the 1979 UK Conservative Government, the number of council houses available to local authorities to meet housing needs was to fall significantly as sitting tenants took up the option to purchase. That these were often the best quality houses in the best of estates meant that local authorities such as Glasgow were left with stock that was in poorer condition or hard to let, and with a tenant population that was disproportionately more disadvantaged and on lower incomes than the population of other housing tenures. Together with the impact of Right to Buy, programmes of selective demolition in the late 1970s and 1980s saw some of the inter-war schemes, that generally suffered from hugely negative reputations pulled-down and as the pace of this continued during the final two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the council housing stock fell dramatically. By 2003, Scottish and UK governments favoured the transfer of social housing to smaller social landlords. In Glasgow, 80,000 houses were transferred to the Glasgow Housing Agency (GHA) in 2003 (Glasgow City Council, 2017).

As Chris Leslie highlights in his pioneering photographic record of 'disappearing Glasgow' (2016), between 2006 and 2016 over 30% of the city's tower blocks were demolished, significantly altering the built landscape of the city. Flats in multi-storey tower blocks made up around 30% of GHA stock at stock transfer, but by 2016-2017 it had fallen to around 18%.

This was heralded by Glasgow City Council as bringing forth a new era for social housing in the city (not for the first time in the post-war period was such an era proclaimed!):

*'The skyline of Glasgow is set to be radically transformed, as swathes of high-rise tower blocks make way for thousands of new homes across the city. Glasgow is enjoying a real renaissance. We're delivering on better housing and we have regained our sense of ambition. This is an announcement that looks to the future and we are*

*determined we will not repeat the mistakes of the past'. (Glasgow City Council 2006, quoted in Leslie, 2016: 2)*

This is in the context of widespread demolitions across Scottish and UK local authorities, but where Glasgow has had the vast majority of cases, not surprisingly given the volume of council housing building in high-rise blocks in previous decades. While the growing attention on high-rise demolitions has not surprisingly reflected the increasing pace of demolitions in the 2000s, high-rise demolitions in Glasgow have a longer history and in some cases these demolitions have taken place in areas of the city that had undergone significant change in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1957, 29 'Comprehensive Development Areas' (CDAs) were designated in the older areas of inner Glasgow. These were primarily areas that contained late nineteenth century tenements, the majority in a poor state of repair. Building large numbers of new homes in the big post-war housing estates meant that a significant proportion of the population could be dispersed to the city's periphery and allowed for the demolition of almost 100,000 houses in run-down tenements (Pacione, 2009: 144). The first CDA was in the Gorbals area (which ultimately comprised three CDAs) to the immediate South of the River Clyde. New high-rise blocks were constructed in significant numbers, some of them award winning, such as the Hutchesontown 'C' development. Designed by Sir Basil Spence, 'Hutchie C', as it was to become known, contained 400 houses in 2 large 20-storey high-rise blocks. The first tenants moved in, to a great fanfare, in 1965. However, significant problems with dampness and other problems with the houses meant that they became very unpopular. These award winning flats would only provide accommodation for 14 years, and were ultimately demolished in 1993 (source: <http://www.basilspence.org.uk/living/buildings/gorbals>).

On April 6, 2014, *The Observer* newspaper carried a feature article concerning a proposal for one high-rise housing estate that would not only transform the skyline of Glasgow, but also broadcast it to a global audience. It was announced that the iconic Red Road Flats would be blown-up as part of the Opening Ceremony of the Twentieth Commonwealth Games being held in the city in July and August 2014. This ceremony would take place a few miles away at Celtic's football stadium in the East End of the city, where the live footage was to be beamed on huge screens. For Glasgow City Council and Commonwealth Games leaders, such demolition would signify the 'brave new world' that Glasgow was about to enter. In

the words of the leader of the Labour-controlled Glasgow Council, it was to be 'symbolic of a changing Glasgow', a Glasgow 'renaissance'. Within days the decision had already attracted considerable opposition from community activists, artists, politicians and a petition started within hours of the news breaking attracted well over 17,000 signatures in less than a week. Among the many criticisms and letters that appeared in the published press included the observation that *'The event is unlikely to resonate with those who lived there and goodness only knows what the rest of the world will make of celebrating the opening of "the Friendly Games" with destruction'* (*The Herald*, 2014; see also Mark, 2014). This controversy gained attention that went well beyond Glasgow. Scottish and UK newspapers carried the story as did local TV and radio stations, various broadcasting and social media sites were heavily populated with Red Road commentary and stories.

Only a week after the initial proposals to demolish were made public the Commonwealth Games organisers announced that they were abandoning their plans amid concerns relating to 'safety and security'. The Red Road flats demolition plans opened-up the opportunities for more critical commentary about the future of direction of Glasgow to reach a wider audience, with the value of the Games to Glasgow and indeed massive, top-down-trickle-down regeneration projects being questioned (Gray and Mooney, 2001; Paton, McCall and Mooney, 2017).

The wider significance of the Red Roads Flats scenario, in the words of the organisers of the Commonwealth Games which seemed at odds with the proposals to have the demolitions as part of the Opening Ceremony, was that it was *'an important part of Glasgow's social history in a unique and powerful way...part of the ongoing regeneration of social housing in Glasgow'* (Sanderson, 2014). The Red Road Flats generated sharply opposing views: loathed by some, defended by others. The fact that many people were prepared to campaign against proposals to demolish the Red Road Flats as part of the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony may come as a surprise but they were in their own way symbolic of a Glasgow that was passing. Not long after their construction, the Red Road Flats rapidly became *the* iconic high-rise estate in Glasgow. Located in the north east of the city, they were the highest public sector tower blocks in Europe at the time of opening in 1971. Built between 1964 and 1969, the eight towers, which ranged from 28-31 storeys high, were to

house almost 5,000 people. At almost 300 feet high, the views from the upper floors of the blocks, extended well beyond Glasgow to the mountains of Argyll to the West, Stirlingshire to the north and almost to Edinburgh in the East. The blocks were readily visible on the city's skyline to people arriving in Glasgow from the North and from the East by train or car.

Studies of the social, individual and communal aspects of life in high-rise blocks have been under the microscope since the period of rapid high-rise building throughout the 1960s, many of which have either been conducted in Glasgow and or have a focus on the Red Road Flats in particular (see Jacobs et al, 2007; Jacobs et al, 2008; Kearns et al, 2012). As early as 1971, Jephcott undertook a pioneering study of 'homes in high flats' across Glasgow during 1968 and 1969 (Jephcott, 1971)<sup>ii</sup>. Already the Red Road and other tower-block developments had attracted growing criticism about the individual and social costs of high-rise living, as well as with the planning and design of the buildings. Over 1000 tenants were interviewed by a team of researchers. While the initial tenants were largely positive about their new homes and life in high-rise blocks, already problems were being highlighted, for example, the frequency of lift-breakdowns, the absence of local shops and other social amenities and, a particular concern for Jephcott, the absence of play facilities for children.

The early views of tenants of estates such as the Red Road, highlighting positive and negative aspects, was to be a recurring feature throughout the history of the Red Road Flats, loved and loathed in almost equal measure. However, the architecture and construction of the blocks, steel-framed concrete slabs in a style since then referred to as 'Modernist Brutalism' (Grindrod, 2014; Hatherley, 2008) was the subject of early complaints, often focusing on the problems and cost of heating draughty and poorly insulated houses. It was not too long before the Red Road became a hallmark, not of Glasgow's advance in public sector housing design, but of poorly constructed and hard to let council housing.

However, there was a deeper level to the symbolism surrounding the plans to demolish the Red Road. It somehow managed to cue to a wide audience that it is waste of time and money to try and provide council housing for working-class people. This 'failure' of social housing is framed within the negative portrayal of the individuals and groups living in council estates. There has been an ongoing emphasis of the role of individual agency in the

degeneration of certain areas – especially around the East End of Glasgow (Mooney 2006). As Lynsey Hanley highlighted in her evocative book *Estates* (Hanley, 2007), council estates do not often appear in a positive way in word, film or song. In the last few decades, council housing has come to be seen as second-best housing, relegated to a residual status for the most impoverished sections of society. Such estates have become emblematic of all that is wrong with British society – symbolic of what David Cameron and others in 2009-2010 termed the ‘broken society’ (see Mooney, 2009; Hancock and Mooney, 2013).

In some respects the Red Road Flats offer an appropriate backdrop through which ‘broken-Britain’, and its related narratives are visualised and illustrated. They appeared in numerous films, television dramas and documentaries, including Scottish Television’s *Taggart* police detective series, and the Bafta-winning *Red Road* (2006) directed by Andrea Arnold. Both exhibit in some ways the darker side of Red Road life, thereby contributing to the Red Roads’ notoriety, but at the same time the Flats were kept in the limelight. Other artists, writers, photographers and filmmakers made it the subject of their work in ways which were more celebratory of the blocks and of life in and around them, seeing them as part and parcel of post-1945 Glasgow culture (see Stephens, 2015). Art exhibitions, planning, architectural and photographic projects have taken the Red Road as their inspiration or focal point. Other projects have included oral history interviews with some of the earliest residents and other attempts to capture some of the more positive aspects of life in the flats. Alison Irvine’s book, *This Road Is Red* (2011) is a collection of semi-fictional stories based on anecdotes from real-life residents over the 50-year plus history of the high-rise scheme which are more positive about the Flats.

From the diaries that were written throughout the Glasgow Commonwealth Games (2014) for the Beyond Stigma project (see Paton, McCall and Mooney 2017) this counter-narrative was clear in the way that participants talked about the deindustrialisation of Glasgow and their reaction to related media, for example:

*“I still think occasionally and have a run through the Gorbals’ history. The theme was the interaction between Gorbals Children and Canadians, sharing their views. It was lovely. Emotional – human - life-affirming, people together” (Diary entry 01/08/14).*

As well as the links to working-class memory and reminiscence, the diaries also reflected on the demolition of the Red Roads flats in a way that highlighted how they were integrated into the day to day conversations of Glaswegians:

*"...there was a birthday party to attend, where my friend and I engaged in conversation which drifted into work related matters.. We discussed money that is to be spent on refurbishing some well-known flats to house the homeless during the commonwealth games and which will be blown up afterwards...." (Diary entry 0.07.14).*

The Red Road Flats, therefore, give rise to contested and contesting histories and narratives, and this underpinned opposition to the demolitions. Despite the rich history and social commentary on an 'older' or 'other' Glasgow, demolition started in 2012 with two blocks demolished with the remaining blocks blown-up in 2016. It symbolised a contradictory narrative – made more complex by its linkage with the 2014 Commonwealth Games – that tried to position Glasgow as 'reborn', a city 'renewed', contrasting with the symbolisation of the destruction of part of Glasgow's post-war history. This was highlighted clearly on official narratives around the proposed demolition in 2014, which also reflects ironically the arguments made by those opposed to demolition:

*'This is about more than creating an iconic moment for the Opening Ceremony; it is about the next step in the regeneration of one of Glasgow's most famous communities. It symbolises the changing face of the city over the years and recognises our proud social history. Glasgow's Opening Ceremony is right to celebrate that history, but we will do so in a sensitive manner.'*

*We have worked with former residents for the last six years to get the story of Red Road. This is their story and the voice of real Glaswegians should rightly be heard during the ceremony and the story of Red Road should be shared with the world. Of course, this is one small part of a much larger show that will entertain, inspire and show Glasgow in a spectacular light.*

*The demolition of the flats is not about social failure - in fact, the opposite is true. The flats were once the future of social housing in the city and over the years have been*



*home to thousands of families. We are celebrating their role in our history and want to make sure their role is properly marked'. (Bridget McConnell, Chief Executive of Glasgow Life, quoted in the (Glasgow) Evening Times, 2014)*

This is an example of opposition narratives being incorporated into policy narratives, thereby working to undermine opposition. While politicians and policy-makers claimed that the demolition of the Red Roads Flats would be symbolic of the 'new' Glasgow, critics observed that it also symbolised an attack on the entire idea of council housing and the role of the state in direct housing provision.

The demolition of the Red Road Flats in 2016, and of other iconic high-rise developments in the city, for instance, the so-called 'Gallowgate Twins', two 31 storey blocks in the Dennistoun area in the east end of the city (which were marginally taller than the Red Road flats), brought-down in 2016 (Rodger, 2015), was also accompanied by mixed feelings on the part of former residents and people living in the area more generally, with a 'loss of community' an oft voiced claim (Leslie, 2016)

Unmet housing needs are a growing issue in Glasgow and across much of the UK. From over 180,000 council houses in the early 1980s, today Glasgow Council controls no housing. In 2003 the then remaining stock of around 81,000 council homes were transferred under the controversial policy of housing stock transfer to the newly formed Glasgow Housing Agency (Daly et al, 2005). Since then with further transfers to local housing associations and around 20,000 demolitions, GHA had only 43,000 homes in 2014, which to some was used as a sign of failure. In turn this gives rise to the idea of dysfunctional and problematic 'estate cultures' (Dugan, 2014; McDowall, 2011; McKenzie, 2015).

This is also the marginalisation of a particular history – of particular working class histories. Housing is not just bricks and mortar – there is a historical voice in each and every estate. Demolition of the 'high-rise', therefore, is always embedded in a wider social-political context. It is not only about demolishing bricks-and-mortar that is considered to be not fit for purpose. The history of the high rise in the contemporary city is still contextualised in the history – and often perceived attack – on social housing itself.

## **Housing, Urban ‘Regeneration’ and the Politics of ‘Failure’**

The idea of ‘failure’ has already been pinpointed as a recurring theme in the dominant narratives and ideologies that have surrounded social housing in recent decades – but particularly in relation to social housing in multi-storey blocks. As the 2017 Grenfell disaster has shown only too well, for some considerable time across the UK, social housing blocks have been represented as long-standing concrete symbols of failure: failures in terms of architecture, planning, construction, and maintenance. But the ideology of failure does not only speak of the ‘physical’ dimensions of high-rise housing blocks and estates; this is also inextricably about ‘social’ failure. There are no physical or technical aspects of housing that lie apart from or outside these social dimensions: all housing is designed and constructed with particular categories of people in mind, the ‘type’ of tenant who will inhabit the house in question; matters of resources directly reflect this: how much money should be spent on construction and maintenance, and the density and layout of housing and the provision (or lack of provision) of social amenities in estates also reflects a deeper class (de)valuing and social engineering processes, embedded in narratives about particular places and particular groups of people.

In Glasgow in Grenfell and across urban Britain, the causes of the failures of social housing are all too often attributed to the lifestyles of tenants. The vast majority of high-rise social housing was built during an era when housing needs and the social welfare of housing tenants enjoyed much more importance and significance, albeit not unproblematically. Council housing had some redistributive dimensions. However, more recently in the context of ‘post-welfare’ ‘reforms’ that have led to the withdrawal of the state from the substantive provision of social protection, far-reaching benefit cuts, in turn greatly reducing the amount of money that circulates in already disadvantaged communities (see Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). This has also been compounded by reductions in local authority provision and services (Hastings et al, 2013). Crucially, social housing has also been largely devalued and in an era when neoliberal-led government policies has reinforced the demonisation and stigmatisation of social housing estates.

## Concluding Comments

The story of high-rise housing in post-1945 Glasgow is a story that is embedded within the particular histories and geographies of the city itself. It is also part and parcel of several interrelated processes: the impacts of long-term industrial decline, planned population decline, population decentralisation and dispersal, suburbanisation, gentrification, regeneration and segregation. Exploring this in detail is beyond the scope of this paper but the example of Glasgow shows complex socio-geographic patterns of urban segregation and sharply contrasting senses of place and belonging.

What is exposed through the discussion above is that there are two worlds of sharply contrasting high-rising housing in the contemporary city. But these are not just contrasting – they are competing. High-rise urban living means something completely different for those who are wealthy, in contrast to some of the most disadvantaged sections of society who live in poorly maintained high-rise housing blocks. We have seen in the case study of the Red Road Flats that the demolition of the high-rise can be utilised to attack social housing more generally. High-rise living can be attractive - if it has enough investment and sufficient maintenance. When it does not, it can clearly result in ultimate disaster, as Grenfell has demonstrated in the most awful ways.

The dominant narratives that surround the discussion of social housing in the UK are ones that have been largely denigrating and stigmatising, not least of people who depend on social housing. This has led to claims that social housing itself is 'toxic' (Kerslake, 2016; see also Foster, 2016), a sign of personal, familial and community pathologies and failures. High-rise blocks symbolise 'vertical failure', and 'vertical pathologies' (Graham, 2015: 623). The failures of high-rise housing are presented as the inevitable outcomes of past 'mistakes' and, in neo-liberal thinking, from social welfarist approaches to housing provision. In turn the identification of such failures opens-up particular policy 'solutions' which are couched in a language that talks of housing or estate 'renewal' and 'regeneration'. However, in many cases, as we have seen in Glasgow, renewal through demolition is often the 'go to' policy tool.

What is also marginalised in the dominant narratives is a story which highlights the long-term decline of council estates; of successive decades of disinvestment. Large-scale demolition is accompanied by widespread population shifts. In contemporary London this has led to repeated claims of social cleansing: forcing working class tenants to vacate estates targeted for 'renewal', involving demolition, privatisation and property developer-led speculation (Minton, 2017; Watt, 2016).

High-rise social housing blocks are not inherently unsafe, and do not have to be unsafe. The lack of safety in blocks such as Grenfell, and countless others identified since Grenfell, reflects this disinvestment, insufficient regulation and inspection, and long term political and policy neglect. Successive waves of privatisation and subcontracting has led to the blurring of responsibilities and roles. Cuts in expenditure and top-down policy shifts mean that local authorities in the UK are now less and less able to address housing needs than in any period since 1945.

The position of high rise social housing in the UK today cannot be fully comprehended apart from the property-speculation-led housing policy, increasing inequalities, austerity politics and the widespread transfer of public assets to the private sector that are so apparent today (see for example Moore et al, 2017; Williams, 2017). While it is reasonable to argue that the tenants of high-rise council housing have long lived with a degree of risk, in the intensified landscapes of urban inequality today, economic and financial risk and uncertainty are more and more reflected in the precariousness of housing.

Across urban Britain, those who are wealthy are more and more able to finance their own security, safety and protection. But the deadliness of urban inequalities underpins a widespread decline in safety standards and the dilution of inspection and regulation, as is becoming all too apparent following the Grenfell Tower disaster. The responses to the Grenfell fire have recast light on the classed nature of urban policy and the inequality behind housing provision in the UK.

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<sup>i</sup> The 'Bedroom Tax' is officially known as the Under Occupancy Charge or Spare Room Subsidy and was introduced in the UK Welfare Reform Act 2012. It can result in a reduction of Housing Benefit if the tenant is reported to be living in a property with more rooms than necessary. This remains a divisive policy in the UK with the Scottish Government currently mitigating the effects of the policy for Scottish residents.

<sup>ii</sup> Pearl Jephcott's studies, and that of other researchers of council housing in post-war Glasgow, is the work of a research team at the University of Glasgow focusing on Housing and Wellbeing in Glasgow, 1950-1975, <http://glasgowhousing.academicblogs.co.uk/people/>