

‘A paradise, what an idea!’ Defending the English Council Estate.

If we are here to enfranchise histories and memories that are otherwise considered subordinate, and to extend respect and interest to the excluded – then I think that the post-WW2 British council estate certainly needs some of that historical TLC. Over the past few years, I have been researching the history and development of one particular example, a small 1960s council estate in Lincolnshire where I grew up. Along the way my research has naturally taken me into looking at the work of the painter George Shaw who is known for producing highly detailed representations of the 1950s and 60s council estate in Coventry where he grew up. One article on Shaw’s work begins quite typically:

the grey, pebble dashed frontages of 1950s council houses are not improved by rain ... In Coventry, as elsewhere, the mistakes of the post-war planners of public housing have long been derided - from the materials they used (too much concrete) to the scale they built on (too monolithic) and the places where they chose to build (too far from the middle of town).

Now this for me sums up much of the knee-jerk, and ill considered anti-council estate rhetoric: the planning ‘mistakes’, too ‘concrete’, too monolithic, too remote, too rainy even! And sadly there’s a lot more of this: in April 2012, the BBC Radio 2 presenter, Jeremy Vine, promoted a project called ‘I love where I live’ that invited the British public to celebrate their particular part of the United Kingdom. The trailer for this project urged people to produce a one-minute love letter to ‘your town, place or village’, or ‘even’ the trailer went on, ‘your crumbling council estate.’ The most recent book on the subject, Lynsey

Hanley's 2007 *Estates: An Intimate History*, is part personal memoir and part account of public housing policies. It makes a valiant attempt to understand how council estates were intended to improve people's lives, yet it also ends up perpetuating the same old aesthetic criticisms of these places – that they suffered from bad planning and bad architecture, which produced a sense of drabness, and of uniformity – as well the same old social criticisms – that these places were misguidedly utopian, patronizing, and that they somehow dragged people down and held them back.

This paper will provide a response to these very tired and increasingly lazy critiques. I want to defend, to celebrate even, the post-war English council estate by examining the estate where I lived as a child and teenager – in terms of how it was originally planned and designed, and in relation to the personal experiences and memories of the original tenants – that is my family, my friends, and their families. It will be my contention that council estates were carefully and thoughtfully planned environments, and that they have produced particularly rich histories and meanings of their own. For me especially, my estate played a vital role in creating what was a very happy childhood. This is where I spent my formative years during the 60s and 70s, living, playing, hanging around, growing up, and picking stones out from the pebbledash walls of our house – and getting really told off by my mum for doing it.

In May 1964, me and my mum and dad were rehoused from a Victorian slum terrace in the town (with the wonderfully Dickensian name of Popplewell's

Row) into a two-bedroomed council house on an estate that came to be known as the Middlefield Lane estate, in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. We were amongst the very first tenants there, and our house was brand new, and I have a very vivid memory of us viewing it before we actually moved in – of its empty echoing rooms, and of the smell of freshly planed wood, paint and putty.

In her book, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment*, (2001) Alison Ravetz states that slum clearances and the re-housing of families in new estates represented a 'state intervention' that was 'invoked in working-class interests'. So far, so good. But Ravetz then goes on to suggest that 'The whole operation was a culture transfer amounting to a cultural colonization: a vision forged by one section of society for application to another ... It asked nothing more of tenants than to live in houses and to participate in estate life in ways approved by middle-class reformers.'

It is true that there was a kind of cultural, and indeed, social 'transfer' going on in the case of the rehousing of Popplewell's Row's residents, who are listed in the 1962 *Caldicott's Directory for Gainsborough and District*. We lived at No. 7 and my Dad, 'Waites, John A' is listed there, along with our neighbours on the row:

- 7. Waites, John A
- 9. Brown, Leslie
- 17. Bacon, John W

21. Reid, James
23. Brooks, Gordon
29. Hollingsworth, C
33. Biddles, Frank

Then, when we look at the later 1965 directory listing for the newly built Dunstall Walk on the Middlefield Lane estate, this is what we find:

18. Bacon, John W
20. Reid, James
22. Hollingsworth, C.
24. Brooks, Gordon
28. Biddles, Frank
30. Brown, Les
36. Waites, John A.

The same names but in a slightly different order – those who obviously opted for moving up to the new estate were placed in these new houses in almost exactly the same order as they were at Popplewell's Row. As such, we could be forgiven for thinking that this was indeed a culture transfer; that the tenancy arrangements here amounted to a cultural colonization and a vision forged by one section of society for application to another. On the other hand of course it was just a simple, rational move to try and keep old neighbours together and to preserve the old neighbourhood community. Ravetz however suggested that this sort of thing added up to 'institutionalization' and

precluded 'spontaneous estate evolution' (whatever that is – I'm not sure if my Dad ever felt like being 'spontaneous' after an 8 hour shift at his lathe at the local engineering works. Or whether my Mum was always secretly thinking about creating an estate 'happening' while doing the ironing. Was my 9 year old self being spontaneous when I got into big trouble for helping my mate to mess up his dad's front lawn by digging foxholes for our Action Men?).

Perhaps as a working-class kid making a mess of the neighbour's garden, I was 'spontaneously evolving' into a typical underclass *council estate* kid. I don't know – but what is clear is that we weren't *forced* to live there. There are many names listed in the directory entry for Popplewell's Row that do not appear on the listings for any of the houses on this new estate. Maybe they were the true working-class heroes, somehow refusing to 'live in houses and to participate in estate life in ways approved by middle-class reformers', and that we were the poor dupes succumbing to those middle-class ways. It's what EP Thompson described as the endless, enormous condescension of posterity all over again. In his 1991 book *Customs in Common*, Thompson said that the working classes were 'for themselves and not for us'. They were 'not bugged' by notions of status and equality. Neither were we in 1965: all I know is that, as far as my family was concerned, we just wanted to live in a nice, modern, house. Given the state of our previous home, this was a simple necessity and requirement, and the Middlefield Lane estate provided it.

This estate was a relatively small development of 380 dwellings and its design was determined by certain principles associated with the Radburn estate, a

small, unfinished 'New Deal' settlement in New Jersey that was founded before WW2. Ravetz quite rightly describes the Radburn layout as 'garden city plus the motor car', because it was designed to provide dual but wholly separate circulation systems for cars and pedestrians. Radburn principles were widely taken up in the design of many English council estates of the 1950s and 60s and for a time this was seen as being excitingly progressive. In 2012 I spoke to Neil Taylor, the architect responsible for the design and layout of the Middlefield Lane estate and he told me how much he was influenced by Radburn principles. He recalled that just as he was about to start work on planning the estate in 1962, he took his obviously very tolerant wife on a lovely Sunday day out to Coventry to see the very estate where George Shaw lived at Tile Hill that had been designed on Radburn principles, which Taylor then adapted to his plans for Middlefield Lane.

So my estate was planned to accommodate car use but also to minimise the car's intrusion onto what was meant to be a communal, pedestrianised environment. The estate was essentially served by two cul-de-sac access roads only, with one outer road to enable movement beyond the estate and into the town itself. The car was always kept to one side of the houses or, as we knew it, 'round the back'. On the other side was what we called 'the front', where each house had its own, individual, but essentially open-plan lawn, and a path that connected to a wider, public, network of footpaths to give access to all the other parts of the estate. And this gave the pedestrian – and the child especially – almost complete safe and secluded separation from the motor car.

The planners of the 1960s wrote breezily and proactively about the use of a Radburn-style layout for council estates: 'What we can do in housing schemes is minimise [the car's] visual intrusion; and, by separating it as completely as possible from pedestrians, keep it from making life dangerous and unpleasant.' All was for the communal good: 'Only then can motorists and pedestrians, who are also sometimes the same people, enjoy the best of both worlds' (Ministry of Transport, *Traffic in Towns: a study of the long term problems of traffic in urban areas*, HMSO: London, 1963). Despite its obvious merits however, the Radburn-style estate layout came to be pejoratively labeled as 'the council estate layout'. I hesitate to take Ravetz to task again, but she reckons that this type of layout made it 'difficult to distinguish the backs from the fronts of houses: in a conventional sense they had neither'. But in fact it was easy – we had a 'front' that led to a lawn and the pedestrian spaces beyond, and a 'back' that faced the road - and therefore no different surely (albeit with the situations reversed somewhat) from any number of terraced houses with back gardens.

Ravetz then goes on to say that 'Signs with arrows pointing to runs of odds and evens had to be provided ... Visitors, even residents themselves had difficulty locating addresses.' Hmmm ... odds on one side, evens on the other, except with a road or an expanse of grass separating the two sides? Again, not that difficult to grasp, and all the original residents I've spoken to said that it was different but essentially not a problem on an estate of this size – you knew where everyone lived anyway and once visitors found you, they knew –

it *wasn't* exactly conventional, but it was a new way of life and, as one original resident said to me, wasn't that the point in the 1960s – that names and numbers didn't matter?

The academic criticisms of post-war council estates – that they were supposedly fatally affected by a cultural paternalism, embodied for instance by seemingly incomprehensible and somehow alienating estate layouts – have unfortunately played a crucial role in what the cultural historian, Patrick Wright, has described as 'an idea of British historical destiny which has treated the whole period of the welfare state as if it was an entropic disaster that had reduced the true British people to abject creatures of a failing social democracy.'

The overarching historiographical problem here lies in how historians, social scientists, architectural critics and so on have overwhelmingly tended to view the council estate as utopian. As Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius put it in *Tower Block*, their monumental 1996 study of high-rise estates in Britain: 'If it is proper to speak of any kind of 'failure' or 'blame' in respect of Modern housing, then in our view the major 'culprit' must be the polarisation of Utopia itself.' The perception of a failed utopia continues to be used as a stick with which to beat both the council estate and the welfare state in general. In January 2013, the right-wing think tank 'Policy Exchange' produced a report called 'Create Streets', that was written by one Nicholas Boys Smith and Alex Morton. This report essentially proposed that post-war council estates in London should be demolished and the sites 'redeveloped' into new 'traditional'

streets where, as the report put it, 'normal' people want to live. It continued to regurgitate one hoary old anti-modernist/anti welfare state/paternalist cliché after another – that these estates had to be horrible places to live because Stanley Kubrick filmed *A Clockwork Orange* on one of them (the Thamesmead estate in London) and because 'the creation of post-war estates (was) the work of well-heeled utopians ignoring what the people wanted in favour of what they thought the people should want'.

On the contrary, the Middlefield Lane estate gave my parents and I exactly what we needed – a good, modern house, in a thoughtfully planned, spacious and pleasant estate. In their time, these estates were representative of an exciting sense of Modernity – just one block in the foundation of creating a new, socially democratic, future.

For my parents and myself, this estate was a thrillingly new environment. As I personally look back now it was like a blank canvas where a completely new way of life could be created, full of fresh experiences for the children who came to grow up there. The open plan, communal, pedestrian and recreational areas of the estate could be described as 'pure space' – a space that was open to be 'spatialised', and which I was able to use almost completely on my own terms, giving me a real sense of freedom – a place that was ready-made for healthy childhood development. But there was nothing 'utopian' about it at all as far as we were concerned. We were, as EP Thompson nearly put it, for ourselves and not for others, and we were – god

forbid in today's overweening property-owning obsessed democracy – happy and content there.

The same went for Neil Taylor, the estate architect. He worked for a modest, local, practice and was certainly no well-heeled utopian as Boys Smith and Morton so snottily put it – in his own words, and with a characteristic sense of public duty that is clearly way beyond our neo-liberal times, Mr. Taylor merely wanted to do a 'good job' for the people of Gainsborough. The idea that the creators of council estates peddled delusional utopian dreams to the great British public is patently untrue, and I would argue that if historians at least stepped away from continuing to think of the post-war council estate, high-rise or not, as being somehow 'utopian', we might begin to make some steps in really understanding these places and the experiences of those who lived there.

