

Civic Perception, Prefabricated Housing, English City Councils and Local Decision-Making in the 1920s

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The first duty of architecture, wrote Le Corbusier in 1923 as he contemplated post-war reconstruction, was to advance a revolutionary ‘revision of values [as to] ... the constituent elements of the house’ - to create the ‘spirit of constructing’, living in’ and ‘conceiving mass-production houses’.¹ In Britain, however, the approach to using new methods of construction after 1918 has been characterised as being ‘unusually level-headed’ and pragmatic towards a development often treated polemically by ‘the avant-garde abroad’ or ‘architectural reactionaries at home’.² Yet one might also question whether and how ‘modern’ ideas were diffused locally amongst potential purchasers. As one provincial newspaper commented in the midst of an intense local media campaign to force the civic adoption of new housing technology: ‘Every time we go to a Municipal function, anywhere in the country, we hear this phrase – “We now have the very best (something or other) in the country.” This is said because Councillors are not sufficiently familiar with what other places are doing.’³ Indeed, perhaps rational selection and the implied centrality of local authorities to decision-making were largely irrelevant.

¹ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (Woburn, 1970 Edn.), pp. 6-7.

² M. Swenarton, *Homes fit for Heroes: The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain* (London, 1981), p.108.

³ *Leicester Mail* (hereafter *Mail*), 22 May 1924.

Arguably, non-traditional housing methods were more centrally imposed on local authorities: the product of the imbalance of power between town halls and Whitehall, and particularly the centrally-led promotion of the new building technology.

This article, in examining the diversities of local circumstances from a civic perspective, re-evaluates this central-local relationship politically, as it affected the decision-making processes of local authority housing purchasers in the 1920s. It assesses, too, the impact of ‘dominant’ opinion forming ideas and contexts locally—particularly civic self-view as mediated through the press—against other determining factors. Located in the economically prosperous East Midlands, Leicester and Nottingham (with populations of 234,143 and 262,624 in 1921) occupied a broadly equal position within the central-local government hierarchy. Each vied for regional leadership and presented themselves as progressive authorities. Both were to embrace non-traditional ideas, yet although only 25 miles apart, the circumstances and scale of that adoption varied significantly. In each city a ‘new spirit’ of technological utility and experiment was apparent, but—critically—its application, it will be argued, was tied to contradictory perceptions of civic achievement.

Central-Local Influences and Housing

Paradoxically, while Britain fell behind architecturally in adopting modernism during the inter-war period, it was to the fore in experimenting with concrete and steel housing immediately after 1918. Here, ‘mass production and prefabrication as a rational outcome of the housing and labour shortages were not specifically considered, but the need for

lessening site work and using surplus [war] materials' was.⁴ By 1919 the building crafts labour force stood some 45 per cent below pre-war levels. Shortages were compounded by the financial unattractiveness of local authority housing against other building work, which persisted beyond the construction boom of 1919-21. A subsequent contraction in building activity after 1921, when the state curtailed its escalating liabilities for working-class housing under the 1919 Housing Act, further depleted the skills base, as labour left the industry and fewer apprenticeships were offered. Renewed local authority expansion in house building from late 1923 onwards, therefore, 'came at the worst possible time'.⁵

A political awareness of this dilemma already existed at the highest level. State funding during reconstruction had extended beyond direct subsidy intervention in the housing market into supply-side measures that established research programmes to promote standardisation and the use of new methods more economical in scarce resources.⁶ Neville Chamberlain particularly wanted 'one or two mass production schemes' to encourage the use of unskilled labour.⁷ Churchill, as Chancellor, was less hesitant still in proposing the use of alternative methods, complaining that Chamberlain was only experimenting 'on a tiny scale'. Chamberlain, however, favoured diffusion through local initiative rather than central imposition: a formula handicapped by the

⁴ D. Dex Harrison, J.M. Albery and M.W. Whiting, *A Survey of Prefabrication* (London, 1945), pp.4-5.

⁵ S. Merrett, *State Housing in Britain* (London, 1979), pp. 36-40; H.W. Richardson and D.H. Aldcroft, *Building in the British Economy between the Wars* (London, 1968), pp. 123-6.

⁶ See particularly, R.B. White, *Prefabrication* (London, 1965), ch. 1 & 2.

⁷ PRO, HLG 52/771, letter from Sheepshank to Moir, 24 Nov. 1924; *HC Debs.*, Vol. 179, cols 858-9, 16 Dec. 1924. Chamberlain was Minister of Health in 1923, and from 1924-29.

reluctance of many local authorities to become engaged in solutions where disputes over dilution and demarcation still existed.⁸

While, therefore, there were self-imposed limits to the direct impact of government measures to promote non-traditional methods, in a broader cultural sense by the mid 1920s ‘theories of social and industrial progress ... had increasingly connected mass production and housing in the beliefs of the political establishment’. Ministry staff, too, championed non-traditional solutions.⁹ Dunleavy attributes the adoption of non-traditional housing to the prevalence and influence of such discourses centrally, which, through their structural authority, effectively marginalised civic autonomy and bypassed rational decision-making.¹⁰ Certainly non-traditional methods offered little by way of cost-savings and later acquired a chequered reputation technically. Once local labour conditions permitted, the authority of such arguments diminished and most housing agencies reverted to brick construction.¹¹ Central imposition, for example, has been cited to explain the forced adoption of new building methods in Leicester, effectively absolving the local authority of responsibility for building using a technically flawed system.¹²

⁸ P. Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front* (London, 1992), p. 254.

⁹ B. Finnimore, *Houses From The Factory: System building and the Welfare State* (London, 1989), pp. 17, 21, 44; S. Marriner, ‘Cash and Concrete: Liquidity Problems in the Mass-Production of “Homes for Heroes”’, *Business History* 18 (1976), esp. pp. 159, 184.

¹⁰ P. Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain 1945-1975* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 3, 59-60, 342-52

¹¹ C.G Powell, *An Economic History of the British Building Industry* (London, 1980), p.120; Min. of Works, *Post-War Building Studies No.1. House Construction* (London, 1944), p.7.

¹² N. Newitt, ‘From Slums to Semis: housing the people of Leicester 1919-39’ (unpublished M.Phil, University of Leicester, 1993), pp. 58, 66.

Yet, contradictorily, Ministry influence over the level of building during the 1920s has also been characterised as essentially passive or negative: it did little to initiate but rather either rubber-stamped local authority proposals, or rejected them.¹³ Moreover, recent national studies suggest that a local culture of enthusiasm for alternative methods frequently preceded, exceeded or otherwise acted in tandem with central government predilections, and lay beyond mere economic constraints.¹⁴ Nor should we ignore the richness and variability of the interplay between officials and representatives locally and nationally. Local authorities today still retain degrees of democratically invested autonomy: where policy outcomes reflect the relative power and resources of each government tier within a disorderly bargaining system of mutual power dependency, constrained by past practice, and only ultimately a central veto.¹⁵ Local ‘authority’ was even more apparent in the inter-war period: nominally a ‘golden age’ for civic government, where new responsibilities for social provision were being actively transferred by Westminster to local authorities (and away from other local bodies deemed

¹³ R. Ryder, ‘Council House Building in County Durham, 1900-39’, in M. Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities 1919-1939* (Leicester, 1984), p. 51.

¹⁴ N. Morgan, “‘£8 cottages for Glasgow citizens’. Innovations in municipal house building in Glasgow in the inter-war years’, in R. Rodger (ed.), *Scottish Housing in the Twentieth Century* (Leicester, 1989), pp. 125-54; N. Hayes, ‘Making Homes By Machine: Images, Ideas and Myths in the Diffusion of Non-Traditional Housing in Britain 1942-1954’, *Twentieth Century British History* 10 (1999), pp. 282-309.

¹⁵ R.A.W. Rhodes, *Control and Power in Central-Local Government Relations* (Farnborough, 1981); R.A.W. Rhodes, “‘Power Dependence’. Theories of central-local relations: a critical reassessment’, in M. Goldsmith (ed.), *New Researches in Central-Local Relations* (Aldershot, 1986), pp. 1-33.

less trustworthy—notably the poor law guardians).¹⁶ In high profile areas like health provision, for example, it was local authorities that provided the major source of initiatives in default of central activity. City councils played a ‘major and identifiable’ role in the social and economic life of their communities, while, politically, key ‘autonomous’ local characteristics remained intact.¹⁷ Thus, increased state intervention also brokered new local relationships: where civic identity through active citizenship was increasingly structured in terms of the willingness of municipalities to incur debt through, amongst other things, urban renewal programmes.¹⁸ Importantly, in both Nottingham and Leicester pre-war ‘progressive’ laxity in matters of municipal welfarism was held in no small part responsible for Liberal atrophy, from which the other parties sought to benefit electorally.¹⁹ In short, therefore, the conditions existed for self-nominating progressive authorities to construct an enhanced reformist identity through locally initiated social provision.

Undoubtedly, inter-war municipal expansion brought with it a greater local dependence on central grants. Yet there is a suggestion, too, that the coercive governmental strategies of the nineteenth century were being relaxed. The newly

¹⁶ Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 307-8; M. Daunton, ‘Payment and Participation: Welfare and State Formation in Britain 1900-1951’, *Past and Present* 150 (1996), p. 199

¹⁷ P. Thane, *The Foundation of the Welfare State* (London, 1982), p. 196; J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Face of Local Government* (London, 1989), pp. 13-15.

¹⁸ H. Meller, ‘Urban renewal and citizenship: the quality of life in British cities, 1890-1990’, *Urban History*, 22 (1995), p. 65.

¹⁹ D. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 291-3; N. Hayes, *Consensus and Controversy: City Politics in Nottingham 1945-66* (Liverpool, 1996), pp. 18-21.

established Ministry of Health (which was responsible for social housing provision) saw itself more as ‘general guide, philosopher and friend to local authorities’ than had its Local Government Board predecessor.²⁰ While such self-evaluations have obvious limitations, other commentators also noted the correlation between the ready deployment of local authority enthusiasms and the lack of exercise of a coercive function by government departments.²¹ Excepting immediately after the war, central government lacked the extensive administrative system needed to control closely local activity. Thus, during the 1920s central government left much to the localities, albeit that pound-for-pound grants did encourage Whitehall’s ‘constant interference’ to ward against possible local extravagance.²²

In predicting local welfare outcomes it is generally held that by the mid-1920s Labour administrations were showing a ‘greater enthusiasm’ than other parties to construct social housing. Spending on welfare provision, too, generally reflected Labour’s strength on

²⁰ Gibbon (Ass. Sec. Min of Health), cited in J. Davis, ‘Central Government and the Towns, 1840-1950’, M. Daunton (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* ??????

²¹ W.I. Jennings, ‘Central Control’, in H.J. Laski, W.I. Jennings and W.A. Robson (eds.), *A Century of Municipal Progress* (London, 1935), pp. 450-3.

²² J. Bulpitt, *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 157-8; Daunton, ‘Payment’, p. 199. For the differing attitudes within ministries to social expenditure, see G. Savage, *The Social Construction of Expertise: The English Civil Service and Its Influence, 1919-1939* (Pittsburgh, 1996).

councils (but was surprisingly unrelated directly to physical need).²³ Quantitatively, a more radicalised Labour party certainly advanced significantly further, and earlier, in controlling Leicester (Table One).²⁴ In Nottingham it was more growing Conservative strength—already well established before 1914—which erased Liberal civic government. A ‘resistance to socialism’ nominally bound together the traditional parties, particularly in the early 1920s. Nowhere was this ethos more strongly articulated and reinforced than through the local press (which notwithstanding this provided contemporaries and historians with a comprehensive commentary on civic affairs, determining ideas and public policy formation).²⁵ The conservative/populist *Leicester Mail* was particularly intemperate in its universal criticisms of all things ‘socialist’; much more so than the serious, ‘respectable’ *Nottingham Guardian*, or the liberal-progressive, ‘popular’ *Leicester Mercury* and *Nottingham Journal*.²⁶

Yet to focus on political divisions is, in part, to misconstrue local understanding. There existed an equally resonant yet contradictory discourse circulating through local newspapers and, more formally, through the conventions of civic politics, which stressed

²³ J. Darke, ‘Local political attitudes and council housing’, in S. Lowe and D. Hughes (eds.), *A New Century of Social Housing* (Leicester, 1991), p. 163; M. Powell, ‘Did Politics matter? Municipal public health expenditure in the 1930s’, *Urban History* 22 (1995), pp. 360-79

²⁴ Lancaster, ‘Breaking Moulds’: The Leicester ILP and Popular Politics’, in D. James, T. Jowitt and K. Laybourn (eds.), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax, 1992), pp. 88-9.

²⁵ See, for example, M. Freedon, ‘Strangers at the Feast: Ideology and Public Policy in Twentieth Century Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History* 1 (1990), pp. 9-34, esp. p. 13.

²⁶ For simplicity’s sake, the *Nottingham Evening Post* and *Nottingham Evening News*, which were stable mates to the above, have been largely ignored.

consensual and civically-centric values, and placed political inclusivity above factionalism (except during the annual election periods). Thus the presence of loose ‘anti-socialist’ electoral coalitions, and lasting divisions over key ‘ideological’ policies (for example, the use of direct labour), did not preclude active forms of co-operation within each council’s committee system, with their shared intimacies of specialist knowledge, joint responsibility and endeavour (and on which Labour had ever increasing representation). Of the two cities, on balance it was in Nottingham that inter-party co-operation was more evident—or rancour less apparent. This partly reflected (but also contributed to) local Labour moderateness.²⁷

Unlike most major municipalities, neither city participated in the initial wave of prefabricated housing after 1918 heavily promoted by the Ministry of Health as an intrinsic ‘supplement to houses of ordinary construction already in hand’ within an ambitious national reconstruction programme.²⁸ Through its traditional designs, however, Leicester was still thought to be at the ‘forefront of housing initiatives’ immediately after the war.²⁹ By 1939, 35 per cent of its new 25,749 houses had been municipally constructed, against regional and national averages of 30 per cent and 27.9 per cent.

²⁷ For example, Labour’s strong pacifist tendencies (not present in Nott’m), and the antagonisms that resulted, *Leicester Mercury* (hereafter *LM*), 2 July 1919, 9 July 1919; or continuing Liberal opposition to accommodating Labour’s claims to civic office, see *LM* 29 June 1927. For Nott’m and overview, see Hayes, *Consensus*; P. Wyncol, *The Nottinghamshire Labour Movement 1880-1939* (London, 1985). For welfare consensus in Leicester, see D. Reeder, ‘Municipal Provision: Education, Health and Housing’, in D. Nash and D. Reeder (eds.), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century* (Stroud, 1993).

²⁸ *Housing*, 24 Nov. 1919, cited in Swenarton, *Homes*, p. 125.

²⁹ R. Rodger, ‘The Built Environment’, in Nash and Reeder, *Leicester*, p. 9.

Within a specifying framework that equates radicalness with ameliorative provision, it might be expected that Tory-controlled Nottingham corporation played a less active role. In fact it built an even more impressive 65.5 per cent of the 26,080 city houses constructed (Table 2).³⁰ Of these, new methods played a contrasting role in Nottingham and Leicester, contributing 3.4 per cent (slightly below the national average of some 4 per cent) and 16.5 per cent respectively to the public housing stock. Both the Henry Boot and Crane systems used sought the substitution of crafts by unskilled labour (a process which attracted the suspicion of, and occasioned hostility from, organised labour).³¹ Each building system used precast concrete infill slabs in lieu of brick to form the external house wall.³² Henry Boot was one of the few national builders with experience of large contracts; over 8,000 of its non-traditional units were erected during the inter-war period (1,500 of which were in Leicester). By contrast, the Crane system was developed independently by Nottingham's chair of Housing. Used only locally—500 being built—the system license was gifted free to the corporation. It had, therefore, integral core civic and personalised status beyond that of a commercially imported system. All these non-

³⁰ Nottingham's high level of municipal provision is traditionally explained through its monopolisation of city building land (see, C.J. Thomas, 'The growth of Nottingham's Residential Area since 1919', *East Midlands Geographer* 5 (1971), pp. 120-4). It needs to be noted, however, that this decision was politically driven against internal opposition.

³¹ Levels of unemployment generally were consistently higher in Nottingham than Leicester 1923-25, although the gap had narrowed considerably by 1926. However, the key factor was the shortage of skilled building labour, which remained acute in both cities during this period: see, for example Nottingham Archives Office (hereafter NAO), Housing Mins, 16 Jan. 1925; *NG*, 30 April 1925.

³² See Min. of Works, *Post-War Building Studies No.1*, pp. 58-60, 79-80.

traditional houses were completed between 1925-1927, during the second post-war national housing initiative. In Leicester this also coincided with the period of maximum municipal housing construction, after which output fell considerably (Table 2). Set against a backdrop of the earlier rejection of non-traditional solutions, this suggests very specific civic responses to local imperatives outside of the rubric of party specific ideology in two cities where economically no great variances existed.

Reconstructing Civic Perception

Asked by its readers in 1924 if Leicester city council was ‘really in earnest over the shortage of houses’, the *Leicester Mail* replied matter-of-factly that: ‘If they were as convinced to-day that homes must come first as they were in 1914-18 that winning the war must come first they would have a better record than they have.’³³ Acute housing shortages ensured that reconstruction objectives continued to carry disproportionate civic resonance into the 1920s, where national obligation was made more potent and immediate through local press renditions about city hardships. Social reforming local policy-makers might privately hint at the potential political costs of opposing reconstruction —that ‘the working-classes would not be content with the old regime’³⁴— but publicly it was presented as denying ‘brave heroes of the homes they needed.’³⁵ (In

³³ *Mail*, 3 May 1924.

³⁴ NAO, CA ENQ/1920/136, Evidence of William Crane.

³⁵ *Nottingham Journal* (hereafter *NJ*), 23 Sept. 1919.

both cities war service was essentially a prerequisite for obtaining a council house.)³⁶

Enrolling war as a metaphor for social obligation never obscured other constructs of civic responsibility—such as the linkages between public health, morals and improved housing. Rather it bolstered the case for action.

Ultimately local political readings of the success or failure of recent housing policy impinged significantly on the decisions to adopt non-traditional methods. The first preceptor of this was the number of houses constructed by traditional means under the 1919 Act: where Nottingham completed 1,476 of the 3,700 dwellings planned to Leicester's 746 out of 1,500 before national expenditure cuts curtailed programmes. It was not that Nottingham had had greater ambition or unanimity of purpose. Indeed, already approved schemes had initially been abandoned for a lesser number of cheaper tenements.³⁷ Moreover, Leicester's politicians had seen its targets as only preliminary. Nevertheless, government argued that the latter had consistently under-performed against even these more limited expectations.³⁸ Critical, too, in formatting each council's self-image through performance was the important area of central-local relations. In Nottingham, it was Addison (Minister of Health) who intervened at the behest of the Housing Committee to save most of its original programme. In endorsing the committee's 'enlightened' garden city approach, vetoing any subsidy for tenements (to which he had partially agreed) and reminding councillors that default charges would be

³⁶ A similar point is made by Ryder, 'Council House Building', p.74.

³⁷ *NJ*, 23 Sept. 1919.

³⁸ PRO HLG 48/132, D. Wood (Housing Commissioner), to Pritchard, 10 July 1920; *LM*, 7 July 1919, 29 Oct. 1919.

levied nationally against them if they decided not to proceed, he ‘guided’ the city’s options.³⁹ At a time when local authority inexperience was at its greatest, and Ministry ‘interference in matters of detail’ at its height,⁴⁰ here was a relationship characterised by vacillation and open partisanship (when colluding with factions within the City Council), but also one based on negotiation. Ironically, too, it also enabled Nottingham subsequently to construe its own achievements positively.

In Leicester there was a marked absence of alliance building with central government agencies. Indeed, the Liberal chair of the Housing Committee publicly ridiculed standard government designs ‘damaged by foolish ideas of economy’: ‘they were convinced they could do better themselves.... Whatever the Government has touched it has spoilt’.⁴¹ Departing from ‘approved’ designs involved the Committee in ‘protracted’ discussions with Ministry officials. Other common difficulties aside, this meant that by the end of 1921 Leicester could count only half the number of house units approved by Whitehall as in Nottingham. What Leicester’s Housing Committee viewed as ‘the continued refusal of the Ministry to allow them to proceed with their work’ evidenced a breakdown in central-local discourse—from which neither benefited—where the Ministry curtailed new programmes until existing contracts were completed and conformity on costs and related specifications met. The committee, however, continued to draw the backing of the full council and a civically-partisan local press. Neither situation could last indefinitely.

³⁹ NAO, Housings Mins, 26 Sept. 1919; *NJ* 7 Oct. 1919; R. Smith and P. Whysall, ‘The Addison Act and the local authority response’, *Town Planning Review* 61 (1990), pp. 194-7.

⁴⁰ Ryder, ‘Council House Building’, p. 62.

⁴¹ *LM*, 1 June 1921.

Waiting lists continued to rise—from 2,115 in December 1920 to 5,747 by May 1924—by which time only a meagre 3.1 per cent of local building labour was engaged on municipal schemes.⁴² ‘The Housing Committee had from the very beginning hindered progress’, one member belatedly concluded. ‘There was always something to object to with the regulations’.⁴³ Progressive local authorities traditionally had sought legitimacy and independence from central ‘expert’ supervision by providing high local standards of service.⁴⁴ In Leicester, however, mounting public criticism centred directly on an inverted sense of civic failure borne of inactivity. “‘Hush!”, say the Councillors when the housing question is under consideration. “Don’t face the real facts. Talk around the subject.””⁴⁵

Yet facts were not indiscriminate guardians of civic perception. Nottingham’s waiting lists also reached 6,184 by September 1924, rising by a further 25 per week over the next year. Yet proportionately little public criticism emerged. On the contrary, reformers actively sought to ‘depoliticise’ housing, so that reform acquired a pragmatic mantle. Crane publicly took leading fellow Tories to task for proposing alternative strategies, arguing that housing ‘was far too important a matter to be made the subject of an election cry’.⁴⁶ Meanwhile the committee busied itself building low rent accommodation for ex-servicemen, popular both with the Ministry and across local

⁴² Leicester Record Office (hereafter LRO), Counc. Mins, 31 May 1921, 27 May 1924; Housing Mins, 9 Feb. 1922.

⁴³ *LM*, 10 Sept, 1924.

⁴⁴ J. Dale, *Class Struggle, Social Policy and State Structure: Central-Local Relations and Housing Policy, 1919-1939*, in J. Melling (ed.), *Housing, Social Policy and the State* (London, 1980), p. 203.

⁴⁵ *Mail*, 1 May 1924.

political divides.⁴⁷ By contrast, Leicester's attempts to build 'low cost' housing to its own designs ended in the bankruptcy of several contractors, and more delays.⁴⁸

In Nottingham, the contrast with earlier shortcomings—encapsulated in the 'dent to civic pride' in 1920 when the city was refused a boundary extension partly because of its past poor slum record⁴⁹—helped ensure that later municipal provision (quantitatively and qualitatively) was constantly and favourably reported upon in an elevated, reinforcing (and uncritical) manner. Where formerly the press had been critical of the levels of interventionism (positively or negatively), by the early 1920s both its progressive and conservative wings were offering supportive homilies on housing tasks completed.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly Crane's location within the ruling Conservative party aided this process of assimilation. Thereafter, although city politicians continued to differ over future housing policy, only a few commented negatively on municipally constructed estates now validated as icons of civic achievement.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *NJ*, 28 Nov. 1925.

⁴⁷ *Master Builder*, 5 July 1922.

⁴⁸ Rodger, 'Built environment', pp. 10-11.

⁴⁹ R. Smith and P. Whysall, 'The origins and development of local authority housing in Nottingham 1890-1960', in Lowe and Hughes, *Social Housing*, pp. 36-7.

⁵⁰ Compare, for example, the conservative-supporting *Nottingham Guardian* (hereafter *NG*), 11 Aug. 1920 and 15 Sept. 1920, with 30 Dec. 1921.

⁵¹ Hayes, *Consensus and Controversy*, pp. 26-7. As exemplars of newspaper coverage, see *NG*, 26 June 1926, 1 Jan. 1929, *NJ Trade Review* 1 Jan. 1931. Criticism of the city's slum problems only reinforced this consensus for action e.g., *Nottingham Evening Post*, 8 June 1925, *NG*, 8 Oct. 1929.

However, the disparities between the lack of immediate civic accomplishment against needs in Leicester produced a singularly more volatile condition. When Herbert Hallam, now chair of Housing, refused again to apologise for the committee's past performance, notable were the press accolades awarded to his recently appointed Conservative vice-chair for his ultimatum to his colleagues of 'Get on or Get Out'.⁵² Such directness in public was very unusual, particularly between fellow committee officers. Nor especially was it the product of a broader anti-socialist rhetoric against Hallam as a Labour nominee. Instead, it complemented the heightening press campaign against inactivity. Indeed, once the committee took a more robust line, Hallam was re-presented as 'Leicester's Busiest Man Today', assimilating a 'mass of detail' connected with the 'City's latest housing scheme' for which he has 'done so much spadework in committee'.⁵³ It was, then, upon the question of civic leadership that the press took its stance (albeit that the *Mail*, idiosyncratically, called for a local housing 'Mussolini' to 'smash' trades union tyranny), wedded to the belief that: 'Not in Whitehall, but in Leicester, shall we find the solution to the great Housing problem.'⁵⁴ Nottingham's press, by contrast, never took up arms against its Housing Committee, which was deemed to be providing the leadership required. It is here, at a local level through the civic reportage of activity and inactivity, that the experiences of Nottingham and Leicester noticeably diverged in the adoption of non-traditional housing solutions.

⁵² *LM*, 28 May 1924.

⁵³ *LM*, 5 Aug. 1924, 19 Sept. 1924.

⁵⁴ *Mail*, 28 May, 5 June; *LM*, 25 June.

The Discourses of Crisis and Consensus in Civic Decision-Making

The 1920s have been portrayed as the high point of a popular idealism linking civic welfare reform to the promotion of community identity and active citizenship.⁵⁵ Within what McKibbin has labelled a ‘community of language’, a socially inclusive local press, with its cross-sectional readership (in terms of class, political allegiance and gender) and high levels of sales, provided a ready medium for formatting such organic ideals.⁵⁶ Key news stories were specifically selected for their capacity to involve its readership through an agenda that affected his own life or engaged his imagination. Yet local institutional leaders, symbiotically, also exercised ‘a decisive influence’ on newspaper content as ‘leaders of thought’, for the papers relied heavily on them for their material.⁵⁷ Within this closed environment, where the community was interpreted through its institutional structure, ‘the versions of events promulgated by powerful individuals within this institutional order become the established truth of communal life’. Yet as Franklin and Murphy point out, occasionally predilection, ‘the market for news’ or the ‘forces in the inter-play of local politics’ disrupted this tendency to normative social reinforcement. In

⁵⁵ J. Harris, ‘Political thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: an Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy’, *Past and Present* 135 (1992), pp. 116-41.

⁵⁶ R. McKibbin, *Classes and Culture* (Oxford 1998), p. 505.

⁵⁷ I. Jackson, *The Provincial Press and the Community* (Manchester, 1971), 39, 43-4.

then brokering its own constructs of ‘city first’ interest, the local press stepped outside of the ‘normal sheepfold’ it inhabited to make and direct opinion independently.⁵⁸

Against a common backdrop of shortages, Leicester’s active interest in non-traditional housing predated that of Nottingham by some six months. This broadly reflected the greater disparity between its lack of achievements and its perceived needs-driven obligations as laid out through local opinion. Its decision-making process, too, was truncated as intensive local debate created civic exigency. In such circumstances, perhaps, expert validation had a key role. Indeed, one reason offered to explain the adoption of new methods in Leicester is supposedly rapidly changing attitudes within the Ministry of Health, which in strongly commending concrete methodology, left the City Council with ‘no alternative’.⁵⁹ Hallam was unquestionably resistant to the substitution of non-traditional methods: idealistically on aesthetic grounds of sameness, and because it was a comparatively untested and expensive alternative. The Ministry bolstered this belief in traditional solutions by granting further allocations at a time when Hallam argued that local labour shortages were improving.⁶⁰ Antagonisms between Leicester and senior Ministry officials were also easing, largely because local leaders now actively sought the counsel of their central counterparts within the general context of a more relaxed supervisory apparatus once government financial liabilities were limited to a

⁵⁸ B. Franklin and D. Murphy, *What News? The Market, Politics and the Local Press* (London, 1991), pp. 55-75.

⁵⁹ Newitt, ‘From Slums to Semis’, p. 58.

⁶⁰ *LM*, 28 May 1924, 25 June 1924, 12 Aug. 1924; LRO, Council Mins, 27 May 1924.

fixed sum per house under the 1923 and 1924 Housing Acts.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the initiative to use alternative methods came first from within Leicester, when it sought to erect ‘temporary’ timber houses (one solution, amongst several emergency measures, proposed by the *Leicester Mail* and certain hectoring councillors).⁶² The Ministry was also seeking progress through compromise. It, therefore, reluctantly granted permission for this initiative. This reluctance was understandable. As Ruthen (Director General, Ministry of Health) pointed out, ‘a considerable amount of skilled labour was required to erect temporary houses and he did not want the Council to do anything that would retard the permanent housing programme.’⁶³ That on reflection the Ministry, the city’s housing architect, and, after consultation, the city council, preferred ‘permanent’ concrete housing at a significantly lower cost, simply made good sense.⁶⁴ It does not, however, explain why the Housing Committee abandoned its longstanding predilections against alternative housing methods.

There was, of course, nothing *new* in the Ministry promotion of non-traditional solutions, although a renewed interest had yet to be fully reawakened.⁶⁵ Yet,

⁶¹ For example, LRO, Housing Mins, 28 Feb. 1924, 13 June 1924 and, especially, 4 Sept. 1924; Dale, *Central-Local Relations*, pp. 212-3, 219-20. Under the 1919 Housing Act, local authority liabilities were limited to the product of a one penny rate. All expenditure above this level came from central funds.

⁶² *Mail*, 11-12 June 1924. Temporary meant a life span of some 15 years.

⁶³ PRO HLG 49/258, ‘Notes on Interview at Min. of Health’, 5 June 1924.

⁶⁴ *LM*, 21 June 1924. The cost for timber houses was £460 each, whereas the estimated cost for concrete was £415 less a £75 subsidy.

⁶⁵ See the Moir Comm. (est. Sept. 1924), whose four reports into 1925 broadly favourable to non-traditional methods.

comparatively, national commendations were overshadowed by those already instigated by local politicians and, more particularly, by the *Leicester Mercury* (the city's other major daily newspaper). In ratcheting up the tensions of civic neglect, the *Mercury* first surveyed the work being undertaken elsewhere: for example, that 'Birmingham is tackling the housing famine in a way which is an object lesson to Leicester'. Here, apparently, was a city which had constructed six times as many houses since the war, and currently completing over 170 brick houses per month (as opposed to Leicester's 16); yet Birmingham was also 'building concrete dwellings to relieve the housing shortage.'

And how is it that the Housing Committee, which on its own showing cannot produce brick houses, declined to go ahead with concrete building? There is no adequate reason for such a conservative disregard of a material which has the virtue of not calling for skilled bricklayers, who are costly and unobtainable. Leicester must build houses and the "Mercury" will continue to concentrate public attention on a crying evil... WE WANT HOUSES – NOT EXCUSES.⁶⁶

There followed an intoxicating tirade through May and June (where only exceptionally did the paper not carry a major lead, editorial or exploration on Leicester's housing crisis) and into July and August. Firstly it asserted, directly or mediatorially ('experts know that'), the underlying merits of alternative methods: 'Concrete Facts For City Council. Expert on Advantages of New Form of House Construction. Time and Labour Saving'; or appealed directly to the 'common sense' of its readership – 'What is the matter with concrete? The houseless do not care what materials are used... when modern improvements are made why should not advantage be taken of them?' The implicit or

openly stated assertion was always that ‘Concrete would solve Leicester’s biggest problem in a very short space of time’.⁶⁷ Attesting to civic achievement elsewhere remained central to the validation process, cementing the perception of Leicester’s own ‘dilly-dallying’ neglect.⁶⁸ Even those not then building by non-traditional means were recruited. ‘Nottingham’s Hustle Puts Leicester in the Shade’, reported the *Mercury*’s ‘Special Correspondent’. ‘The more fully I go into the housing conditions in the Midlands, ... the more does the effort of Leicester appear dwarfed by that of neighbouring towns.’⁶⁹

Finally, the *Mercury* concentrated unreservedly on the human cost of not building by concrete. Key members of the Health Committee, Thomas Windley (for 46 years its Liberal chairman) and Walter Wilford (now its chair and also Labour’s chief whip) first offered a bipartisan call for non-traditional solutions because of the ‘scandalous’ threat posed to public health by homelessness and endemic overcrowding.⁷⁰ This opened the floodgates to journalistic licence. In one article alone, ‘Home, Sweet Home, No Longer. Families Suffer while Authorities Talk—and Talk’, the *Mercury* alluded to children ‘not getting fair play’, to falling property values because of overcrowding, the break-up of family life, of ‘decent working-class families’ having to live in slum conditions all because: ‘Apparently, it is better for people to live in squalid hovels or crowd into rooms

⁶⁶ *LM*, 2 & 3 May 1924 (it was acknowledged that B’ham had a waiting list of 16,600).

⁶⁷ *LM*, 9-13 May 1924.

⁶⁸ *LM*, 24 May 1924.

⁶⁹ *LM*, 7 May 1924. For a similar theme of civic insularity, see *Mail*, 22 May 1924.

⁷⁰ *Mail*, 7 May 1924; *LM*, 17 May 1924, 28 May 1924.

in other people's houses rather than ... have concrete dwellings.'⁷¹ Many a lurid headline and story followed: of 'People Herded in Rooms Suffering Untold Misery'; or of terrible overcrowding 'Driving Mothers Out of Their Minds', a quote attributed to Wilford, who concluded 'our doctors tell us that as a result there may be an actual increase in lunacy'.⁷²

With four times the readership, the *Mercury*'s campaign always overshadowed that of the *Mail*'s, which championed cheap, temporary accommodation through private enterprise and self-help; and opposed 'concrete' solutions. The *Mercury* itself was not unduly modest about its 'considerable influence' in setting the civic agenda by programming council debates and focusing attention on achievement elsewhere.⁷³

Windley thought its 'numberless articles and letters' had provided 'a service' for which 'the public are greatly indebted.'⁷⁴ That other less sympathetic politicians dubbed its campaign a 'wicked criticism, absolute perversion of fact, and a down-right lie' only gives credence to these claims and to their perceived impact.⁷⁵ It was the press, too, that rode roughshod over the unwritten behavioural protocols muting sustained, publicly-voiced criticism inside the council chamber, breaking down and reconstructing a new consensus. To this process, groupings inside the council attached themselves. Hallam's publicly expressed attitudes to 'concrete', while not providing a precise measure, are instructive in assessing the determining impact the *Mercury* had: for during the campaign

⁷¹ *LM*, 10 May 1924.

⁷² *LM* 15 May 1924, 17 May 1924.

⁷³ *LM*, 10 Sept. 1924

⁷⁴ Letter from Windley, *LM*, 14 July 1924.

⁷⁵ *Mail*, 9 July 1924.

he moved from outright opposition, to grudging acceptance and fulsome praise (the Boot system is ‘thoroughly tested ... [and] will give entire satisfaction’); even finally to outright hostility against those who subsequently sought delays (‘if we find anyone’s head in the way we shall hit it’).⁷⁶

This is not to dispute that the Housing Committee relied on Ministry officers to approve its proposals, and for impartial technical advice (on which professional authority central officials had historically based claims to *positive leadership* over local government).⁷⁷ In both respects, the Ministry validated concrete’s credentials as a viable constructional form designed to counter local labour shortages, the availability of which partially determined whether approval for a scheme was granted centrally.⁷⁸ According to the Ministry’s account of the decision-making process:

We suggested to Mr Fyfe [Leicester’s Housing Architect] that as the tenders for the wooden [temporary] houses had come out so high, he would probably be well advised to consider the question of concrete houses. He might not get the first instalment of these so quickly ... but in the long run it seemed probable that greater progress would be made this way. Mr Fyfe agreed and said he would get in touch with firms who had erected concrete houses ... so that he might have other proposals to put before the Housing Committee.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ LRO, Counc. Mins., 9 Sept. 1924; *LM*, 8 Sept. 1924.

⁷⁷ C. Bellamy, *Administering central-local relations 1871-1919* (Manchester, 1988), p.15.

⁷⁸ LRO, Counc. Mins., 27 May, 1924, 24 June 1924.

⁷⁹ PRO HLG 49/258, Mins of meeting on 17 June 1924 between Unwin, Maslin and Fyfe, 25 June 1924.

Fyfe was already ill-disposed to accept high cost, temporary solutions (a conviction he thought the Housing Committee would share). The city's Health Committee, however, was pressing hard for immediate action.⁸⁰ Thus within the climate of bullish expectation created in Leicester, central enthusiasms and tutelage were not outweighed by locally determined perceptions of necessity and its practical amelioration. Thus it was Housing Committee representatives that scurried half-way across Britain one weekend to seek private reassurances from Ruthen that their expansionary concrete houses programme was intact; and, shortly after, actively lobbying to build more 'concrete' houses and to make Leicester a national centre for 'experimental steel houses'.⁸¹ Within an orchestrated ambience of civic neglect, therefore, Leicester councillors' late penchant for non-traditional solutions flourished.

The shortages endemic in Leicester were certainly present in Nottingham, too, so that slum housing previously closed was being reopened. The corporation, however, initially placed its faith in stimulating private developers, who promised some 2,000 working-class houses over a two year period under the subsidy provisions of the 1923 Act (half of which were to be rented to those on the housing waiting list). While Crane supported this measure short-term as a pragmatic compromise, his own enthusiasm, and that of the Housing Committee generally, was for strategic municipal intervention, building directly for rent.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ LRO, Housing Mins, 4 Sept. 1924, 8 Jan. 1925; HLG 49/258, Mins of Meeting, 26 Feb. 1925.

⁸² NAO, Housing Mins., 8 July 1921, 20 July 1923; Coun. Mins., 1 Oct. 1923.

The attempted restoration of even heavily subsidised private provision was not a success: six months into the probationary programme saw only 30 houses completed. Further hampered by local resource shortages, Nottingham's newly-found civic sense of progress was diluted and in danger of foundering. The committee's response was to suggest that local demand could 'never be met unless some new form of construction is used.'⁸³ Thus, by the time Ministry officials approached the city to act as a demonstration centre for prototypes, steps had already been taken locally to sketch out its own rapidly 'approved' design for a concrete and steel exemplar.⁸⁴ Local reactions to the proposals were favourable; indeed the call was for greater variety (initially only the Weir and Crane types were to be displayed). The key voices raised against prefabrication came from a Labour minority, because the Weir system was nationally associated with the non-payment of trades union rates.⁸⁵ Mainstream Labour thinking neatly side-stepped this objection in two ways: by openly stating its preference for brick, circumstances permitting, and by praising Crane's design. The 'mere demonstration', it was argued, of the Weir house would 'kill it', but when seen the public 'would want a lot of those designed by the Chairman'.⁸⁶ Press accolades acted to minimise dissent: lacking the hyperbole of Leicester's campaign, they instead offered a reassuring meld of civic continuity, utility and progression:

⁸³ NAO, Housing Report, 21 Sept. 1925.

⁸⁴ NAO, Housing Mins, 24 Oct. 1924, 19 Dec. 1924, 2 Jan 1925; Housing Report, 16 Jan. 1925.

⁸⁵ White, *Prefabrication*, pp. 73-8.

⁸⁶ *NG*, 3 Feb. 1925; *NJ*, 3 Feb. 1925, 1 April 1925.

the exterior of the house was attractively bright, contrasting gratefully with the severity of the average “council” house.... large numbers of houses can be erected by mass production in a very short time.... The houses are fitted with electric fires, cooking stoves and boilers [etc.].... [and are] both convenient and of elegant appearance, as would be expected from any work that is designed by Mr. T.C. Howitt, who has been so successful in regard to the housing schemes carried out by the Corporation in recent years.... It might be added that as soon as Mr. Crane’s method of construction was submitted to the Ministry of Health it was at once approved by their principal architect.... ‘fire away’ with the enterprise.⁸⁷

‘Here are houses such as hundreds and thousands of people would jump at the chance of living in’, commented the conservatively-orientated *Nottingham Guardian*. ‘Mr. Crane has realised for a long time past that if people are to wait for houses constructed in the orthodox manner, most of those now without houses will probably never get them.’⁸⁸

The Crane prototype was Ministry approved and subsequently erected within three months. A clear sense of purpose likewise spurred the Housing Committee to order 72 Wild steel framed, brick clad houses. Crane brushed aside what he labelled ‘obstructionist’ opposition, decrying claims that needs could be met by traditional means as being ‘too absurd to be contradicted.’⁸⁹ It was now simply a case of deciding how many Crane type houses to build. Having originally opted for 500, the committee thought again and doubled that number.

⁸⁷ *NJ*, 30 April 1925.

⁸⁸ *NG*, 30 April 1925.

⁸⁹ *NJ*, 7 July 1925.

Yet securing final approval for the package locally proved singularly more difficult than obtaining Ministry consent, which again readily granted its permission and a subsidy. The city's Finance Committee was increasingly preoccupied with a rising capital housing debt. Of concern, too, was that 30 per cent of the 'Crane' site lay outside the city boundary, where the rates paid would be lost to another authority. It proposed tactically, therefore, that initially only 500 houses be built, offered first for sale. It was this compromise position which was finally adopted, amendments for the cancellation of the second 500 and for building the full allocation for rent under the more generous 1924 Act being defeated.⁹⁰

Crane presented the case not only in terms of rapidity of construction but also as the 'biggest scheme for the relief of unemployment the Corporation had then undertaken'. Its relationship to civic self-esteem became apparent in other ways: sold as a technical innovation locally developed, and as a continuum of Nottingham's garden city ethos. Opponents retaliated likewise, branding the houses as unsaleable, 'monstrous', 'nothing less than large bird-cages.' Clearly significant divisions existed. Yet as the *Guardian* commented, 'obstructionist argument, even though plausibly based, received short shrift' when set against the 6,000 names on the waiting list. 'In any case now that the scheme is to go forward, public speakers should think twice before proceeding to undermine public confidence in the new form of construction.'⁹¹

It would be disingenuous to claim that Nottingham's newspapers consistently reported civic affairs through a consensual filter. Nevertheless the coupling of 'city

⁹⁰ NAO, Council Mins., 6 July 1925, 5 Oct. 1925.

⁹¹ *NJ & NG*, 6 Oct. 1925.

before party' was prominently cast through the next two decades.⁹² The conciliatory, softer tones struck in Nottingham contrasted starkly with the strident campaigning and bitter criticisms driven by Leicester's press in the mid 1920s: where it claimed, for example, that city councillors 'let themselves go with laughter at savoury bits about housing troubles'.⁹³ Yet as construction proceeded, the Crane houses did provoke controversy. One senior Conservative alderman persistently brokered an alternative treatise that the houses were now 'very widely criticised', with tenants complaining that you 'could wipe the water off the walls' (claims the occupiers subsequently denied). The *Guardian's* response, when he spoke again, was to offer an editorial and separate comment praising Nottingham's municipal 'courageous enterprise', and specifically the great interest in, and anticipated benefits of, the Crane development.⁹⁴

Within the idealised constructs of civic consensus, dispassionate 'objectivity' was never the first consideration, nor the first goal. When the proposed erection of a further 500 prefabricated houses was repeatedly blocked, and finally whittled away to constructing fewer traditional buildings, again for sale, this too was presented by the press as 'containing more than a germ of a satisfactory compromise'. To Crane, however, 'it was all very disheartening'.⁹⁵ Twenty years later, he was more forthright. 'There was' he concluded, 'a very large reactionary section on the Council at that time.'⁹⁶ Yet Labour

⁹² Hayes, *Consensus and Controversy*, passim.

⁹³ *Mail*, 28 May 1924.

⁹⁴ *NG*, 8 & 26 June 1926.

⁹⁵ *NG*, 4 Jan. 1927, 8Feb. 1927.

⁹⁶ *Fifth Report of Select Comm.*, p. 173.

support also faltered. Nottingham had already embarked on the first of several major brick built estates; these quite clearly were the models Labour favoured, instead of what some of its supporters ‘irreverently dubbed “Kaffir Kraals”’.⁹⁷

Yet, it was in the conservative press that the campaign against the Crane house had briefly ignited to contest previously constructed agreement in an economic climate now more conducive to traditional methods. Setting aside its earlier praise, this revised rendition of ‘city first’ consensus relied instead primarily on traditional mantras. Wollaton Park (the proposed site) was, as the *Guardian* put it, ‘a scene of almost unrivalled sylvan beauty’, which was likely ruined if yet more ‘monotonous’ concrete houses were laid down. (As importantly, it was a residential area and further development threatened property values). The cost to the rates in lost revenue when building outside the city boundaries was again raised.⁹⁸ Crane appealed in vein to the Council ‘not to be influenced by anything that had been said in the press’, as the tide of reported opinion turned against him.⁹⁹ In fact, within the confines of party peculiarities, the press and the council largely spoke with one voice — against Crane. Yet, the construct of ‘city first’ consensus remained to the fore, because even in defeat Crane’s endeavours drew praise. ‘It was very pleasant to find’, recorded the progressive *Nottingham Journal*, ‘that no matter how members of the Council may differ on matters of policy they desired heartily to recognise disinterested endeavour put forth in the interests of the city.’¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *NG*, 30 Dec. 1926, 4 Jan. 1927, 8 Feb. 1927.

⁹⁸ *NG*, 30 Dec. 1926, 1 Jan. 1927.

⁹⁹ *NG*, 4 Jan. 1927.

¹⁰⁰ *NJ*, 4 Jan. 1927.

Concrete had its critics in Leicester too: its mayor, for example, labelling it ‘a white elephant on the city’. As in Nottingham, civic politics occasioned divided loyalties, so that a Tory election assault on the Boot house provoked an equally robust response from Conservatives serving on the Housing Committee.¹⁰¹ The complaints in Leicester, however, carried greater substance. Poor supervision and design faults were only partially rectified by subsequent modifications, so that while quality improved, complaints continued too.¹⁰² In fact, a government sponsored enquiry had identified potential design shortcomings contemporaneously.¹⁰³ Yet while Nottingham was largely content to cancel its half-completed prefabrication programme, Leicester persevered with the second and third phases of the Boot scheme, so that some 1,500 of the technically inferior Boot houses were finally constructed (although phase one was already acquiring a reputation as a sink estate).¹⁰⁴ Why was this? Leicester’s councillors and professional advisors were certainly not instinctively wedded to new technological solutions. Nor should we absolve councillors of their responsibility by maintaining that ‘the use of concrete was forced on the Corporation by central government’; even if that was true initially—a dubious assertion—it does little to explain an enthusiastic perseverance with a partially flawed methodology. Cancellation (as in Nottingham on less ‘concrete’ grounds) was always an option, but not one favoured generally by Leicester’s opinion

¹⁰¹ *LM*, 30 Sept. 1925; *Mail*, 21 Oct. 1925, 23 Oct. 1925.

¹⁰² LRO, Housing Mins., e.g. 10 Dec. 1925, 26 May 1927; Newitt, ‘Slums to Semis’, pp. 61-6.

¹⁰³ PRO HLG 52/771, ‘Notes on Sub-Comm. dealing with Alt. Methods of Housing Construction’, 14 Nov. 1924 & Statement by Moir, 21 Nov. 1924.

¹⁰⁴ Newitt, ‘Slums to Semis’, pp. 61-66; *LM*, 6 April 1927;

formers, excepting the *Mail*.¹⁰⁵ After a succession of local campaigns, which started in the 1930s, the last of the Boot houses are now finally being demolished. Yet subsequent shortcomings should not blind us to the dominant culture of response and obligation created locally in the mid 1920s, underpinned by a strongly pejorative construct of past performance and of contemporary crisis. It is against this backdrop that defensive, locally-made decisions and attitudes were struck, and once validated, endured. This, too, speaks to the authority of locally-conceived discourse as nationally non-traditional housing fell out of favour.

‘Local Authority’ and Civic Perception

Several points emerge from this discussion. Firstly, local councils clearly did retain authority over significant areas of policy formation at all stages of the decision-making process in these early years of mass state housing. This authority, however, was not set at a fixed rate. Initially, at least, it was determined by the degree to which local/national objectives and practices coincided within a loose system of shared values. While coercion was always an option for central government, especially under the 1919 Act, encouragement and/or tutelage was the stronger ethos. If an antipathetic relationship held sway neither party benefited, but the costs were greater for civic leaderships. Local political elites in Nottingham and Leicester were bound to a spatially immediate and personalised construct of civic improvement, where progressive self-image was

¹⁰⁵ Newitt, ‘Slums to Semis’, p. 66; *Mail*, 1 Oct. 1925.

defined—albeit ambiguously—by local performance. Here a tarnished civic image had both an individual and collective cost locally.

In each city a strong belief existed—propounded particularly through the press—that the ‘solution to the great Housing problem’ would be (and was) found locally, not in Whitehall. In the diffusion of new methods of construction, we find several exemplars of this ideal. Against a common national backdrop of research and promotion, in Nottingham it was at a local level that the key impetuses (and resistances) were to be found: as it designed, implemented and ultimately terminated its own programme. Yet developing its own system placed Nottingham in a clear minority amongst local authorities. In Leicester’s case, by contrast, central impetuses were stronger: in terms of validation, initiation and—through contributing negatively to local housing shortages—in providing a civic environment in which non-traditional ideas could flourish. Nevertheless it was locally that the campaign to implement new ideas exploded.

Most interesting, perhaps, is the centrality of self-perception within the civic decision-making chain. While each city reacted to ‘hard measures’ of local social need and economic constraint, decisions were also strongly filtered through a distinctly local culture of understanding which drew powerfully on each city’s past and present situation. Political decision-making depended less on those spheres of influence frequently used to predict outcomes (notably contemporary party divides) than on the city’s intrinsic view of itself. Such perceptions, too, were grounded less on a mathematically precise equation of needs against provision, than on more subtle shades of interpretation, reportage and constructions of political community: of what might, perhaps, be provided, and how municipal performance measured against this. This, in turn, influenced how each council

viewed itself and was viewed locally by others: in our examples, against a common backdrop of a progressive agenda, ultimately as either as a body in crisis or one consensually driven forward.

It would be a misnomer to suggest that even within this circular process of interpretation and reinterpretation only one unitary civic perception existed at any one time. What is evident, however, is that from starting positions which were roughly congruent, facing problems which were broadly of the same magnitude, these two political communities came to be portrayed—and to a lesser but still significant degree to see themselves—in wholly dissimilar terms. Physical performance by itself does not account for this divergence: waiting lists rose equally and constantly in both cities, and both also encountered significant problems in raising housing output (albeit that Nottingham performed better in the immediate post-war years).

Within a politically intimate system, in each city ‘progressive’ issues like housing and health retained an underlying propensity to bypass local partisanship (aided by the practices of civic government where committee loyalties competed with party loyalties). The normative processes of the press, which strongly reinforced such consensual constructs, were overridden in Leicester only because of the city’s continuing non-conformity to this progressive ideal, so that the press itself stepped in to offer its own interpretation and leadership of a ‘city-first’ solution to a major civic dilemma. In Nottingham, by contrast, press compliance reinforced the positive decision-making process (although, ironically, short-term it could also act as a brake on initiative). Either way, in rendering an idealised construct, the press offered a ‘vision’ against which non-conformity jarred abruptly. Press presentation counted because it tapped into and

energised those loosely defined, yet core expectations and contemporary shared beliefs organically registered within the civic community; and because local politicians presumed that it further influenced public opinion. In this environment, at a time when progressive local authorities considered a dynamic welfare function as intrinsic to a city's identity, it is hardly surprising that local perception, too, took on great importance in defining and setting policy, especially when perception and press presentation walked hand in hand.