

All That Is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster by Danny Dorling – review

Extortionate house price rises. A lack of suitable homes. There is only one real solution



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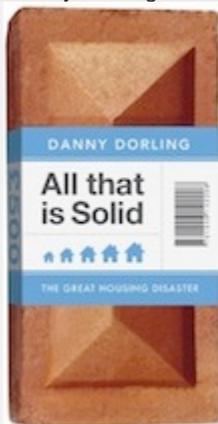
Georgian houses in Islington, north London. Photograph: Londonstills.com/Rex Features

Somewhere in among the avalanche of graphs, statistics and stories of [housing](#) misery that make up Danny Dorling's *All That Is Solid*, the author acknowledges that he is in good company: the state of housing has formed the basis for recent studies and diatribes authored by everyone from "revolutionaries" to bankers and economists. It arrives soon after a [notable essay in the London Review of Books by James Meek on the housing crisis](#), and chimes well with the more elliptical analyses of housing in film-maker [Patrick Keiller's book of essays *The View from the Train*](#). Both Meek and Keiller give a great deal of attention to undersupply, with consequences ranging from the densification of London to the overvaluing of an ageing, dilapidated housing stock; they make a variety of counter-proposals, ranging from new council housing

to inexpensive self-builds as a way of breaking the national obsession with wildly expensive private property. What is striking is how little effect these suggestions have on mainstream opinion. Emphases are different, but politicians seem agreed on the necessity of returning to some sort of *status quo ante*, with Labour's demand for more building expressing an evident yearning for 2007 and a tangle of cranes over Leeds or Manchester, and the Tories preferring 1980s revivalist talk of eliminating red tape and offering inducements to home ownership. Dorling's book rejects both "left" and "right" arguments in favour of a rather surprising assertion: that we do not need to build more at all. There is, as the last census proved, more than enough housing, with even overcrowded London having more than enough bedrooms for each inhabitant. So why isn't it shared out?

All That Is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster

by Danny Dorling



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Like many of Dorling's other books, then, this one is really about inequality. As a result, it can feel rather familiar to anyone who has read those books, or who knows the heavily statistical, social democratic arguments they represent (reminiscent of *The Spirit Level* and its successors). And this isn't a sweeping, synoptic study of how housing in the UK became as distorted and expensive as it is – the book that one would expect Dorling to have written. There is little in it on the recent past or how we got to a situation where housing became an "asset" rather than a place to live. The histories of council housing, right to buy, and the New Labour housing boom are only lightly sketched out, with the author sometimes assuming that we know it all already, an assumption sometimes sits oddly with the accessible prose. What there is instead is a relentless attention to how bad things have become. The book is

divided into themed headings – "Planning", "Building", "Buying", "Speculation", "Slump" and so forth – but they are often a very vague rubric, with similar points and examples recurring in each. Meek's essay is much better at explaining how we got here, and it is more vivid, too, with its direct accounts of particular housing estates in London. Its one graph, showing the correlation between the collapse of council house builds and massive house price inflation, is more memorable than all of the two dozen or so in *All That Is Solid*.

Dorling's explanation is less direct. He stresses the role of the very rich, particularly in London, in hiking up prices everywhere, and surveys the consequences. These include an increase in homelessness – finding a solution to which is now contracted out to companies such as [Social Finance](#), whose goal is to get people off the streets as quickly as possible, by "confirmed reconnection to another country" if necessary. The number of rough sleepers is rising – "by 25% in just the 12 months to autumn 2011", Dorling notes, and one British family with children is becoming homeless every 15 minutes. Class cleansing in inner London is becoming ethnic cleansing, with black families being the main victims of evictions as the consequence of benefit cuts. Some of the most powerful passages in this book dwell on the iniquity of the [bedroom tax](#), where "almost two-thirds of those who will be affected have a disability", and he quotes one anonymous housing association tenant (and academic) as saying that receiving their social landlord's explanation of the tax was as if "a wormhole somewhere in Whitehall had allowed the Chadwick report to slip on to someone's BlackBerry". This refers to [Edwin Chadwick](#) and the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which established the workhouse system as a guard against "bastardy". London, in particular, is hurtling back to a neo-Victorianism, an era before the introduction of the London county council or of council housing. There are new types of building that are the products of this inequality – at the low end of the scale, garden sheds housing whole families; at the upper end, capacious basements boasting cinemas and games rooms. These, he notes, can often be found in the same areas – for instance, in London districts such as Pimlico.

The "solutions" that have been offered by politicians are staggeringly flimsy: he quotes Theresa May's claim that "house prices could be 10% lower over 20 years if the government cut net migration to zero", and curtly points out that "she assumes that the electorate she wants to appeal to is innumerate as well as prejudiced. A reduction of 10% over 20 years, or much less than 0.5% a year, is negligible". Dorling also gives a lot of attention to the idiocy of the [Help to Buy](#) scheme. One

passage on this shows his strengths as a populist writer. Defenders of the status quo like their household metaphors (the financial crisis as a result of a "maxed-out credit card" and so on), and Dorling is fine at upending them. Help to Buy "has been described as the equivalent of a rich dad giving his children money to help with their deposit", but "no one gives the mortgagor any money; instead they have to take out a bigger mortgage. The scheme is better characterised as a rich dad, the government, going to the bank manager and giving him or her a financial inducement to approve a mortgage that the bank manager considered risky." It also practically guarantees more house price inflation, making the whole problem worse.

What is distinctive in Dorling's argument can be found in one of the clearer graphs included in the book, an image of "The value of property in Britain by urban area, 2012", where a wildly bloated London dwarfs the rest of the country, whose towns and [cities](#) resemble planets orbiting the sun. Here is the real problem, and the simple demand to "Build more!" comes with no guarantee of solving it – quite possibly the reverse, as "building more may result in the wealthy owning even more houses, more families renting some of those homes, but more being empty at any one time and in greater future inequality".

At the heart of this is a country skewed. "The perceived 'national' housing shortage is in fact a regional shortage, part of the growing north/south divide. Everywhere there is vacant housing that needs to be used better. But in certain areas there is a growth of empty housing stock that is partially disguised by very high rates of underoccupancy, rates made possible by how cheap housing away from jobs has become. Or, to put it better, cheap as far as people with 'good' jobs are concerned." The flip side of adults flat-sharing well into their 30s in London is a single teacher moving into what was a three-bedroom council flat in Sheffield. Each is a sign of dysfunction.



Park Hill flats in Sheffield. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

One of the most interesting aspects of *All That Is Solid* is its attention to the north, and to Sheffield in particular – every one of the photographs in the book was taken in that city, as if to prove the point that the housing crisis goes well beyond mere expense, and certainly far beyond the question of the "quality" of housing. Here, there are well-designed, green, airy housing estates designated as slums ([Gleadless Valley](#)); empty blocks of flats aimed at students and affluent residents who aren't moving in, but too expensive for those "decanted" from council housing ([the Velocity Tower](#)); Victorian housing (in Sharrow) left to rot that would go for millions in London's Islington, let alone Notting Hill; and a huge inner-city housing estate ([Park Hill](#)) turned whimsically into luxury loft-living in a city with the highest council waiting list in the country. In his earlier book *So You Think You Know Britain?*, Dorling points out that Sheffield, with its greenery, good housing and schools, abundant facilities and closeness to open country is exactly the sort of place where people always say they want to live. Yet they aren't exactly moving there in droves.

Sheffield, he notes, makes more from its universities than its metal trades. As a rare example of things moving in the right direction, he points to the BBC's partial move to Salford; but he doesn't spot that this is coinciding with formerly working-class housing being taken over by property developers and a massive overbuilding of one- and two-bedroom flats: house prices are rising faster in Manchester than anywhere else, London aside. If the housing crisis is to be solved, it surely can't be by these rather New Labour methods of shipping white-collar workers into former industrial cities. There is, surprisingly, next to nothing here about the attempts under the last government to give the north back some of its independence and civic pride, and their darker consequences: the [Pathfinder regeneration programme](#), an initiative to

create more "mixed" [communities](#), had drastic effects. Dorling's own Sheffield photos show many traces of this, though the blanks are left frustratingly unfilled. He does talk about the [Decent Homes programme](#) that renovated many council estates, but, unlike Meek, he doesn't mention what this meant on the ground – stock transfer to housing associations, and often the rebuilding and densification of housing estates. Some members of the last government did at least notice the problem, but their solutions tended to exacerbate it. This matters, precisely because of the radicalism of Dorling's critique. He has bravely gone to the root of the issue – a capital city (with a hinterland stretching out through the entire south-east) that has become an international tax haven, a playground for plutocrats, in contrast with the rest of the country, some parts of which have been allowed to depopulate and gradually die. No solution to the crisis can even begin to make a difference without that divide being seriously addressed.

At the end of the book, he laudably provides a variety of possible ways out, such as an abandonment of the "right to be stupid", that is, the fallacy that every consumer can be "informed" in a market as complex as this – "the unfettered market does not work well in allocating housing, because levels of knowledge are so unevenly distributed and there is no sane way of balancing out such knowledge – not unless you want everyone to become like an estate agent in their understanding of housing markets". He goes on to advocate the [Mortgage Rescue scheme](#) as a model for the "right to sell" housing back to the state, becoming tenants rather than being evicted; he supports a variety of taxation measures, from a land value tax, increasing the number of council tax bands to "Z", and taxes on second homes, holiday homes and empty commercial property. He does, eventually, recommend housebuilding in places where there are more people coming in than leaving, and he advocates rises in wages and benefits, rent controls and the decriminalisation of squatting. It is a fair shopping list, and considerably more dramatic than anything being conceived of by the Labour party. But it will not put the cat back in the bag – that is, it won't bring well-paid, secure jobs to the north for northerners (as opposed to transplanted London media workers), in order to reverse the drain southwards.

It also fails to address the ugliest aspect of the housing crisis – the fact that a lot of people who are not international plutocrats are doing very well out of screwing their fellow citizens out of the right to decent shelter. This is a divisive issue, and always will be. The solution, too, if it comes, will be equally so.