



Abandoned terraced housing in Doncaster

Empty nests

Lynsey Hanley

All That Is Solid:
the Great Housing Disaster
Danny Dorling

Allen Lane, 400pp, £20

"When a great disaster looms in housing," writes Danny Dorling at the start of his new book, "so, potentially, does a disastrous loss of freedom." Recently appointed professor of geography at Oxford, Dorling used his inaugural lecture to state his opposition to the politically generated fiscal trends of the past 35 years: the concentration of wealth and privilege that has allowed a few to hoard money, land, bedrooms, social capital and political power at the expense of others.

As a geographer, Dorling's chief obsession is with spatial inequality and the ways in which neighbourhoods have become more unequal over time. The freedom of individuals has become restricted: fewer can live broadly where they wish, or have a degree of disposable income after paying for their housing and associated costs. Social housing provision has receded and owner-occupation has become impossible for those squeezed by declining real wages and inflated property prices.

Compared with 30 years ago, there are fewer households of "average means", meaning more poor households – whose incomes do not match the needs of the time and who live in areas of lower rent and poorer services – and more rich households concentrated in "exclusive" areas of new-build detached houses and mini-mansions. As the various areas become less alike in character, so the people living in those areas become less known to each other and the more people will pay a premium to get away from places and people deemed to be undesirable.

It is important to note that, in the late 1970s, to be "average" meant you were almost as likely to live in council housing as to be an owner-occupier. Dorling patiently and consistently draws attention to how it was political will that managed to get most of Britain housed better than it had ever been by the mid-1970s. By the same token, it is a deliberate lack of political commitment to the idea of good housing as a basic right that has led us into the present situation.

He quotes the UN special rapporteur Raquel Rolnik's statement that the coalition's housing benefit cap has harmed "the most vulnerable, the most fragile, the people on the fringes of coping with everyday

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life". He shows a society that, though never coming close to perfect, had a discrete period of trying to include everyone in its broad aims for dignity and prosperity. The misapplication of political will and the collusion of just enough voters whose house values are at stake have put paid to those goals.

When Dorling writes about the disappearance of the average household, and with it the average neighbourhood, he is referring not so much to the squeezed middle as to the hollowed-out north. Cities such as Liverpool and Stoke are dealing with the legacy of the Housing Market Renewal, a Labour initiative that knocked down street upon street of terraced accommodation in

poor areas. In the same places, a surfeit of minimum-wage, short-term work prevents people from saving and forces them on to the social housing list even when there is plenty of inexpensive property to rent privately.

The book is illustrated throughout with photographs of housing in Sheffield, where Dorling lived and worked before his own southward migration. Sheffield has the longest waiting list for social housing in the UK, as well having some of the wealthiest neighbourhoods. A single teacher can buy a three-bedroom former council flat in the city for his sole use because he is "into" the architecture. A beautiful neo-Georgian cottage in Sheffield, which would be worth millions in London, lies boarded up and derelict because there aren't enough people in the neighbourhood with the income to fill it. Meanwhile, the *London Evening Standard* reported that there were "at least" 740 houses worth £5m or more lying empty in the capital, bought as investments rather than homes.

This brings Dorling to his main argument: that the solution to Britain's housing crisis is not necessarily to build more homes. The average inhabited dwelling has never had so many spare rooms, most of which lie empty most nights. Owner-occupied family homes are swollen with extensions, loft conversions, study areas and games rooms, while older couples and widows find themselves living alone in four-bedroom houses.

He does not argue that elderly people should be herded out of the home they have lived in for 50 years to make way for young, poor families; he merely notes that the current government is pushing out and punishing those who are worst placed to bear the burden. It goes without saying that the bedroom tax applies only if you have the temerity to rely on social housing. The social housing stock has been depleted systematically, yet most private housing has never been so replete, if not with space, then at least with habitable rooms.

Dorling advocates rent control legislation, a tax on land values and a curtailment of the period for which properties are allowed to remain vacant before the local authority pressurises their owners to find tenants. A renewed push to create decent, self-sustaining, private-sector jobs outside the south-east would aid the redistribution of people to places where they can find good housing and infrastructure.

All That Is Solid is repetitive in places, but that is more a sign of rapid-fire editing than poor writing. This is an urgent book about an urgent topic and it couldn't have come out soon enough. ●

Lynsey Hanley is the author of "Estates: an Intimate History" (Granta Books, £8.99)

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