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The Fall and Rise of Social Housing: 100 Years on 20 Estates, by Becky Tunstall

Danny Dorling is impressed by an in-depth account that challenges much of the received wisdom (and stereotypes) about social housing

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By Danny Dorling

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A majority of people in Britain now in their seventies spent some of their childhood growing up in social housing – almost entirely in council houses. When someone of that generation tells you that they grew up in a council house, they are telling you that they were normal.

A decline in the size of the council sector coupled with an acute lack of understanding created stigma and encouraged uninformed stereotypes. This is a wonderful book. It is full of data and charts, quotes and conclusions, but the best-known chart of social housing – the one that shows the number of homes built in each year of the past century – is deliberately excluded because it is so misleading. That chart gives no indication of how much of the housing stock remained in use. Nor does it emphasise enough the quality of so much that was built or how crucial that building was in improving the lives of so many of the poorest. Social housing was the part of the welfare state best targeted at the poor. It was also the part that was least well supported and easiest to dismantle.

This is not the normal story of social housing. First, it was partly written in three former council houses, as well as at two universities. Second, it is being published exactly two months after the general election of 2019, in the campaign for which the Labour Party promised to increase the number of council homes built annually to 50 times the 2018 rate (of only 2,000 a year). Third, the book is based on experience, not just the intricate historical record, census and much other older data, as well as interviews conducted in 1982 and 1988 on the 20 estates mentioned in its title, in addition to interviews that the author herself conducted in 1994, 2005 and 2018. Few researchers still report on studies that they themselves have been working on for more than a quarter of a century.

The 20 estates that this book tells the story of were all selected for study in the early 1980s, by Anne Power of the London School of Economics, because they were seen as problematic. Rhetoric about social housing rose to a crescendo in the late 2000s when New Labour was in power and became even more shrill throughout the coalition government. It culminated in half a dozen uninformed statements made in 2016 by David Cameron, who was then prime minister, all listed in these pages, illustrating how little he knew of what he was talking. The measured reality is so different from that rhetoric. Much of the stock had actually been improved in fits and starts since the late 1970s. The “residualisation” of social housing (whereby those most in need were brought in as tenants from outside the local community) went into reverse, and in most cases the “unpopular” estates of the 1980s are no longer unpopular today.

When it comes to what matters most in life, *The Fall and Rise of Social Housing* concludes: “It is hard to trace trends over time, but there is certainly not good evidence to suggest that ‘friendliness’ or ‘sense of community’ in the estates declined over time, or was weaker than elsewhere, or that neighbour problems were any greater.” Most importantly, however, it demonstrates that those who disparage social housing today are often peddling outdated myths that they do not even know are myths.

Danny Dorling is the Halford Mackinder professor of geography at the [University of Oxford](#).

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