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Paper title: A Curate's Egg – Post-war Mass Housing in London

Abstract: *This lecture presents a short 'pre-prehistory' to Grenfell, focusing not on the issues of adaptation and maintenance that immediately led up to the disaster, but on the original production processes of postwar London mass housing.*

Firstly, it sets the British system of 'council housing' as a whole in its international context, highlighting in the organisational field the almost exclusive reliance on direct municipal building and ownership, and in the built environment the preoccupation with extensive inner city 'slum clearance'. The result of this combination was an internationally almost unique formula which encouraged intense local politicisation of housing within individual authorities, alongside an idiosyncratic interpretation of CIAM modernism, under which multi-storey blocks tended to be concentrated in quite individualistic inner-urban clumps of tall towers, rather than the arrays of prefabricated slab blocks typical of France or the Soviet Union.

Secondly, it explores the more specific circumstances of post-war London, whose unique two-tier local-government system further encouraged individualistic and divided approaches to the challenge of planned mass housing. Here the reorganisation of 1964/5 marked a fundamental watershed and a rebalancing between the two 'tiers'. Beforehand the all-powerful upper-tier regional authority, the London County Council, exerted a dominant influence over the mostly scattered and weak Metropolitan Boroughs, and its architects and planners were able to prioritise individualistic architectural design over mass output. After 1964/5 the position was reversed and the new upper-tier Greater London Council, with its far larger area, proved relatively weak and ineffective, while many of the boroughs began to flex their muscles and embark on city-scale housing drives, of wildly contrasting organisational and architectural character.

Within this new structure, post-1965 Kensington and Chelsea proved to be one of the weaker and less energetic housebuilding boroughs, with slum-clearance projects that were relatively low-key and scattered – as in the case of Lancaster Road (West) Stage 1 (including Grenfell Tower) – and the GLC still played a significant role. However, the relatively individualistic, non-system-built design of Lancaster Road Stage 1 – in its original, non-over-clad form - was in many ways quite typical of 'the London tower block' overall.

[Text starts here: 3300 words] Well, I think it's unambiguously clear that inequality and exclusion played a huge role in the three or four decades of residualisation and so-called 'regeneration' of council housing that preceded the Grenfell disaster – to say nothing of the more specific failures of maintenance and adaptation that contributed more directly to it. If the introductory blurb to Panel 1 argues that '*Housing is both a determinant and product of inequality*' – then speaking of the post-1980 period in Britain, that's an undeniable fact.

[Mass Housing - a Global Perspective]

But I'm a historian who specialises in something slightly different from that, namely the history of the original processes of creation and production of state-supported mass housing, not just in postwar Britain but across the world, over a longer time-frame which in some places stretches right up to the present – **[Mass Housing Book]** For example, this is a book that's about to come out about that, Yugoslavia on the cover. That's in general a story of rise rather than decline and fall, and certainly in postwar western and eastern Europe, including Britain, it would be difficult to interpret those years as ones of *increasing*, rather than *decreasing* inequality overall. You could argue that in many places it was a distinctly redistributive period, even if by no means a perfect one, and that state-sponsored mass housing played a significant role in that – even though within its overall role as an agency of qualified redistribution, there were some obvious hotspots of inequality – including North Kensington.

In this lecture I want to focus not so much on inequality and on generally negative interpretations of mass housing, as on the quite positive aspirations and efforts that originally helped energise it, and on the very strong local diversity that the council housing system encouraged – contrary to the caricature of alienating sameness everywhere.

[Matryoshki] My interpretation of this postwar period of creation and production is arranged a bit like a set of Russian matryoshka dolls, homing in very rapidly from global, to Britain, to London, to Kensington & Chelsea. I want to begin by putting the British council housing system in its international context; then putting London council housing in a national English and British context; and finally putting Kensington & Chelsea in the London context – showing at each stage and asking of this sequence of argumentation – does it, however obliquely and indirectly, contribute at all to our understanding of the context of the Grenfell disaster? **[Tower Block UK]** I've not specifically gone into the creation and building of Grenfell itself, or, historically, the Lancaster Road West Stage 1 development, as part of my research, although it does feature, along with all other postwar multi-storey public housing developments in Britain, in the 'Tower Block UK' database that we have organised with HLF support in 2016-19. But I hope my contextual focusing-in argument might nevertheless cast some interesting illuminations on the Grenfell situation.

1: British council housing in its international context

[Council Housing] Firstly, let's put the British system of 'council housing' as a whole into its international context. Internationally, in general, contrary to the caricature of homogeneity, postwar mass housing was able to generate networks of diversity and autonomy, within which an almost limitless variety of local variants was able to flourish within supposedly 'national' housing systems.

In the case of Britain, as the very term normally used for public housing, *council* housing, indicates, it was actually built and rented out directly by local government, by ‘councils’ – a national system not found anywhere else in the world. Its central decision-makers were elected local politicians, and it consequently became bound up with local political and civic micro-cultures to an extreme degree. **[Social housing, but not council housing]** Elsewhere in the world, a much more normal pattern was an arms length, decentralised approach via semi-public agencies, social companies or housing co-operatives, sometimes big and sometimes small. **[Housing by Authority]** Even in the other Anglophone countries, which also featured a very strong polarisation between public rental and private owner occupied housing, the state tended to provide public housing not via local councils but by semi-autonomous ‘housing authorities’ or ‘commissions’. Great Britain was unique in giving local municipal authorities the lead role in the national ‘housing drive’, directly planning, building and managing large social housing stocks. **[Block Opening Plaques - Stainer Court; Bethnal Green]** Following its large-scale launch in 1919, the council-housing system had achieved remarkable output figures, but after WW2 even these were now eclipsed: between 1945 and 1965, council housing accounted for 57.8% of all new dwellings – twice the interwar percentage. Its role was strongest in Scotland, where overall per-capita public-housing output from 1945 to 1970 was twice that of England and Wales, and by the early 1960s, the proportion of all new housing production directly built and managed by public agencies (79%) was much higher than any other Western country, or the USSR and East Germany for that matter: in Glasgow between 1960 and 1975, 95% of new housing was council-built.

[Here today, gone tomorrow] But there were negative aspects to the council housing system too. Postwar council housing in Br was a direct extension of local gesture politics – which could create tremendous civic diversity, but could also lead to wild swings in policies with changes of political control, and often ridiculous amounts of over-building in unwanted places, followed predictably by mass demolitions – and could also allow hostile interventions by central governments to be made very easily, as in the 1980s under Thatcher.

[Slum Clearance – Gorbals, Glasgow] The organisational reliance on direct municipal building and ownership was bound up spatially with a preoccupation with extensive inner city ‘slum clearance’ – something typical of all Anglophone countries, but which in Britain was especially exaggerated, and dominated by the large urban municipal authorities. Partly, this was because the early suppression of private landlords had caused faster housing decay than in many other countries; and partly it was fuelled by the British tradition of polemical debate about urban conditions. With the private landlord squeezed in the middle, and both owner-occupation and rented state housing going from strength to strength, the municipalities piled up ever more radical powers of slum clearance. Although the late-19th and early-20th centuries had already seen limited clearances, what followed 1945 in many provincial cities was totally different in character and scale: gigantic demonstrations of municipal power, clearing vast expanses, often erasing their street patterns and rebuilding them on completely new layouts. This focus on the inner urban helped generate a very distinctive architectural outcome - an idiosyncratic vernacular of modern housing, with multi-storey public housing blocks in Britain tending to be concentrated in quite individualistic inner-urban clumps of tall towers, usually not ‘system built’ – very unlike the arrays of prefabricated slab blocks typical of (for example) France or the USSR.

2: London council housing in its national context

The position of slum-clearance was rather different in London, though, and I'd like to move on to the London situation now, and very briefly explore the more specific circumstances and constraints operating in the city, whose unique two-tier local-government system encouraged diverse yet also at times damagingly fragmented approaches to the challenge of mass housing and planning.

[London Two Tier.....] To start off with, local politics in London was more overtly political than elsewhere in Britain, with clearly defined Labour and Conservative groups in most authorities, unlike the ratepayer or general anti-socialist groupings that dominated in many towns and cities. Within this system, the London local government reorganisation of 1964/5 marked a fundamental watershed and a rebalancing between the two 'tiers'. Beforehand the all-powerful and Labour-dominated upper-tier regional authority, the London County Council, had exerted a dominant influence over the mostly scattered and weak Metropolitan Boroughs, and its architects and planners were able to impose a formula of planned population 'overspill' linked to slum-clearance, and a strong prioritisation of individualistic architectural design at the expense of mass output; after 1964/5 the new upper-tier 'Greater London Council', with its far larger area, proved relatively weak and ineffective, and while many Labour-controlled boroughs began to flex their muscles and embark on city-scale housing drives, many Tory-controlled ones, such as Kensington & Chelsea, notably avoided doing that.

If the national framework of the council housing drive in Britain was dominated by civic individuality and diversity, London was even more marked by extreme individualism, both in the organisation and location of production, and its architectural form. Slum clearance, for example, was different and more piecemeal in London than in places like Manchester or Glasgow. Even the most famous schemes like the LCC's in the East End, or Southwark's Aylesbury development, were threaded into quite scattered sites. **[Councillor and tower block in slum area]** For areas like this, the emergence of the Modernist tower block in the 1950s provided a godsend, a method of decanting and clearance that would provide the inhabitants with modern homes as quickly as possible, without overspill. In the words of Councillor Eric Smythe, the 1960s Housing Committee Chairman of Enfield Borough Council in outer London [this isn't him], 'Firstly, you had to create the holes to put a tower block up, which you did by pulling a couple of streets down. Then you put in the block, and commenced pulling down the rest of the area!'

[LCC Architecture] In the County of London, the LCC's claims to overall authority over public housing production had been undermined in the 1950s and early '60s by the individualistic design ethos within the Architect's Department. Under the mid-1950s regime of chief architect Leslie Martin, it was grandly assumed that the LCC had an example to set, whether in constructional innovation or in patronage of the arts, while cost and output efficiency seemed secondary, as discovered by the young architect Martin Richardson on joining Colin Lucas's renowned group: 'The whole of the Housing Division seemed like a giant nursery

school, whose main object was the happiness of architects - nothing would make them use the same design twice, or, worse, use someone else's design!' This was a huge contrast to production- and engineer-dominated cities like Glasgow. [**'Arty' Housing**] Unlike them, London was a hotbed of 'arty housing'. This approach was partly fed by celebrated and self-advertising avant garde designers like the Smithsons, Lasdun etc., but the leading role was played by the LCC, as the pre-1965 'upper tier' regional authority. It saw itself as a beacon of enlightened welfare provision, national rather than local in status.

[**Punkthus Danviksklippan**] The LCC designers played the lead role in the importation of the most popular type of high block in postwar England, the slender tower – an import from Sweden, whose overall welfare state set-up, and architecture, found strong admirers in Britain. The Swedes called this '*punkthus*', translated into English as 'point block', and it went through numerous permutations, including 'Brutalist' sculptural concrete LCC towers built from 1962 at Brandram's Works Site, Bermondsey, and elsewhere. But the LCC was less prominent in the later, mainly 1960s turn in London away from freestanding tower blocks to more densely conglomerated designs, fuelled by the propaganda for 'urbanity' by international propagandists such as Team 10 and the Smithsons. [**Barbican**] One of the most popular forms this took was to have a continuous low-rise 'podium' with towers sticking out of it; this trend was exemplified by the City of London Corporation's high-rental Barbican scheme (planned from 1955, built from 1962, designed by architects Chamberlin Powell and Bon with a cluster of 43/45-storey towers rising from a megastructural podium of walkways and medium-rise courtyard blocks. A later example, as we'll see, was Kensington & Chelsea's West Chelsea Redevelopment (World's End), from 1969, by architect Eric Lyons – and Lancaster Road West was also a miniature version of this in a way.

[**London borough map**] But all this diversity in the LCC-dominated system was bought at the cost of much lower output than large cities like Glasgow or Salford, and the Government's remedy to this London output crisis, implemented in 1964-5, was to rebalance the two-tier system in favour of the boroughs, and replace the LCC by the larger, but less powerful Greater London Council – a strategy that resulted in a 55% jump in per-capita output in 1964-7. On the planning side, the tables now turned: the new London Boroughs were virtually full planning authorities in the housing field. [**Mellish in Enfield**] For the most ambitious of them, mass council housing was a means of creating civic identity – an ethos boosted under the post-1964 Labour government by the progress-chasing work of London housing minister Robert Mellish, who later recalled: 'I set up what was tantamount to a league table, and said the people at the bottom would be relegated!' Within five years, a jumble of parochial towns and suburbs had become forceful, city-like authorities, ostentatiously muscle-flexing, to emphasise their emancipation from the LCC and compete with one another. Some continued the LCC emphasis on architectural individualism, notably Lambeth LBC, whose leadership regarded housing design as a municipal flagship, and astutely secured prominent LCC architect Ted Hollamby in 1963 as their first Borough Architect. [**Lambeth and Southwark**] To raise output, Hollamby began in 1966 a programme of 22-storey tower blocks on small gap-sites, designed in an individualistic, craggy style by his own architects, along with other, low-rise projects. Others were also architecturally orientated but in a different way, especially in the case of Southwark, which proudly tried to monumentalize its social idealism. It built massive, horizontally-accentuated complexes of deck blocks rather than towers, designed by the staff of Borough

Architect Frank Hayes. The centrepiece of their programme was the Aylesbury redevelopment area, a typically London scattered assemblage of piecemeal slum-clearance sites, dotted with numerous existing buildings, into which immensely long slab blocks and low terraces were inserted in 1967-75. **[Enfield, Hounslow]** In outer London boroughs such as Hounslow, where land was not in such short supply, more conventional production-orientated tower-block schemes were built, and in the case of Enfield, these were mainly built by the borough's industrialised direct labour force, 'EDLO' which launched vigorously into multi-storey building, including its own technique of battery-cast prefabrication, used after 1965 for a succession of massive, idiosyncratically-patterned towers at Barbot Street, Edmonton Green (both 1966) and elsewhere.

3: Kensington & Chelsea in the London context

[K&C map] Let's now finish with something that contrasts with all this, by narrowing our focus still further, on to Kensington and Chelsea. This exemplified this extreme individualism in the post-1965 structure, not by its vigorous activity but by its inertia. It proved to be one of the weaker and less energetic housebuilding boroughs, with slum-clearance projects that were relatively low-key and scattered – as in the case of Lancaster Road (West) Stage 1 (including Grenfell Tower) – and left the GLC to still play a significant role. A partial clue to the ineffectiveness of Kensington and Chelsea is given by its unique twin-headed name. This was actually quite appropriate in the housing field, as it symbolised two very different ways of approaching housing design. **[postwar Chelsea – Cremorne Est]** Prior to the 1964-5 amalgamation, both were Tory controlled but bohemian Chelsea adopted a very strongly social ethos of housing provision. The council's resourceful Housing Committee Chair, Alderman Elizabeth Stockwell, later recalled that 'If you can imagine all these now expensive, endless streets in Chelsea, almost all without exception in the 40s were requisitioned housing. During the war, every time a house became empty, it got requisitioned – whole half streets at a time. The government suddenly said in the early 50s that it had to stop, and all of a sudden all these people needed to be rehoused.' Correspondingly there was an eager willingness to experiment with high density flats, and the borough commissioned a series of increasingly high-density flatted estates, building up from the early postwar Cremorne Estate to the very controversial **[World's End]** West Chelsea Extended Area or World's End project, an ultra-high density scheme by architects Eric Lyons and Peter Cadbury Brown, intended to rehouse as much of Chelsea's slum population close at hand, bitterly opposed by LCC planners, but successfully pushed through a complex public enquiry by Stockwell.

[Slum repair in N Kensington] Kensington was very much more orthodox Tory in its politics, and under its 1960s leaders, Sir Malby Crofton and Anslow Wilson, confined its housing activity to a rather unconventional niche policy – a stress on compulsory rehab. Especially in the slum areas of North Kensington, by bearing down on recalcitrant landlords of dilapidated private housing and enforcing the repairs provisions of the Housing Acts – unglamorous but in fact quite effective in quantitative terms. But what went with this was an extreme reluctance to build any council housing, an ethos that extended over the whole new borough after 1965, as Kensington controlled the new post-1965 authority and held all the committee chairs, squeezing the Chelseaites out. **[Lancaster Rd West]** Rather like the

old pre-1964 boroughs of the East End, Stepney and Poplar, which had said, ‘we won’t do anything, we’ll let the LCC do it’, Kensington & Chelsea avoided building council housing itself – although they had to go through with World’s End as Chelsea Borough Council had already signed all the contracts - and at first left the GLC to start building in North Kensington, only intervening itself very late, when the tide of opinion in London was already turning against high flats in the wake of the Ronan Point collapse in 1968. Stage 1, including Grenfell, was only approved in 1970 and the medium rise Stage 3 three years later. Elizabeth Stockwell argued subsequently, in 1987, that the scattered, disparate character of the Lancaster Road West redevelopment was the result of this lack of enthusiasm: ‘when the new borough was formed, they just didn’t do anything. They got chivvied into it by Mellish, by Rachman, by the deterioration of North Kensington in general. They eventually realised that they had to do something about North Kensington, but they didn’t do things in time.’

In terms of the built form that resulted, you could argue that the fragmentary character of Lancaster Road West Stage 1 and the relatively individualistic, non-system-built design of Grenfell Tower – in its original, non-over-clad form - was in many ways typical of ‘the London tower block’ overall – even if the overall scale of the development was at the lower end of the scale of production ambition.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude – does the progressively narrowing focus that I’ve set out, on council housing in Britain, London and Kensington & Chelsea, and the resulting diversity of the micro-worlds of housing policy and architecture, help in providing any kind of meaningful historical context for the Grenfell disaster? I’d argue that any lessons are only very oblique ones, because of the radicalism of the policy reversal that developed post-Thatcher in the 80s onwards.

[New York City] Concerning council housing itself, one could plausibly argue the first potential lesson may be concerned with the politicised character of council housing by comparison with arm’s length programmes elsewhere: as council housing was a part of government, and a direct participant in party political controversy, it proved only too easy for a hostile central government to pick off, commodify and residualise, under Thatcher in the 80s. An interesting contrast is the famous and now 85-year old ‘NYCHA’ in NYC, a semi-municipal public authority that has survived the collapse of the US public housing system virtually unscathed. Or the national co-op housing organisation in Sweden, the HSB, now nearly a century old and still going strong. **[GLC abolition]** And in London, the two tier system proved especially unstable and vulnerable to eventual decapitation, by the Tories’ abolition of the GLC altogether in the 1980s, while the relative autonomy of the new post-1965 boroughs left ample room for inertia in some cases, such as Kensington & Chelsea, alongside frenzied activity in others. How much all this rather frenetic diversity and activity had any direct bearing on the build-up to the Grenfell disaster itself, though, is still very much open to question!