

THE PRESS AND THE SYSTEM BUILT DEVELOPMENTS OF INNER-CITY MANCHESTER, 1960s-1980s

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The creation of the welfare state in post-war Britain promised to build a New Jerusalem that would slay the giants of squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease. Although health care and state benefits were of central importance in building this New World, housing also had a key role to play in securing a better life. Victorian slums were to be cleared and affordable homes made available to all, but progress was slow due to limited resources, changing ideological approaches and the sheer scale of the problems which faced major urban areas. By the 1960s, both Labour and Conservative governments were determined to force the pace of change, and pressure to increase the number of completions led architects, designers, planners and contractors to promote a variety of factory built systems, which seemed to offer local government much needed solutions to long-standing housing problems.

The factory system developments of the 1960s and early 1970s were among the boldest, most spectacular yet expensive failures in the history of British social policy. Almost immediately, they attracted widespread criticism in the press, where damning reports highlighted the plight of tenants trapped inside the new developments. In Manchester, the *Manchester Evening News* and the *Guardian* published graphic accounts of residents describing the horror of life on the estates. Tenant experiences were at the heart of these critical narratives in the press of the 1970s and 1980s, yet in the 1960s, the same papers had enthusiastically supported the new housing proposals. They embraced the Council and architects' spin, never bothering to critically probe the new proposals. Council chiefs, designers and planners were motivated by a vision of a new environment whose success would enhance their own leadership. Their plans were endorsed by journalists who never investigated further than the official press releases. Yet this served effectively to legitimise the decisions made by the Council. This was important, especially given the fact that the intended beneficiaries of this New World were never consulted and made no contribution to this vision.

This article examines the use of factory built housing systems in Manchester, looking especially at the rebuilding of Hulme, as well as Beswick and Ardwick. It will consider how press reports served to support Manchester City Council in creating a housing vision, which had been promoted by private designers and developers and was supported by central governments, who were keen to clear away the slums and improve completion figures. Such support served to justify Council decisions and, in the absence of an effective consultation process, helped legitimise them in the public sphere. However, as will become apparent, press opinion gradually changed as the visionary plans which journalists had helped to structure in the 1960s, became a social nightmare in the 1970s and 1980s. As the press became a vehicle for the expression of tenant fear and loathing, Council legitimacy was undermined and its capacity to make such sweeping independent decisions fatally compromised.

Post-war Housing Policy

Unlike many British cities, Manchester City Council officials were reluctant to embrace modern post-war housing designs, having inherited a tradition based on Lord Simon's inter-war vision of quality cottage style housing.¹ In the Council's 1945 Development Plan, Alderman Jackson, a close ally of Lord Simon, rejected the idea of building flats, claiming it would be a "profound sociological mistake to force upon the British public, in defiance of its own widely expressed preference for separate houses with private gardens, a way of life that is fundamentally out of keeping with its traditions, instincts and opportunities."² The Housing Committee upheld the recommendations of the 1944 Dudley Report, which supported the idea of building three bedroom houses with separate toilet, bathroom, kitchen, dining room and living room.³

However, the main problem for the post-war Council was that it was caught in a land trap, since only a limited number of small gap sites were available for development in the city, and there was nothing in the built-up areas over its borders. Councillors felt that the only answer lay in overspill estates, which would enable them to build quality cottage style homes and free up space within the city boundaries, allowing them to clear the slums and re-develop large areas. The Housing Committee was determined to "acquire lands beyond the present City boundaries" to allow them to "provide houses for the overspill."⁴ They planned to build 40,000 homes over a twenty-year period. However, by the mid 1960s, these overspill plans were clearly faltering, since one of the major problems facing councils who were willing to embrace overspill developments was the fact that agreements broke down or were simply unattainable due to lengthy and bitter inter-authority squabbles.⁵ Manchester City Council had a long series of struggles with neighbouring local councils, who were unwilling to accept large-scale developments and the subsequent influx of tenants from Manchester. Cheshire County Council was especially resistant, refusing to accept proposals over the development of areas such as Mobberley and Lymm.⁶ While large estates were built at Langley and Hattersley, Manchester City Council was only able to reach half of its 40,000 target by 1970.⁷

An estimated 70,000 houses had been declared unfit for habitation in Manchester, yet the Council's continuing battles with other authorities for the right to build overspill estates seriously undermined its completion rates and led to increasing pressure to build quickly.⁸ Slum clearances began in 1954 and the Council planned on demolishing 7,500 houses a year, but by 1960 this estimate was 1,000 under target and the completion rate had dropped below 1,000 homes per year.⁹ The expectations of central government were also growing, as Labour and Conservative administrations encouraged councils to clear away their slums by using modern building techniques, such as flats and multi-

deck access systems. Government policy was reinforced by subsidies and in 1961, Manchester City Council, urged on by the Town Clerk and Medical Officer of Health, decided to act. Slum clearance had already left a number of gap sites, and the Council was persuaded that modern systems were the answer to the urgent need for speedy construction. As a result, it initiated a programme of multi-storey buildings, using private contractors such as Laing. Between 1962-66, the company built 35 tower blocks, the first four of which were, ironically, on the overspill estate in Heywood.¹⁰

Despite this, the Council continued to keep the brakes on the development of high-rise tower blocks.¹¹ It still clung to the idea of cottages, a fact reflected in the choice of multi-deck access flats, which were intended to resemble streets in the sky, providing modern homes whilst re-creating the community atmosphere of the old terraced neighbourhoods. Theoretically, they were an ideal solution to the city's housing problems, allowing the Council to avoid having to build too many tower blocks and to increase completion rates, while staying faithful to the ideals of Lord Simon. Robert Stones was responsible for one of the first schemes, built at Gibson Street in Longsight by Bison (Concrete Northern), in 1968. Other schemes were designed and built in conjunction with private contractors, one of the most prominent of which was in Hulme.

Hulme – The Historical Context

Hulme had long been a major housing problem for Manchester, and it remained important in terms of size and stature, with its own Town Hall and separate shopping district around Stretford Road. Criticism had been levelled at Hulme as one of the city's most notorious slum areas since the Victorian period. Pressure for housing reform came from a series of local organisations, including the Hulme Betterment Association, the Hulme Settlement and the Hulme Working Men's Sanitary Association. This latter organisation was formed with the help of the Reverend W. Gooch of St. Stephen's, following a conference at nearby St. Mark's school on the 10th October 1890. In his address, Gooch claimed:

It is no wonder that the death rate of Manchester is a disgrace to the whole country. I am not surprised that the poor people of this district seek to drown in intemperance the sickening odour of sights which our Corporation allows to exist as plague spots and death traps at their very doors.¹²

In 1914, the Council appointed a Special Committee to investigate Hulme's housing problems, which revealed that 63,177 people were living in an area of only 477 acres: one-eleventh of Manchester's total population was crammed into one-forty-fifth of the city's geographical area, a density level of 132 people per acre.¹³ There were 13,137 homes in the area, of which 11,506 had no baths or space for washing and drying clothes. Worryingly, the death rate remained at a relatively high figure of 20.88 per thousand, as opposed to an average of 16.93 for the rest of the city and 10.1 for the leafy district of Withington.¹⁴ The report called on the Council to buy sites which would allow them

to create open spaces, build a new wash-house and construct two new libraries.

However, the Council did little to ease the problems which faced the residents of Hulme, and even the new spirit of change during the inter-war period failed to make a lasting impression on the area's deep-seated problems, despite some slum clearance between 1936-37 for factories, homes and open spaces. Further developments in the 1940s included the building of the Bentley housing estate, but the issue was still being debated in the 1950s, when pressure to rebuild Hulme gathered pace. The area's social problems were as bad as ever, and while the Council was trying to free up space through its overspill policy, the people of Hulme remained locked within boundaries where there was no room to build. In 1953, the *Manchester City News* ran a series entitled 'Slum Debate', which claimed that the parish of local priest, the Reverend Harold Lees, Chair of the Hulme Community Council, contained "more misery to the square mile than any other in the city." It described a "world of mean streets and wretched houses, of broken marriages and unwanted children, a world of general darkness without even the blessing of bright lighting."¹⁵



Collyhurst families arrive at Hulme, 1968

The New Dawn

By 1962, the Council was ready to unveil another new vision for a brighter and better Hulme. Plans were revealed at a Public Enquiry, held on 29 May 1962, when the scale of the problem was outlined by the Deputy Town Clerk, C.A. Marsh, who pointed out that many local houses were over 100 years old and were "mostly unfit for habitation" and "crumbling away." He concluded that the area was "worn out" and needed "comprehensive redevelopment," which meant almost total clearance and rebuilding the entire area.¹⁶ This was to be achieved in five stages, the first of which started in 1962 and the last of which was completed in 1971. In the first stage, 128 maisonettes were to be built, along with 57 houses, 63 flats, a number of schools and various road schemes, all at a cost of £1 million. In a critical blow to the social life of the neighbourhood, the number of pubs was also to be reduced from fourteen to two. The plan received



Demonstration to have slums demolished in Lower Broughton, 1975

government approval in November 1962 and by October the following year the Council was ready to unveil plans for stage two. On 22 October 1963, Marsh announced plans to compulsorily purchase a further 1,800 houses for demolition. A total of 66 acres was to be developed. There was a real sense of excitement and radical transformation, as Marsh claimed that “great social changes” were taking place, with “one area after another... being swept away by a tremendous wave of clearance.”¹⁷ More plans were announced in 1964, when the total cost increased to £20 million. The first stage of the rebuilding commenced in August 1964 with the construction of 5,000 new homes, which included a series of 13 storey flats at a cost of £564,309. This was the first time that the city had built in such concentrated numbers, and the entire programme was so vast that it was to take seven years to complete.

The initial reaction of local residents and the press was generally positive. In February 1965, the *Guardian* reported on the sense of optimism amongst residents, who were being forced to leave the area because of the demolition and rebuilding. The inhabitants of Bath Street and Raglan Street held a leaving party at the local pub. One resident declared they were “glad to get the move over with,” and though sad to be leaving, felt it would mean “better schools and a better outlook for the children.” Another believed that this was a new dawn, that it would mean

having gardens and that the “kids are already talking about swings and paddling pools and all that.”¹⁸

The Crescents

This sense of optimism snowballed throughout 1965, reaching a new climax in October with the announcement that the Council was to build four multi-deck blocks of flats, known as the Crescents. This was the fifth and final stage of the development programme, which Eric Mellor, Chairman of the city’s Planning Committee, claimed could be “one of the finest schemes in Europe.”¹⁹ The Committee passed the plan in November 1965, with only one member voting against it. It was, as Mellor again remarked, a “unique opportunity” for the city.²⁰

The proposed scheme would allow the Council to build 924 homes for £3,810,955. Although cost was a factor, the evidence suggests that the Crescents were not a cheap housing alternative. The total cost of almost £4 million actually meant that the average cost was £3,500 per dwelling, which was £300 more than the average under the Hulme II development.²¹ The Housing Committee Report insisted that this was because of the balconies, heating system and the fact that they had “insisted upon high quality finishes and fitting.”²² The scheme was designed by planning consultants Hugh Wilson and Lewis Wolmersley. It was claimed that they were using Georgian plan-

ning models, though in reality they were using Scandinavian style industrial building techniques. The architects maintained that the plans would achieve a “solution to the problems of twentieth century living,” which would be the “equivalent in quality of that reached for the requirements of the eighteenth century in Bloomsbury or Bath,” and they readily convinced a Council desperate to improve completion rates whilst raising the city’s profile.²³ The plans were presented to the Council in 1966, when the Housing Committee’s Report explained that they were proposing to build “an urban environment on a City scale,” which would involve “continuous blocks of maisonettes at six storeys high in a few bold and simple forms so as to develop large open spaces.”²⁴ While it was admitted that the scheme’s economical building costs would allow for much greater housing densities, it was hoped that this would have social advantages, including “greater choice of friends among neighbours,” and “easy contact” for elderly people “with the passing world.”²⁵

Hulme V was finally completed in 1971. It had been a large-scale project involving a workforce of over 300. Building the Crescents had taken two and a half years to complete and had involved two specially constructed gantry cranes, each capable of shifting 10 tons in one move. Between them, they shifted 26,000 concrete blocks. The final topping out ceremony took place on 14 January 1971.

Selling the Vision

With the exception of public enquiries, there had been no consultation process between the Council and the public. This was a Council vision, which had been sold to them by the architects and developers. Involving the public was seen as neither necessary nor desirable. The former Council leader, Bill Egerton, admitted that there was “minimal consultation with the local population,” and claimed that although this was “one of the main problems,” the “alternatives were slower.” He maintained that they were under pressure because “there were targets for the number of houses built” and “political pressure to get out-turns quicker.”²⁶ Since decisions were not legitimised by direct contact between the authorities and the occupiers, the Council had to set about selling its vision to prospective tenants. In April 1968, senior letting officer, J. Bradbury, gave a conducted tour of the redevelopment district to 100 residents from the Egginton clearance area in Collyhurst. The Council provided free public transport for what was described as an attempt to “convince people that while things might not be better round the corner they are across the city at Hulme.”²⁷

Such public relations initiatives were necessitated by the lack of an effective consultation process, the absence of which also significantly enhanced the role of the press in giving positive publicity to the new housing schemes. Without open debate and discussion in the public sphere, local newspapers assume a central position, as their support serves to legitimise the decisions made by political institutions in the public sphere, both informing and shaping public opinion.²⁸ This was apparent in Manchester in the 1960s, where the press became an important public relations vehicle as it followed the Council in giving full support to the new housing vision. The press was effectively, and conveniently, used by the Council to sell its own vision of the

future. Journalists did not bother to question or scrutinise the Council’s decisions, but largely accepted what they told through official press releases and regurgitated the same enthusiastic language employed by the designers and councillors. The *Manchester Evening News*, for example, in outlining plans for Hulme V in 1965, waxed lyrical about them under the wildly optimistic headline, ‘A Touch of Bloomsbury’. The paper could scarcely conceal its enthusiasm for what was believed to be a new and exciting programme.

*(Of) all redevelopment schemes that will rejuvenate the Britain of tomorrow, Manchester’s £20 million plan for Hulme stands out boldly. For it is unique. Here is a fascinating concept which should make proud not only the planners but the citizens. That the design for a thousand maisonettes in long curved terraces will give a touch of eighteenth century grace and dignity to municipal housing is welcome indeed. But above all the plan is realistic... Thank goodness someone has been using both imagination and common sense in planning homes.*²⁹

The *Manchester Evening News* was not alone in its praise. In October 1965, the *Guardian* ran a positive story under the headline, “No tower block – and Georgian elegance.” Politicians found the press to be a willing accomplice in the Council’s belief that this would be a centrepiece development of which they could all be proud. In April 1965, the *Manchester Evening News* claimed the Council was determined that the re-development would be “an example of good planning to the rest of the country.”³⁰ In 1969, the *Daily Telegraph* reported on progress in the area and concluded that, “as far as the reasonable observer can see Hulme, Manchester, should be a good place to live in instead of being the source of many a sleazy background for novelists.”³¹ The local press and politicians continued to lavish praise on the scheme, until its completion in 1971. Geoffrey Whiteley of the *Guardian* was pleased that there would be no more tower blocks and that the “mistakes” of the past had now been learnt. He wrote that municipal housing had suffered badly from its own haste, “but that now Manchester was to put that behind them,” and would finish the job “with a flourish.”³²

The failure of the press to question the decisions made by the Council may well have been due to laziness, ignorance or genuine belief in what the Council were trying to achieve. However, the Council’s ability to use the press was important because it helped to legitimise its decision in the public sphere. The public messages were clear. The press supported the views of the politicians and accepted the confidence of the architects in believing that the new housing would prove to be a high-status development, which would set Manchester apart from other cities. The municipal correspondent of the *Manchester Evening News*, Brian Welch, suggested that the Georgian design might “help to solve the problems of twentieth century living,” and described how the “sweeping long terraces of eighteenth century Bloomsbury and Bath” had provided a blueprint for the area’s development, with a “higher class finish both internally and externally.”³³ Again, this was the language of the architects and the Council, which was simply repeated through the press. Other *Manchester Evening News* reports described the Crescents as,



One of the few horses left grazing in Hulme, 1971

“an exciting space age housing venture,”³⁴ while the *Guardian* enthused about the creation of a new Hulme.

*Lawns lie where a city went to seed... Grass is growing in Hulme, ordered grass on lawns with flower beds round them. There are trees, hundreds of them and big rose beds... For those who knew the old Hulme, the seediest, most tired, bomb blasted, 300 acre mess in the inner ring of Manchester housing, it is the most striking impression now... It is a redevelopment scheme of superlatives: the biggest of its kind in Europe. It is by far the most imaginative housing project in the city, many will say the most imaginative city scheme in the country.*³⁵

This article included interviews with some of Hulme’s early residents who had moved back into the area. One elderly woman, who was wiping her “already clean outside paintwork,” pointed to the construction of nearby shops and commented that once they were open, it would be “perfect.” Completing this utopian picture, the reporter described how he had met a man digging his garden, who offered him a personal inspection of his maisonette, while children, “playing in safety,” shouted to him, “it’s smashing here mister.”³⁶

The *Manchester Evening News* lavished similar praise on the new development’s Georgian elegance but ultra-modern design. In 1969, it described how:

*When Nash build his elegant crescents at London and at Bath he had to do it without a railroad. The Regency style terraces that Manchester Corporation are putting up in the rehabilitated slum land that was Hulme will eventually look just as fine in their twentieth century fashion, but are giving the builders a good deal less trouble.*³⁷

The New Hell

Initially, many of the reported reactions of families moving into the new developments were generally favourable. One man was apparently excited by having “two toilets in a three bedroom house,” and the press published other reports that also suggested satisfaction with the redevelopment. In October 1969,

for example, the *Daily Telegraph* reported how one pensioner, who had settled in the area after the completion of Hulme III, thought it was a “very friendly place” in which to live, while a mother of seven, who had been moved on to the top floor of a nine storey block of flats, stated that “we are all very happy.”³⁸ This particular report also claimed that applications were already coming in for housing exchanges from former Hulme residents who had an “affection for the place which always puzzled the planners.” This was underlined by the fact that every Friday and Saturday night, “parties come in coaches and taxis to drink beer and play darts in the public houses.”³⁹

However, the press also reported on some of the early grumbles. There were complaints that the “rooms were too small” and that “there was only one door in each flat,” which meant that everyone faced the square and that you could not “nip out the back to avoid someone.”⁴⁰ One tenant, already living in the area following the completion of Hulme III, complained in 1968 that the “usual signs of vandalism” were already visible and that the area was blighted by “litter, chalked vulgar signs, broken lamps etc.”⁴¹ He blamed the planners for their failure to provide any kind of facilities for children and local youths, who had “no play centre, no playground, no “flicks”. They liked the new accommodation, “Oh yes, the houses are nice, better than we lived in,” but they also complained that “there’s nowt to do and nowhere to go.”⁴²

Despite the general early enthusiasm, there had always been those who expressed strong reservations about Hulme’s wholesale redevelopment. As early as 1966, it was pointed out to the Housing Committee that they might experience difficulties in finding tenants to live in the tall terraced blocks, while it was also claimed that they were reminiscent of the old style council flats.⁴³ In 1967, the Reverend H.M. Clarke, of St. Wilfrid’s Roman Catholic Church, claimed that the redevelopment had destroyed the community: “something great has gone out of Manchester... the heart and soul of a whole community has been torn to bits and lost.”⁴⁴ He cited the example of one resident, who “always used to be cheerful, running errands for people and being a good neighbour,” but who was now reduced to sitting in his



Hulme - the way it was

eleventh floor flat, “smoking, looking out of the window, not knowing anyone around him.”⁴⁵

It was not only the break up of the old community that had such a negative effect on tenants. Complaints about the facilities also started to emanate from those who had moved into flats and maisonettes following the early phases of redevelopment. In 1968, sixty residents living in a new twelve storey block of flats in Duffield Court, sent a petition to the Council claiming that they had fewer facilities than they had enjoyed in their old Victorian slum houses. They complained that they had no footpath, limited street lighting and no local shops. One tenant maintained that although he had been born in Hulme, he had never “lived in worse conditions, they are shocking.”⁴⁶ Of course, there were always going to be problems while rebuilding was still continuing all around Hulme. In 1970, another resident, Mr. J.E. Rushton, wrote to the *Manchester Evening News*, complaining at the lack of post-office facilities. A few days later, J. Bostock, chairman of the Hulme People’s Association, a local tenants’ group, also wrote to the paper, claiming that they were looking into the issue of post-office facilities and into “the provision of shops generally, play areas for children, telephones and other amenities.”⁴⁷

However, minor complaints soon gave way to far more serious issues. Complaints against the Council continued to escalate after the completion of Hulme V, and only four years after the completion of the Crescents, residents were demanding to be re-housed. An anonymous local doctor claimed that the whole environment was so bad that it was seriously affecting people’s health. His report, entitled *Health in Hulme*, claimed that local living conditions were creating high stress levels, marital break-up and even suicidal tendencies, with huge increases in neurotic, psychotic and gastro-intestinal illnesses.⁴⁸ Problems included broken lifts, which had poor lighting and smelled pungently of urine, inadequate refuse disposal (with rubbish left rotting on landings), litter, animal excrement, noise echoing through the stairwells, and vandalism. The doctor ended by claiming that:

*The deck access blocks as they are at present constructed and administered, are a basic factor in the production of much low-grade ill health. They have the potential for the rapid spread of transmittable disease.*⁴⁹

Ardwick and Beswick

Hulme was not the only area in Manchester to have what many believed were status housing projects using industrial building techniques. Two large deck access developments were also built at Ardwick and Beswick. Beswick was to become one of the most notorious of all these redevelopment programmes. Plans to rebuild the district were initially proposed in 1944, when the Council hoped, under the ‘Better Beswick’ plan, to spend £37,250 on developing 290 acres.⁵⁰ However, substantial rebuilding did not occur until 1969, when a £5 million programme was unveiled that included deck access flats and maisonettes, housing 1,018 families. The Council was to pay for the developments over the next fifty years. At the centre of this plan was the Fort

Beswick Estate, a huge, monolithic structure, made up of deck access flats. The estate was built by Bison Concrete, which gained a strong reputation in the 1960s. (The firm won the Queen’s Award to Industry and its chairman, Sir Kenneth Wood, became adviser to the Ministry of Housing in 1966).

The estate was finally completed in 1973, but it was already clear by 1978 that Fort Beswick also had a number of serious structural faults. It was one of four sites across the country where councils were instructed to inspect the prefabricated blocks, following a large number of complaints, which included rainwater seeping through the walls. Manchester city architects carried out a further survey in 1981, which revealed hair-line cracks in the roofs, water penetration on the lower decks and condensation. There were cracks in 320 out of 400 supports to fire escape balustrades (some of which exposed the metal core). There were nine structural failures on bridge supports and unsatisfactory repairs to concrete wall panels, while stair towers were starting to lean away from the main blocks. It was estimated that it would cost £9.3 million to repair the flats, over £4 million more than they had originally cost. The Housing Committee was urged to knock down three blocks immediately, to be followed by the rest of the site over the following years.⁵¹ In 1982, it was finally resolved that the entire estate of 1,018 homes would have to be demolished, since steel links were rusting and cracks were appearing in the concrete. The Council decided to sue Bison Concrete for negligence and breach of contract.

This was only a start. The Council compiled a dossier of major structural faults affecting flats across the city and published its own booklet, *Housing Defects in Manchester*, which claimed that serious faults ran “right through the stock – deck access, tower blocks, post-war maisonettes and traditional style housing.”⁵² The list included 300 four-storey maisonettes in Ardwick and Wythenshawe, a number of high-rise flats from the Hulme III and Hulme V schemes, as well as flats in the Turkey Lane development at Harpurhey. In many cases, cracks had started to appear in the concrete coverings, presenting a real danger of pieces breaking off and falling to the ground.⁵³ Importantly, Graham Goodhead, the Director of Housing, claimed that these problems were all a result of “departing from low rise housing and well understood practices,” adding that the “sins of the sixties” were “being visited on the eighties.”⁵⁴ By the 1980s, it was decided to return to old-style “traditional” homes, with garages and gardens. David Ford, Chairman of the Planning Committee, unveiled plans for a new village, which would include 750 new homes and community facilities. Crucially, it was also announced that local people would have the chance to express their opinions, as Ford invited them to come forward so that some of their views could be incorporated “in the new Beswick.”⁵⁵

Despite this change in the direction of its housing programmes, the Council was left with a legacy that would not easily disappear, as the disastrous news continued through the 1980s. In 1985, for example, a series of damning faults was revealed in another prestigious development, Coverdale Crescent in Longsight. The development, which became known as Fort Ardwick, was a deck access block of 500 homes. Completed in 1972, Fort Ardwick, was built with the same Bison Concrete wall-frame system that had been used in neighbouring Fort

Beswick, and by the mid 1980s was clearly suffering from similar structural faults. The Council employed a private firm of consultants to survey the estate, which found that water was leaking through roofs, steel fixings were corroded and concrete was breaking away. The Council had to spend £60,000 immediately to bolt 1,100 panels back on to the building's internal skin. The city architect, David Johnson, claimed that the report highlighted the "rapid deterioration" of Fort Ardwick's fabric.⁵⁶

Highlighting the New Nightmare

The press and the media, previously so keen to copy and support Council press releases, were, by the 1980s, eager to highlight the scale of human misery to which they had given rise. One of the earliest and most damning of these reports was a highly critical *World in Action* documentary produced by Granada Television in 1977.⁵⁷ This showed that the Bison wall-frame system used at Beswick was deeply flawed and had involved placing pre-fabricated concrete blocks together with a type of glue, which was neither designed to last as long as the panels nor to cope with the damp climate of south east Lancashire.

The system was also inadequately water-proofed, with badly fitting rubber seals and panels which were chipped, cracked or the wrong size.⁵⁸ Chemicals had been used which actually corroded the steel, and the whole system was poorly fitted. General levels of supervision and work standards were inadequate. (A former construction worker described them as "pathetic.") There had been warnings about a series of faults in Bison Concrete's first development at Kidderminster as early as 1964 and flats, which the company had built in Glasgow, were also revealed as having serious flaws in 1965-6.⁵⁹ Even their low-rise developments were badly connected, thinner walls and wall-to-floor connections were used to cut costs. This was one of the problems that led to the Ronan Point disaster in May 1968. In some instances, where panels were difficult to fit, workers cut the steel ties holding them together.

Similar problems at Beswick led to early decay, dampness, vandalism, noise and condensation, which the Council initially blamed on bad tenants. The government ignored these difficulties while Bison simply chose to keep quiet, despite having known about the design faults for years.⁶⁰ There were similar complications at Bison's developments in Glasgow, Kidderminster, Hillingdon, Oldham, Birmingham, and Portsmouth. In Glasgow, panels had actually fallen off because wall-ties had corroded due to the type of chemicals which had been used. Interviewed for the Granada documentary, the former Chief Executive of Bison, Peter Jupp, candidly admitted that he had done nothing because it would have cost between £18 - £24 million to correct the problems and would have resulted in bankruptcy.⁶¹

The press started to highlight the horrors which tenants endured only a couple of years after the new flats had been completed. Significantly, whereas newspapers had earlier followed the Council's official line, they now reported extensively on what the tenants themselves were saying. In 1973, for example, the *Manchester Evening News* reported on the problems of those who lived in the new Hulme Crescents. The newspaper's correspondent, Bernard Spilsbury, described how flats, which were to have been "Manchester's Brave New World," were already prov-



Coverdale Crescent flats in Gorton, 1971

ing to be a huge "flop", with the residents of new housing developments in both Hulme and Beswick saying "bluntly that they prefer the old slums."⁶² Spilsbury described "litter... broken glass... piles of excreta", and lifts used as toilets. He spoke to 22 year old Fay Powell, who claimed that "everybody hates it here... it's not all the tenants' fault - the corporation is not as quick as putting things right as it should be." Another resident, 34 year old Margaret Ogunyemi from Beswick, had a list of structural complaints, which included the fact that her window had fallen out because the fastenings were "not strong enough for the weight of the thing."⁶³

Journalists started to give tenants' views and criticisms a much more leading role in their accounts. In 1978, for example, the *Manchester Evening News* described the Crescents as the new "Colditz", a complete reversal of their 1960s description of them as the new Bath.⁶⁴ Such trends continued into the 1980s. In 1985, both the *Manchester Evening News* and the *Guardian* published separate full-length reports on the respective horrors of Hulme and Beswick. The *Manchester Evening News* detailed the "Horrors of the Concrete Jungle: How the Heady Dreams of the 60s Turned into a Human Nightmare."

In the mid-1960s, system built development was hailed as a timely answer to the housing problems of the time. The ensuing housing disaster has entered the mythology of post-war planning. Its social decay has been punctuated by complaints of damp condensation, fungus on the walls, poor ventilation, vermin, cockroaches and shoddy workmanship. In 1983 an inspection of Hulme's 3,800 factory-built flats threw up serious structural faults, crumbling concrete panels, cracked walkways and rotting window frames.

The report graphically illustrated the problems facing the same flats, which had once been hailed as the new Boomsbury:

'I never had dis problem in Saigon' screamed the graffiti. The blood red letters were splashed across a metal door panel in William Kent Crescent in Hulme. The warzone imagery is everywhere. On William Kent Cres-



Jackson Crescent in Hulme prior to demolition, 1991

*cent, named after the great architect, a broken washing machine blocks the first floor walkway like some discarded military hardware. The 'streets in the sky' walkways are minefields of dog excrement decomposing under spadefuls of treated council sand.*⁶⁵

Later in the same year, an article by Michele Hanson in the *Guardian* vividly described similar conditions on the "desolate looking" Beswick estate. The problems highlighted in 1981 had been worsened by the fact that the condemned estate attracted no money for repairs, although tenants had to remain there until the final stage of demolition. The decision to demolish the flats had been "only the beginning of a whole new crop of horrors" for residents, as conditions there rapidly deteriorated.⁶⁶ Lighting, heating, plumbing and general repairs were all ignored, gypsies were blamed for stealing pipes, tanks and fittings and drug addicts and prostitutes had moved into the empty flats. The lifts were either broken or "full of drunks, vomit and excrement (human and dog)." One family had stopped asking friends and family to visit because they were too embarrassed by their flat, which was plagued with "cockroaches, maggots, bugs and fleas."⁶⁷

Conclusion

The media was as willing to expose the human nightmare which followed the construction of the early post-war housing developments as it had been to embrace the new vision in the 1960s. The *Manchester Evening News*, the *Guardian* and Granada Television were instrumental in highlighting in graphic detail the structural and social problems which plagued large inner-city areas, although they had previously supported, justified and legitimised the decisions made by the Council. Initially, it was striking to see the reaction of the press to the Council's rebuilding projects of the 1960s. There was no critical review, no questioning or scrutiny. Rather, the press celebrated the schemes, using the same spin already employed by the designers and Council. Whether this was due to ignorance, or sloth, it served to legitimise the Council's plans and was all the more important because of the absence of an effective public consultation process. Press opinion reinforced the general consensus, involving central government, professional designers, architects and the

Council, which had fully supported the use of system built housing projects. However, this consensus rapidly disintegrated in the 1970s, as the appalling conditions of the new housing stock became apparent. The Council became the focus for increasing criticism, as the press supported disillusioned tenants, and by the 1970s and 1980s, graphic press reports were being led by tenant discontent, which seriously undermined the Council's legitimacy as a housing provider.

Yet the Council had not made its decisions in a political vacuum. It had been under pressure to build quickly and economically. Moreover, decisions were not made in a cultural void. The issue of status, and of the local context, was an important feature in housing projects, from Lord Simon's Wythenshawe project, to the overspill estates and even the system built projects of the 1960s and early 1970s. One of the reasons which had pushed the Council towards system built developments was the failure to expand into a significant number of overspill estates. The Council was only able to build half the number of homes that it had originally intended. This was partly due to persistent struggles with neighbouring councils. A form of council wars broke out in the 1950s and 1960s, with urban Manchester accused of acting as an imperial bully and rural Cheshire seen as protecting the narrow interests of the land-set. Such political struggles were often a source of considerable bitterness. Yet, if the Council felt relations with neighbouring authorities were a source of difficulty, the eventual backlash of its own tenants was to have far more serious repercussions. The rise of the tenant as an active consumer, seeking redress for a poor quality service, posed real problems for the Council in the 1970s and 1980s. A number of campaigning tenants groups were formed to protect the rights of occupiers, following the rent rises of the late 1960s, the proposals for further slum clearance in the early 1970s and the introduction of improvement grants under the Housing Action Area and General Improvement Area schemes.⁶⁸ Such tenants were to force the Council to listen, producing a shift in urban governance which research into the role of the tenant has already highlighted.⁶⁹

This article forms part of a wider project examining the politics of housing in post war Manchester and Salford, which has highlighted a range of valuable sources, as well as a compelling story of urban politics.⁷⁰ While research into policy and governance



Eastford Square in Collyhurst, 1986



New housing in Chichester Road, Hulme, 1998

forms an important part of the study, other members of the research team have focused on local Labour Party politics. Taken together, issues involving party politics, inter-local authority policy squabbles, relations with central government, struggles with local tenants, as well as Council in-fighting in the 1980s and the politics of housing reveal a complex picture of urban governance. This brief examination suggests how studying the politics of housing in Manchester raises many important questions which

go to the heart of urban politics. Yet, even this list of issues does not provide an exhaustive account of the significance of housing politics. Further research is needed to examine a range of other important issues, such as attitudes and policies towards homelessness, rent levels, race, and gender. Although current research is still at a relatively early stage, it is already clear that the politics of housing highlight issues which run to the very centre of urban government and governance.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, K.M. Brady, 'The Development of the Wythenshawe Estate, Manchester: Concept to Incorporation' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Salford, 1990), pp.101-123.
- ² Simon's influence on Manchester's housing policy during the inter-war period was obviously substantial, a fact underlined by the building of the Wythenshawe estate. His own works include E. D. Simon, *Rebuilding Manchester* (Manchester, 1935). *Manchester Evening News*, 22 February 1985.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Minutes of Housing Committee, Vol 26, p. 568.
- ⁵ S. Glendinning and M. Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (Yale, 1994), p. 161 (hereafter Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*).
- ⁶ See P. Shapely, 'A touch of Bloomsbury: the politics of housing and the importance of the urban context,' forthcoming.
- ⁷ Figures are estimates provided by C. Raiswell, Housing Information Unit, Manchester City Council Housing Department, E-mail 25 September 2002.
- ⁸ Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, p.172.
- ⁹ *Manchester: Fifty Years of Change*, HMSO, 1995, p. 23.
- ¹⁰ Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, p. 255.
- ¹¹ Housing Department figures for the approximate number of flats are: 8,000 multi-storey flats (8-16 floors, in 118 blocks); 5,000 walk up flats (3 floors); 12,000 cottage flats (2 floors); 7,000 deck / balcony access flats and maisonettes (2-6 floors).
- ¹² *Manchester City News* (hereafter *MCN*), 5 June 1914.
- ¹³ *Manchester Guardian*, 5 June 1914.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ *MCN*, 27 February 1953.
- ¹⁶ *Manchester Evening News* (hereafter *MEN*), 29 June 1962.
- ¹⁷ *Guardian*, 4 September 1963.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 November 1965.

- ²⁰ *MEN*, 10 November 1965.
- ²¹ Report of the Housing Committee, 'Hulme Redevelopment Area – Stage 5,' May 1966.
- ²² Cited in *MEN*, 10 November 1965.
- ²³ *Ibid.* Taken from Wilson and Wolmersley, *City of Manchester – Hulme 5 Redevelopment: Report on Design*, presented to Manchester City Council Housing Committee, October 1965.
- ²⁴ Report of Manchester City Council Housing Committee, No. 5201, May 1966, p.1.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ²⁶ Interview with Councillor Bill Egerton, 25 January 2002.
- ²⁷ *MEN*, 6 April 1968.
- ²⁸ For a concise definition of terms, see J. Habermas, 'The public sphere', in P. Marris and S. Thornham (eds.), *Media Studies: A Reader* (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 54-9. For a more detailed account, see J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1989).
- ²⁹ *MEN*, 22 October 1965.
- ³⁰ *MEN*, 9 April 1965.
- ³¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 1969.
- ³² *Guardian*, 22 April 1968.
- ³³ *MEN*, 22 October 1965.
- ³⁴ *MEN*, 1 July 1968.
- ³⁵ *Guardian*, 22 April 1968.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *MEN*, 17 March 1969.
- ³⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 1969.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *MEN*, 6 April 1968.
- ⁴¹ *MEN*, 3 October 1968, Letter from 'Hulme Tenant'.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Guardian*, 23 October 1966.
- ⁴⁴ *MEN*, 8 September 1967.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ *MEN*, 6 January 1968.
- ⁴⁷ *MEN*, 31 October 1970.
- ⁴⁸ *MEN*, 25 October, 1975.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *MEN*, 25 February 1944.
- ⁵¹ *MEN*, 9 November 1981.
- ⁵² *Housing Defects in Manchester*, April 1982, p. 1.
- ⁵³ *MEN*, 20 April 1982.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *MEN*, 7 September 1982.
- ⁵⁶ *MEN*, 22 February 1985.
- ⁵⁷ *World in Action*, 'The System Builder', 20 June 1983.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² *MEN*, 23 June 1973.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ *MEN*, 24 February 1978.
- ⁶⁵ *MEN*, 22 February 1985.
- ⁶⁶ *Guardian*, 5 November 1985.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ See, for example, P. Shapely, 'The rise of the tenant in the politics of housing', forthcoming.
- ⁶⁹ See, for example, C. Johnstone, 'The Tenants' Movement and Housing Struggles in Glasgow, 1945-1990' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow 1992); R.S. Cuthbert, 'Tenant Participation in Public Sector Housing: A Case Study of Glasgow' (unpublished M.Sc. thesis, University of Stirling 1988); L. Hancock, 'Tenant Participation and the Housing Classes Debate' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool 1994); P.A. Baldock, 'Tenants' Voice: A Study of Council Tenants' Organisations, with particular reference to those in the City of Sheffield, 1961-71' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield 1970-71); A.W. Richardson, 'The Politics of Participation: A Study of Schemes for Tenant Participation in Council Housing Management' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London School of Economic 1978); J.S.G. Rao, 'Power and Participation: Tenants' Involvement in Housing' (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, Brunel 1983).
- ⁷⁰ The pilot project is funded by Leverhulme and is being carried out jointly by the Department of History and Welsh History at the University of Wales Bangor and the Department of Politics and Contemporary History at Salford University. It is intended to expand the project into other policy areas and to other cities such as Newcastle.