



**John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing*
(London: Verso, 2018), ISBN: 9781784787394, 330p, £18.99**

Reviewed by:

Lisa C. Robertson
(Acadia University)

The Literary London Journal, Volume 16, Number 1 (Autumn 2020)

Among the various political anecdotes that feature in John Boughton's *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* – from Aneurin Bevin's sagacious observation when opening the Spa Green Estate in London in 1946 that posterity will judge not the number of houses built but the kind, to David Cameron's uncharacteristic entreaty to 'Hug a Hoodie' at the Wythenshawe Estate in Manchester in 2007 – it is Tony Blair's speech at the 1996 Labour Party Conference that offers a particularly modern resonance. While canvassing in the Midlands during the 1992 general election campaign, Blair recounted, he met a self-employed electrician who, like his father before him, had always voted Labour. In recent years, though, he had bought his own house and had set up his own business. 'So', the man explained, 'I've become a Tory' (211).

Blair's soapbox reminiscence on this occasion served to underscore New Labour's commitment to social mobility, and more precisely, Boughton argues, 'after four bruising electoral defeats', an embrace of Margaret Thatcher's direct appeal to the 'aspirational working class' (210). Yet Blair's anecdote also indicates the degree to which the ideology of capitalist individualism had become entrenched in government policy, as well as in popular narratives of personal success. *Municipal Dreams* offers a richly detailed and compelling history of local authority housing in Britain from its origins in the nineteenth century to the present day. Yet the book is most original, and particularly valuable, in its attention to the role of council housing in the public imagination, and the ways that the perception of its purpose shifted over the twentieth century. On the book's dustjacket, John Grindrod identifies the 'grand narrative' that is at the centre of Boughton's study: the transition from the social

provision of housing as an accepted good across the political spectrum, to its replacement by a cultural obsession with individual home ownership. The outstanding achievement of *Municipal Dreams*, however, is Boughton's analysis of the ways this grand narrative was shaped not only by changes in government policy, but crucially, a broader cultural 'failure [...] and unwillingness to challenge existing assumptions about the nature and role of council housing' (251). The book not only reframes the accepted narrative of council housing's decline, but examines the ways that popular culture responded to but also often helped to facilitate government policies that would advance free-market capitalism. Boughton reveals the ways that general trend of both Conservative and Labour policy 'perpetuated the prejudices against [council housing] and undermined the values which sustained it' (251) in service to private capital and commercial interest.

Municipal Dreams has its origins in the author's blog of the same name, which since 2013 has offered readers a richly illustrated and detailed record of civic building and planning that foregrounds the progressive ambitions of many early municipal governments. The aspiration of local authorities to provide a better world realized in bricks and mortar, Boughton acknowledges, is today regularly dismissed as naïve idealism and the legacy of their achievement is 'unjustly neglected and often unfairly maligned'.¹ The book shares with its antecedent blog the objective to offer a counter-history of municipal housing, one that challenges the narrative of steady decline and a conclusion of assimilation into private enterprise.

Municipal Dreams is framed by introductory and concluding chapters that offer an earnest discussion of the calamitous fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017. Boughton acknowledges that this event was for many people a personal tragedy, but he explains that for the nation it symbolized 'in a devastating fashion, a crisis in social housing' (1). The destruction of a building is often granted symbolic significance, for instance post-modern theorist Charles Jencks famously argued that the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe Housing in St Louis on 15 July 1972 represented the 'death of modern architecture', and the gas explosion at Ronan Point on 16 May 1968 is often interpreted as the precise moment that public opinion turned against high-rise buildings as suitable homes.² Yet for Boughton, a crisis in social housing does not signify the failure of social housing. It is instead an opportunity to redefine the role of national and local government in the provision of housing, and to acknowledge the failure of the free market to provide safe and affordable homes to individuals who need them.

Municipal Dreams shares certain objectives with recent histories of council housing, such as Lynsey Hanley's memoir *Estates: An Intimate History* (2011), in particular a desire to address the caricatures and mythologies that constellate around council housing. Yet Boughton's analysis offers a more precise discussion of the forces that work to perpetuate such stories and images. One of the most effective ways that Boughton challenges the popular narrative of council housing's inevitable decline is

in his nuanced examination of the ways that material factors are as much a consequence of the acceptance of such myths, rather than simply the explanation for their persistence. Boughton explores how the process of residualization, that is the 'increasing confinement of council housing [...] to the poorest of our citizens and, disproportionately, those classified as "vulnerable" in some way' (257), contributed to the public perception that council housing did not exist to serve general needs but instead individuals who relied on social services. Boughton suggests the process of residualization may have been 'a partly unintended consequence of housing policies pursued with varying ideological intent' (257), but its effects served to perpetuate an image of council housing as undesirable, and its residents as in some way deficient.

Boughton's study reveals the ways that this degraded image of council housing – so often reinforced in print and television journalism – was not an inevitable conclusion. During the first half of the twentieth century, he explains, Labour policy maintained that council housing should serve a portion of the general population, and certainly from its nineteenth-century origins through the initial decades of the twentieth century, it was the working classes and lower middle classes with regular salaried employment who benefitted most from its construction, and not the poorest nor most vulnerable citizens. Conservative policy, however, insisted that council housing was only for people 'who could aspire to no better' (58) and the rest would be better served by the free market. Boughton's sharp analysis unpicks the ways that a right-wing ideological narrative shaped not only housing policy, but also public perception to the point that its logic was embraced by the very party that was meant to be council housing's chief advocate.

Boughton does not deny that councils could be 'poor landlords' (244), as he describes them, and that decades of underfinancing and negligence served to reinforce popular belief that council housing was a failing social service. In *Municipal Dreams*, however, the buildings themselves remain relatively blameless. Theories of anti-social design and urban planning, which began to gain currency in the latter decades of the twentieth century, offered a certain explanatory power for the problems associated with council housing – particularly the high-rise blocks that proliferated in the sixties. Oscar Newman's theory of 'Defensible Space', first publicized in a book which shared that title in 1972, famously argued that high-rise residential buildings experienced greater levels of criminal activity as a consequence of isolation and alienation which undermined residents' feelings of personal responsibility toward their surroundings.³ Boughton's examination reveals the ways that persuasive explanations such as Newman's do not predict but rather determine outcomes. After the riots of August 2011, which began in London after police officers shot and killed Mark Duggan on a council estate in Tottenham, Boughton explains that Conservative politicians were eager to lay blame on estates and their residents. David Cameron proclaimed, incredibly, that 'the riots of 2011 didn't emerge from within terraced streets or low-rise apartment buildings. As spatial analysis of the riots has

shown, the rioters came overwhelmingly from these post-war estates' (273). Although the architectural research group Space Syntax offered some qualitative data to support such an argument, Boughton argues that to hold post-war estates accountable for inciting violence was merely a 'sophisticated version of the Defensible Space thesis' (273). Boughton's analysis reveals the ways that the popular image of council housing was manipulated not only by the media's misrepresentations and political ideology, but also architectural and sociological theory. Rather than a foregone consequence of the narrow walkways, labyrinthine corridors, and deserted stairwells, the decades of disfunction suffered by high-rise buildings was a consequence of a failed economy and profound cultural abandonment.

After all, such problems are not affiliated with post-war buildings such as the Barbican, built for 'affluent leaseholders' in the City of London between 1965 and 1976 (12). A porter at the Barbican once explained to me that the structure's difficult to navigate walkway system – made less complex in more recent years by the addition of a yellow line leading to the arts centre – was intentional: architects Chamberlain, Powell & Bon aimed to disorient trespassers in order to discourage anti-social behaviour, while residents would become accustomed to traveling through the space. Whether or not this is yet another myth is less significant than the fact that such a narrative offers an alternative interpretation of post-war design that may have proved more broadly convincing had council estates not suffered attenuated government support and investment. Although owned and managed by the City of London, the Barbican was not designed as social housing; and since Right to Buy gave tenants the opportunity to purchase their flats at heavily discounted rates, the simple platitude 'private good, public bad' (255), as Boughton describes it, has often been used to account for its eccentricity.

Yet there is a more convincing argument still for the narrative flexibility of council estates, and that is their increasing popularity in the housing market. Former local authority buildings have, for more than a decade now, been popular with middle-class buyers who have embraced the aesthetics and intellectual elitism associated with modern design. Perhaps this is the trend Boughton refers to when he suggests there are 'now more positive media headlines' (248) than there were in previous decades. He offers his own 'simple observation' that in visiting many council estates – many of which, he concedes, are no longer council-owned – the 'vast majority of them look good: well-maintained, attractively landscaped and overwhelmingly [...] quiet and respectable' (248). It is unclear, however, that these observations are evidence of a 'new "common sense" approach around social housing' (248) and it seems instead more likely that the positive media headlines are the consequence of a market that recognizes its diminishing housing stock will necessarily have to rely on former local authority buildings to fill the void. Boughton is, of course, aware of this trend. At Balfron Tower in Poplar, the famous Erno Goldfinger-designed twin of Notting Hill's Trellick Tower, Boughton describes how during the process of shifting tenure from

the local council to the housing association Poplar HARCA, artists-in-residence and property guardians acted as temporary occupiers in order facilitate a system of decanting which seemed to proclaim that Balfron Tower was ‘an example of council housing seemingly judged too good for the poorer local citizens for whom it was originally built’ (234). There are other examples of related processes that Boughton explores, for instance at Park Hill Estate in Sheffield, but his analysis fails to fully elucidate the role of the property market in refashioning the image and rewriting the narrative of council housing in service of redeeming the reputation of these buildings for the purpose of sale on the private market.

One of the achievements of Boughton’s analysis, which throughout the book weaves together careful study of government policy and consideration of popular perception, is that it exposes rather than collapses the complexities of its subject. In fact, Boughton’s astute observations about the confluence of forces that produce and shape cultural narratives – not only those about housing, but the role and responsibilities of governments more generally – is so very persuasive in the latter chapters of the book that the initial chapters are comparatively less captivating. The book’s initial section, which treats the pre-war period, focuses chiefly on the origins and development of council housing and thereby rehearses aspects of a conventional narrative that the latter chapters, with their attention to ‘the image of the “problem estate”’ (3), so dynamically unravels. A clearer evaluation of the popular narratives at work during the pre-war decades in which council housing and other social provisions emerged would have unified the purpose of the earlier and later chapters and strengthened the book’s compelling argument. *Municipal Dreams* is one of the most important books of its kind not only on account of Boughton’s objective to reject the ‘generalised criticisms’ (5) of council housing, but also to understand why and how such criticisms gained acceptance and became calcified in popular consciousness. Certainly, as Boughton suggests, there has been growing public interest in rethinking the role that national and local governments might play in addressing the current housing crisis, particularly at a point when it is clear that the market is ‘unable or unwilling to do so’ (6). While revisiting historical solutions to previous era’s housing crises offers practical resources for addressing the contemporary situation, *Municipal Dreams* uncovers the importance of thinking carefully about the stories we tell ourselves, and the political potential of reframing accepted narratives.

Notes

1. John Boughton, ‘Municipal Dreams’ (2018), <<https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/about/>> [accessed 16 May, 2018].
2. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), p. 9. For a discussion of the symbolic significance of the disaster at Ronan Point, see Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 104–7, and John R. Gold, *The*

Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954–1972 (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 276–80.

3. Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (New York: Collier, 1973).

Works Cited

Boughton, John, 'Municipal Dreams' (2018). Online at

municipaldreams.wordpress.com/about/ [accessed 16 May, 2018]

Gold, John R., *The Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954–1972* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

Jencks, Charles, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977)

Newman, Oscar, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (New York: Collier, 1973)

Ravetz, Alison, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London: Routledge, 2001)

To Cite this Article

Lisa C. Robertson, 'Review of: John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 16, Number 1 (Autumn 2020): 91–6. Online