

Soft Selling Gentrification?

The final version of this article was published in *Urban Research and Practice* 1:2 pp164 – 180 (2008)

Abstract

This paper explores the rhetoric and reality of regeneration. It looks at wider issues through an examination of ongoing changes in Dundee, using a mixture of participant action research and a critical analysis of government documents and of previous policy-related research. These are combined to show how public debate is being dominated by a political spin that allows gentrifying policies to be portrayed as logical and progressive development.

This paper uses a case study in Dundee to examine how it has become possible for our parliaments and town halls to ignore the negative social impacts of gentrification despite decades of ‘critical’ academic analysis.¹ It examines how a generation of policy makers are convincing themselves as well as others that they are promoting some sort of common good, through a process that includes obscuring the inherent class character of gentrification, the (mis)use of popular consultation, the selective adoption of academic arguments, and the promotion of policy-driven research.

Neoliberalism in Action

What is being examined is an example of ‘third-wave gentrification’ at work in a city much smaller than those where that ‘wave’ has previously been analysed by researchers. The scale of the process is relatively small and insignificant in the bigger picture, but not, of course to those immediately affected by it. In this third wave, as defined by Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith, gentrification is expanding into new areas, is carried out by large developers, and – crucially – is actively promoted by what David Harvey described as the ‘entrepreneurial local state’. Hackworth and Smith argue that this has become possible because of the turn away from Keynesianism that has seen both the dismantling of institutional structures designed to restrict such uneven development, and the dismantling of the physical structures of social housing that literally stood in its way. Gentrification’s third wave is also characterised by a decline in effective resistance as communities are dispersed and community organisers are incorporated into smoothing the progress of the new system. (Hackworth and Smith 2001:468-9) This dissipation of resistance is both symptom and further cause of the decline of the left more generally, and an important part of a wider ‘construction of consent’. (Harvey 2005)

Third wave gentrification appears to be taking on some of the force of a Tsunami as, to quote Smith again, gentrification has become ‘an increasingly unassailable capital accumulation strategy for competing urban economies’ and a ‘consummate expression of neoliberal urbanism’. In Smith’s interpretation, ‘global capital [reaches] down to the local neighbourhood scale’ and ‘real-estate development becomes a centrepiece of the city’s *productive* economy, an end in itself, justified by appeals to jobs, taxes and tourism.’ (Smith 2002:441, 443 and 446) A lot of

¹ And even the odd piece of enlightened broadcasting between programmes on property investment. E.g. the evocative (if academically flawed) depiction of the transformation of a Deptford council block into luxury city homes in the BBC Documentary *The Tower*(2007), and investigations into demolitions of terraced housing in the north of England on *Tonight* with Trevor McDonald (2005)

wealth is created and, in the absence of Keynesianism's constraints and redistributive mechanisms, so is exploitation, exclusion and a growing wealth gap.

The re-establishment of ruling class interests that underscores the neoliberal project (Duménil and Lévy 2005) is not always obvious even to those who are carrying it out because the construction of consent has been so successful; and the beneficiaries may also be several stages removed from those most immediately affected. It may sometimes seem tempting to reject Smith's economic argument, as Uitermark, Duyvendak and Kleinhans did in their analysis of state-sponsored gentrification of Dutch social housing. Explanations given by the main actors encouraged the researchers to conclude instead that in this case 'gentrification is a means through which governmental organisations and their partners lure the middle classes into disadvantaged areas with the purpose of civilising and controlling these neighbourhoods'. (Uitermark et al 2007:127) However, while little is gained by those middle-class households lured to buy the new homes and provide a buffer of 'civilisation', bigger elite class interests are the real beneficiaries. There is money to be made by most of the organisations involved, and even not-for-profit housing associations are expected to repay their private financiers and follow increasingly market-based rules. At the same time, all this is happening at the expense of the poorer working class families who have been displaced. The areas are being controlled not for the benefit of their existing populations, many members of which are forced to leave, but to make them a safe place for the development of a thriving capitalist economy.

Gentrification is a powerful tool of neoliberalism and is being rolled out across the world as the neoliberal hegemony strengthens and neoliberal ideas come to be accepted as good common sense. David Harvey has shown how that hegemony has been achieved by a carefully orchestrated campaign, carried out over decades through policy groups and the academy and later through powerful political leaders and organisations. (Harvey 2005) Many of those now pushing neoliberal policies such as gentrification probably generally believe that they are acting in the wider public interest, or at the very least that (as Margaret Thatcher might say) there is no possible alternative; so how has this happened?

Like in any other sales campaign, wording is very important, and, as Neil Smith puts it, 'Precisely because the language of gentrification tells the truth about the class shift ... it has become a dirty word'. Instead, the language of regeneration is used to 'sugarcoat' gentrification, and 'the victory of this language in anesthetizing our critical understanding of gentrification in Europe represents a considerable ideological victory for neoliberal visions of the city.' (Smith 2002:445 and 446) Chik Collins and Peter Jones have used a grounded discourse analysis to demonstrate how carefully chosen language can be used to present a pragmatic capitulation to business-based policies as something progressive, or even socialist. Their example took place in Glasgow in the mid 1980s and concerned the transfer of some publicly owned local authority housing to private not-for-profit housing associations. Conservative central government was starving public housing of funds, but even so Glasgow's Labour party seemed unlikely to agree to get rid of a public resource built up over decades. That was until a council officer re-branded the sales as a 'socialist case for community ownership' drawing parallels with the co-operative movement. The events described were the first stage in an acceptance of these ideas by a Labour hierarchy that now promotes them wholesale and with enthusiasm. This also demonstrates how neoliberal ideas are being accepted step by step, and this piecemeal acceptance – sometimes reluctantly as the least worst option – has made resistance increasingly difficult.

The role of academics in rehabilitating gentrification has been highlighted by Lees, Slater and Wyly (Lees et al 2007) and, in a much discussed paper, Tom Slater has drawn attention to the gradual 'eviction' of critical analysis from gentrification research. (Slater 2006) The turn away from class-based analysis has allowed those displaced by gentrification to become invisible, so that writers talk about 'reurbanisation' as though all who used to live or work in gentrified city centres were not also people.

Far from policy being driven by independent research, research and - increasingly business-led - policy are heavily interdependent. Much research is specifically required to be policy driven, with an agenda and questions set by interested funders; but even where this is not the case, academics are expected to justify the policy relevance of their work through a sort of self-policing. This can discourage anything that might be accused of flying in the face of a neoliberal 'reality' that has become normalised, leaving the researcher simply to record changes and discuss how to manage them a little better. Policy makers are thus equipped with an extensive pool of research with which to support a pro-business agenda.

On the ground, the dissipation of resistance that characterises third wave gentrification is made easier through new forms of local governance that purport to be giving a greater role to local communities but actually give increasing control of important decisions to unelected business 'partners' and to the target-setters of central government. When local people do get involved, they find themselves tied down in highly regulated bureaucratic processes while important decisions are made elsewhere. (Geddes 2006) The travesty of tenant involvement on housing association boards provides a widespread example of this, and was the subject of many bitter postings on the *Inside Housing* internet forum (downloaded October 2007). In examining the use of 'community engagement' in Scotland, Collins (2006:165) observes that the very term 'is itself an import from the corporate world', where it is used to describe a hearts and minds approach to carrying out business in a difficult environment.

Arguments for gentrification are commonly based on the 'false choice' between degeneration and gentrification. (Slater 2006:753) It is claimed that attempts to improve deprived areas through other means have failed, but that is hardly surprising. These interventions have not challenged the major structural problems of the neoliberal model that generated the huge disparities of wealth and opportunity in the first place. They are restricted to piecemeal policies largely prompted by the need to prevent social disorder. (Gough et al 2006) Neoliberal economics are at the root of poverty and exclusion, but, just as they do for developing countries, the promoters of these economics argue that the neoliberal medicine is failing because the dose is not high enough. If existing communities obstinately refuse to renew themselves, then they should be dispersed and replaced by a better class of people.

Arguments such as this, on top of decades in which neoliberal ideas and individualistic philosophy have become entrenched as normal, have recently allowed policy makers to become more open in their embrace of the market, appealing as they do so to aspirations for personal improvement (Cameron 2006). Plans for demolition and regeneration in the North of England are officially designated 'Housing Market Renewal'. In Scotland, the outgoing Scottish Labour/Liberal administration made attracting 'Fresh Talent' official Scottish policy, and Chik Collins (2006) has shown how their Regeneration Policy Statement, *People and Place*, took its

lead from a report by the Royal Bank of Scotland in promoting 'regeneration' as an opportunity for the growth of private business through the privatisation of public services. As far as regeneration policy goes, the election of a new Scottish National Party government has meant business as usual.

'More Public Housing than Warsaw'²

The dismantling of public rented housing has been particularly significant in Scotland, where, before the impact of Thatcherite housing policies, over half of all homes were in public ownership. And it is nowhere more significant than in the former industrial cities of Glasgow and Dundee, where public housing constituted 63% and 62% of homes respectively. (Scottish Executive 2003) These figures have been massively reduced through the policies of Right to Buy, transfer to housing associations, and also demolition. Between 1979 and 2006, inclusive, over 472,000 Scottish homes were sold to their tenants under the Right to Buy, including over 13,000 in Dundee. (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/933/0056559.xls>) And between 1990 and 2006, inclusive, over 77,000 homes were demolished across Scotland, including over 9,000 in Dundee. (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/933/0056544.xls>) (These figures do not give tenure prior to 1998, but the great majority will have been public rented, or former public rented, housing.) By March 2007 Dundee's council housing stock was down to 14,476 homes and there were also 8,054 housing association homes in the city.³

In an analysis of social housing written in 2003, the Scottish Executive clearly blamed past policy failures at local and UK level for generating a vicious spiral of decay and demolition in Scotland's municipal housing, citing bad initial planning, poor management, over-pricing of rents, and government policies that limited borrowing for investment in housing and encouraged Scottish councils 'to sell their housing assets and not repay their debts'. And they observed:

Too often physical housing decay has been followed by demolition and demolition by unpaid housing debt. Unpaid debt with capital and interest to be repaid, with fewer tenants left to pay, means either rising rents, with no service increase, or reduced services, that is curtailing management and maintenance. But reduced management and maintenance then means higher vacancy rates, more abandonment and more demolitions. (Scottish Executive 2003)

Councils such as Dundee are still having to pay off debts incurred building homes that have now been demolished. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/dundee/7191000/7191612.stm>)

All this is not simply an unfortunate accident. Public housing has been regarded as second class by central government since the 1950s, and in 1979 its demise became government policy. By 2002 (the figures quoted in the City Council's crucial Financial Viability Study) public rented housing in Dundee was down to 26%, with a further 11% rented by housing associations, (DTZ Pineda 2005: paras 2.5 and 2.8) and by the time the study was written in 2005 council housing was already down to 15,638 out of 71,790, or 21% of homes on the council tax register. (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/02/23090710/5>).

² The former proud boast of Dundee City Council

³ Figures from Dundee City Council

What is happening in Dundee

This study focuses on plans for the demolition of two multi storey blocks in Derby Street, at the top of the Hilltown in central Dundee, and 5 blocks in Menzieshill in the city's west end, and for the subsequent redevelopment of the sites. My initial involvement with the events described was working alongside Dundee housing activist, Tony Cox, and local tenants carrying out surveys to discover people's reactions to being moved out of their homes. At that time my academic research was largely in other areas, but I felt that I needed to understand the background to what was happening, and this meant hunting down and analysing government documents, following up housing stories in the local paper, and turning myself into a housing specialist. As I have done this I have continued to work with tenants both in Dundee and other parts of Scotland, sharing my discoveries and learning from their knowledge and experience. I believe and hope that this process has been mutually beneficial, as well as allowing me to include the much neglected views of those whom gentrification is displacing.

Dundee has little to offer the big league gentrifiers, but it competes with every other city to attract the globalised middle class, and it is these new citizens and their local counterparts, rather than the old ex-industrial working class, that are seen as the city's future. The 21st century Dundonian is seen as an aspirational home-owner, and current policies for regeneration in the city involve the demolition of yet more council houses. There are plans to remove a further 2,000 in the next few years, including the multis in the Hilltown and in Menzieshill in the west end.⁴ This is not, of course, promoted as gentrification, however I have found no evidence to back up the official reasons that have been given for demolition. I have also found strong support for the argument that demolition is a damaging policy in both the short and long term.

These conclusions make use of the detailed surveys carried out by tenants in the affected multis, and an analysis of council documents. A vital source of information was the report on the Financial Viability Study by DTZ Pineda that was used by the council as the basis for its housing strategy. (DTZ Pineda 2005) The tenants were initially denied access to this report, and were only allowed to see it after an appeal to the Scottish Information Commissioner under the Freedom of Information Act. The grounds for the council's refusal were that the methodology used by the consultants was commercially valuable, so its disclosure would harm their commercial interests:⁵ an argument that shows a worrying attitude to the idea of objective research, as well as to concepts of consultation, democracy and accountability.

Although criticism of what is happening has been given some coverage in the local press, debate is always curtailed by an official response that, rather than engaging with the arguments, repeats the same discredited interpretation. Here is the official version of what is happening as set out in a letter to a tenant by the director of housing as recently as May 2007:

The continuation of population decline and changes in the housing market continue to generate a surplus of houses in the city, and there is strong, independent evidence that this will continue. Consequently, the Council has houses for which there is no expressed demand, which are blighting neighbourhoods and impacting on community

⁴ 1,898 homes were declared 'At Risk' – the first step in the demolition process – by the council's housing committee on the 21st June 2004. These included 440 flats in 4 multis in Alexander Street, 372 flats in 2 multis in Derby Street and 131 other Hilltown flats (final decision to demolish taken 18th October 2004), and 420 flats in 5 multis in Menzieshill (final decision to demolish taken 18th April 2005).

⁵ Letter from the council's legal manager 15th February 2005

social structures. Additionally there are houses with high investment needs which are unaffordable and uneconomic to retain... This provides the city with the opportunity not only to remove poor quality stock, but to enhance the range and quality of housing opportunities in the city...⁶

In other words, and regardless of any evidence that may be produced to the contrary, the problems are said to be 'surplus' council housing, council housing for which there is no demand, and high maintenance and improvement costs. These are the ostensible reasons for what is happening, but none of these claims bears much scrutiny.

Defining Housing Need – through Policy Driven Research

With growing homelessness, and housing problems dominating MPs' surgeries,⁷ and Shelter noting 'growing signs of affordable housing shortages', (Shelter Scotland 2007) it is hard to believe that the city has surplus council housing; and although the DTZ Pidea report makes this claim, it gives no supporting data. Dundee has seen a fall in population, but the report predicts only a negligible fall in the number of households – from 66,600 in 2002 to 66,400 in 2012. At the same time it predicts that the number of households living in socially rented housing will fall dramatically by 5,386, from 24,642 to 19,256. (DTZ Pidea 2005: para 2.18) In a city with low wages and an aging population, council housing is likely to become more needed rather than less, but this is not discussed. The report acknowledges that only half the people who apply for a council house are allotted one.⁸ (DTZ Pidea 2005 para 1.12-2.13) There was an increase in the number of people leaving the waiting list, (DTZ Pidea 2005 para 1.15) but this could be because it was oversubscribed. Similarly, the report notes that younger tenants are disproportionately renting in the private sector⁹ (DTZ Pidea 2005 para 2.9) - which our surveys show to be generally much less popular as well as more expensive - suggesting there could be considerable further demand if socially rented homes were more easily and quickly accessible. Significantly, the report states that 'the Council is currently experiencing problems finding alternative accommodation for tenants living in properties that are likely to be scheduled for demolition'. (DTZ Pidea 2005 para 3.49)

It is at this point that we can see how policy-driven research is brought into play. When the Scottish Executive commissioned researchers at Heriott Watt University to devise a mathematical model that could be used to predict 'social housing' need, it was no doubt clear that what the Exec was interested in were minimum figures. In fact the concept of 'need' in this context already implies that. The academics responded to the challenge. (Bramley et al 2006¹⁰) The document they produced has enough tables and equations to impress any politician and discourage them from looking beyond the headline figures. But the problem lies not in the mathematics. It is already built into the two basic assumptions that underlie all the figures, and which should raise the alarm for anyone who is hoping to be allotted 'social housing' (council or housing association). The first is the assumption that 'social housing' should only be made available as a last resort, with everyone else forced to rely on the market even if it leaves them just above benefit levels. The second is the completely arbitrary decision that councils should only have to meet 1/10 of the backlog of housing need each year. So, taking the example of

⁶ Letter from Elaine Zwirlein to Tom Black 3rd May 07

⁷ Meeting with Shona Robison MSP and Stuart Hosie MP (both Dundee East) 6th October 2006

⁸ Each year the council allots around 2,500 houses of which around 2/3 are new lets and 1/3 transfers.

⁹ People under 25 made up 42% of tenants in the private sector and only 5% in social rented housing.

¹⁰ This is an update of a model first produced in 2003

Dundee, although the report acknowledges that the city has a backlog need for 6061 social rented homes – almost half due to overcrowding and sharing – this is translated into a backlog quota of 605 homes a year, which – with the restrictions on social housing eligibility – can be more than met by current turnover. That allows the report to conclude that Dundee has a net surplus of ‘social housing’ relets of 700 homes a year.¹¹ (Bramley et al 2006: 87, 89, 117, 11 and 8)

Measuring Demand – or Actively Reducing it

The council claims that, not only are the houses not needed, they are not wanted. There is no demand for so much council housing, and low demand for these particular homes. Academic theories about ‘low demand’ were developed to explain the decline and deterioration of areas of housing - especially of ‘failed’ housing estates - and ‘low demand’ housing has come to be seen not just as a symptom of area decline, but as a cause. One of the main proponents of these theories is Glen Bramley, who is also one of the authors of the housing need model. Research in this field remains a relatively speculative attempt to make sense of a wide range of interconnecting variables, but it has been invested with an unwarranted authority by councils anxious to divest themselves of the costs of public housing, and to promote developments that will attract a new wealthier class of people. Bramley and Pawson have argued that low demand is the product of three main causes; demographic trends such as out-migration, changes in housing preference (especially towards owner occupation rather than social housing), and area stigmatisation. (Bramley and Pawson 2002:396) All three are problematic.

It is arguable whether out-migration should be regarded as unavoidable, and how much this anyway affects need for social rented housing. (It can even be argued that getting rid of housing can increase out-migration.)

‘Preference’ for owner occupation is not, as so often portrayed, a natural aspiration. It has been deliberately constructed through policies that ensure that for most people this is the only route to well-maintained housing, security of tenure, and freedom to personalise their home, and, importantly, that there is a strong economic imperative to get on the housing ladder. Government funding has been used to promote home ownership through policies such as the Right to Buy council housing and new schemes for ‘affordable’ housing, while council housing has been starved of funds for decades. This has meant poor repair and maintenance and big rent rises, and still the waiting lists for good social housing can be prohibitive. The emphasis on home ownership and on homes as investments has been an important factor in the growing wealth gap, with significant, though hard to measure, social consequences. (Thomas and Dorling 2004, Zacchaeus Trust 2005)

Area stigmatisation is more specific, suggesting not so much an over-supply of homes but a problem with particular examples. This problem may have little to do with the homes themselves, and Bramley and Pawson actually emphasise the importance of concerns about crime and anti-social behaviour. Addressing this primarily as a housing issue can lead to the neglect of wider social problems and result in the needless destruction of generally sound houses; while, as in the Dutch example above, those individuals who were the source of the anti-social behaviour are simply moved on elsewhere.

¹¹ The figures for Glasgow are even more worrying. A backlog need for 29,603 social rented homes is translated into a backlog quota of 2,960 homes a year and a claimed surplus of ‘social housing’ relets of 4,590 homes a year, which is being used to justify demolitions on a vast, and increasing, scale.

Bramley and Pawson appear to disregard their own observation that ‘demand projections for more than about five years ahead are difficult and would not carry great credibility’.¹² (Bramley and Pawson 2002:413) They argue that a logical conclusion of this research is the diversion of investment away from some of the worst areas, which are seen as fit only for demolition, enabling councils to reduce their housing stock; (Bramley and Pawson 2002:412) and DTZ Pida had already highlighted the reduction of social housing as a reason for demolition in a report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in England. (DTZ Pida 2000:5) As we have seen, Scottish council housing has undergone an extensive programme of demolitions. Theories of low demand may themselves contribute to neglect and spiralling decline, and architectural determinism can be used to gloss over more fundamental social problems; however these theories continue to be regarded as the pragmatic approach, while more critical academic assessments are ignored.

In Dundee, even after decades of under investment in council stock, there are, as we have seen, still twice as many people applying for council houses as are allotted them, and there are clearly many more people who could benefit from them. Some houses and areas are, of course, more popular than others, but, as with any other product, demand is not a fixed number waiting to be discovered: it will increase if the housing is improved or otherwise made more desirable. Graphic evidence of this is provided by two groups of medium-rise flats in Lochee in West Dundee, which were built to identical plans. One group is very run down, and few residents have objected to being moved out to allow its demolition. The other received an injection of money and a make-over some years back, and the flats are much sought after.¹³

Consultation – as charade

In order to demonstrate the unpopularity of the specific homes proposed for demolition – and also their commitment to consultation – Dundee Council carried out postal surveys of the affected tenants. These were done very rapidly and with minimal supporting information: the £1500 relocation payment was emphasised, and council documents described the buildings – ambiguously - as ‘at risk’. Sparsely attended public meetings were held during normal working hours. Many people naturally assumed that the buildings had structural problems, and some imagined that they would be given ‘braw wee hoosis’. Although others were more sceptical, the surveys produced the desired results – 57% in favour of demolition in Derby Street (on a 53% response rate) and 61% (on a 28% response rate) in Menzieshill. In October 2004 the Hilltown demolitions were given the go-ahead with hardly a murmur of dissent from among the councillors, despite an impassioned plea from tenants’ representatives and a packed gallery of protestors; 6 months later the fate of the Menzieshill Multis was confirmed in just 5 minutes.¹⁴

As unease and anger grew among the tenants, we worked with some of those affected to produce our alternative independent surveys. By this time people were beginning to realise all

¹² Their 2002 article also puts a question mark over Bramley’s own estimates of annual surplus made just 4 years earlier (Bramley and Pawson 2002:400)

¹³ Foggyley Gardens was demolished early 2008, while nearby Dryburgh Gardens continues to provide popular flats. Dryburgh Gardens is now owned by a housing association, but the difference is due not to the nature of the ownership but investment in the buildings.

¹⁴ The council meetings were held 18th October 2004 and 18th April 2005 on the basis of brief reports (4 and 3 pages respectively) by the Director of Housing that included the consultation feedback.

that was involved and to discover the lack of other options available, and anti-demolition campaigns had generated discussion of the issues in the local media and in the blocks concerned. Over many evenings we would meet in one of the flats and go out in pairs knocking on doors or collecting completed questionnaires that had been left out for us. The Derby Street survey was conducted in March and April 2005. At that time 76 of the 374 flats were empty. 153 questionnaires were completed, representing 142 homes, or 48% of the occupied flats. The Menzieshill survey was carried out that October and November, when 133 of the 420 flats were empty. The return rate was 53% of the occupied homes (152 out of 287). A large proportion of the empty flats can be explained by normal turnover. People have always moved out and in, but now those moving out were not being replaced. It should also not be assumed that everyone who had already left the buildings would have done so had they been given real choice. Besides natural turnover, people will have gone to escape uncertainty or to avoid living in an increasingly empty building. The Menzieshill multis also housed a significant number of health workers with relatively short-term contracts at the adjacent hospital, and also tenants in sheltered housing who may have moved to homes with wardens. The residualisation of council housing has meant that a high proportion of tenancies are relatively short term, and the turnover in Menzieshill before the multis were scheduled for demolition was between 25 and 30% a year: there were actually fewer households who left the buildings in the 12 months after they were declared 'at risk' and re-letting was halted than in the 12 months before.¹⁵ The percentages given below are based on the completed questionnaires.

The picture that emerged was very different from that portrayed by the council – and the tenants involved in carrying out the surveys were themselves surprised at the extent of the opposition to demolition. Our surveys show that in the two Derby Street multis at the top of the Hilltown 71% of people wanted to remain in the buildings. Only 18% wanted to leave - and several of those told us that they needed to find somewhere without stairs for medical reasons (the homes are on two floors), or somewhere cheaper. Only 9% supported the idea of demolition. We also found that 30% of the households said they had not received the council ballot paper on demolition. In the five multis in Menzieshill, the results, though strong, were not quite so dramatic. This is probably due in a large part to three factors that all have implication for planning a future for buildings of this kind, and could all be solved with better maintenance and management. First, unlike in the Hilltown, these buildings do not have a 24-hour concierge system, and this had major implications for security and problems with neighbours. Second, these buildings house several families with young children, who, unsurprisingly, want to move somewhere with access to a garden, and third, some of the flats have damp problems and there are, of course, no plans to over-clad the building, which would remedy this. There were also still people on temporary contracts at the hospital. Nevertheless, we found that 47% wanted to stay in the multis, compared to 43% who wanted to move, and that 64% were opposed to the idea of demolition, compared to 22% who supported it (with support for demolition dropping to 11% if the buildings were properly repaired and maintained). And, importantly, 77% wanted, whatever happened, to remain in the area. This is unsurprising as around half had other family members with homes in Menzieshill, but will not be possible as there is little housing available. (Glynn 2005 and 2006)

¹⁵ Figures supplied by the Council

In all the areas targeted for demolition, some people have, of course, been glad to move – especially those who had previously been turned down for a transfer and now found themselves at the top of the housing queue - and there were others for whom it was of no great importance, but in both of the areas surveyed there was a core group of tenants who did not want to leave their homes. The surveys demonstrate how widely held that feeling was, and the depth of attachment felt by many was clear at the first public meetings, when anger at what was happening made it difficult to hear what was being said. Some of these people had been in the buildings for many years, such as Betty and Jim who moved into a top flat in the Menzieshill multis when they were first built. Betty told the Menzieshill meeting that when she left ‘it would be in a wooden box’; but it has not only been long-term or older residents who have been reluctant to give up their homes. Liz, who was one of the group who organised the Hilltown survey, explains that she and others just love living there. ‘Are we going to greet [cry] when they knock this down? Yeh. I’m going to be oot the country... Cos I think it would break my heart if I drove past it when they were knocking this down... I think a lot of people that’s in this multi would feel that way, ken?’ And there are good reasons for her enthusiasm: ‘It’s quiet, peaceful, beautiful view, you’ve everything at your feet when you walk out of the door there. What else could you ask for?’ (interviewed 28th July 2006)

As we have noted, the image of community involvement and support plays an important part in the official portrayal of policy, and the incorporation of active local people can reduce the potential for resistance. As well as their own tenant surveys, Dundee Council has been able to rely on an officially recognised (and funded) Federation of Tenants Associations, with rather closer links to the council than to the majority of tenants; and a tame community council. The latter organised a meeting to look at plans for the Hilltown where they refused to discuss opposition to demolition or to let tenants invite non-tenant activists.

The Financial Argument – Turned on its Head

The council argues that demolition makes economic sense, freeing up money for essential investments in its ‘core stock’. Both Scotland and England have introduced new minimum standards for social housing, and no one would dispute the need for this after decades of under investment. However, the nature and limits of funding mean that the new standards are being used to force through stock transfers and demolitions, as councils are anxious to divest themselves of homes they cannot afford to improve. Rather than being a means of improving council housing, the new standards are driving another nail in its coffin. Long overdue improvements to some homes will only be achieved through the total destruction of others. As a Birmingham MP observed in parliamentary debate:

The only way that the Government have any chance of meeting the decent homes standard without more resources is by demolishing a great deal of houses that are not decent. We now have a crisis, not only because of the condition of homes, but because of homelessness: hundreds of families are now in temporary accommodation.¹⁶ (Hansard 29 June 2005, Column 427WH)

¹⁶ Lynne Jones, Labour MP for Birmingham, Selly Oak, in the debate on council housing.

But it is not as simple as that. The crucial DTZ Pidea report for Dundee is strictly a 'Financial Viability Study'. However, the figures given in that report show that demolition is, in fact, a hugely more expensive option than repair and improvement, and they would be quite incredible to anyone not familiar with the huge public subsidies involved in privatisation. Demolition does make economic sense for the council, but only because they would expect to receive vast amounts of subsidy in various forms from the Scottish Executive, or as it is now called, the Scottish Government. DTZ Pidea have calculated the public subsidies that would be needed to balance the books, and ensure all housing is brought up to the new Scottish Standards, under different scenarios. Their baseline figure, with no demolition, is £89M. If the council were to demolish 4,630 homes this would rise to £121M, and on top of that there would be another £60M of grant subsidy for 1,350 new housing association homes subsidised at 60% of construction costs – giving a staggering total of £181M (and a net loss of 3,280 social rented houses). If demolitions were increased to 7,390 homes, the costs rise to £128M, with a £185M grant for 4,100 new homes, or a grand total of £313M.¹⁷ (DTZ Pidea 2005:para 4.27) What is presented as a saving for the council is in reality a massive extra cost for the Scottish Government. Can we assume that this has been calculated as a price worth paying to get rid of a large amount of social housing, boost private developers, and woo middle-class incomers?

A further abuse of economic logic is found in the arguments about which buildings to demolish. The DTZ Pidea report for Dundee makes clear that, despite all the talk about popularity, when it came to choosing targets for demolition, they were largely influenced by maintenance costs. Although the multistories are in good condition, with a likely minimum life of 30 years, they have higher electrical and mechanical costs, including lift replacement. (DTZ Pidea 2005:paras 2.23 and 2.25) But what are never mentioned are the many savings associated with vertical living in matters such as road maintenance, public transport and street lighting. Tenants have also been told that one reason for demolitions is that the buildings do not comply with new insulation standards,¹⁸ but this is a problem easily solved by over-cladding. A serious environmental policy would not advocate highly wasteful demolition, and would also welcome the multistories' compact planning with minimal travel distances.¹⁹

After we had finally managed to get access to the DTZ Pidea report, some of these criticisms were covered in the local paper. They were followed by the usual response from the council's housing convenor, who told their reporter,

We make no apology for taking away the type of housing people no longer want in a bid to regenerate communities and to saving hard-earned rentpayers' money on property that incurs needless costs. (*The Courier* 28th April 2006)

It is easy to dismiss anti-demolition campaigns as condemning people to poor housing, but of course no-one would suggest that the flats should be left unimproved or that high flats should be used to house families with young children. (It is interesting that, in Dundee as elsewhere, high flats now seem to be thought of as upmarket housing, too good for social renting.)

¹⁷ The Scottish Executive's housing agency, Communities Scotland, has already awarded £3.4 million to finance the current round of demolitions, although they may not be able to use it all as the buildings have not been emptied as quickly as planned. (*The Courier* 11th January 2007, and 19th February 2008)

¹⁸ Letter from the Head of Housing to Tom Black, 28th November 2005

¹⁹ The green argument was recently taken up by a developer who wants to buy multistories scheduled for demolition in Glasgow and turn them into 'Ecotowers' of private housing. (www.architecturescotland.co.uk 13th March 2008)

And what about the Tenants?

Three years after demolition was announced and re-lets were stopped, the Derby Street multistories were half empty, or still half full, depending on how you look at it. The Menzieshill multistories were a little emptier, but it is taking longer to empty all the buildings than planned because of the lack of alternative housing. Many people are being put through high levels of stress. Moving is always stressful, and a sense of powerlessness and the inability to control events only increases stress. It is known that taking older people away from the places with which they are familiar can have serious effects on their psychological – and consequently physical – health. There are disproportionate numbers of older people in all the buildings scheduled for demolition, and some have been made ill with worry. As buildings empty out people are finding themselves alone on empty landings with unheated flats on all sides, a diminished concierge service and growing risks and fears of vandalism.²⁰ The four Alexander Street multistories, lower down the Hilltown, used to be entered through two concierge stations. Now only one is functioning. The standard £1500 relocation payment (which has not gone up for many years) takes no account of the investment many people have put into their homes, including hours of their own labour, so people are being left seriously out of pocket.

Many tenants will end up in homes with higher rents and service charges in the private sector or run by housing associations. Almost all new social housing is built by housing associations rather than the council, so although the council has said it will respect the consultation that showed Dundee tenants did not want stock transfer of council housing to housing associations,²¹ it is carrying out policies that result in transfer by the back door. The Scottish Executive (following the lead of Glasgow City Council) tried to re-brand stock transfer as ‘community ownership’, but there is widespread understanding that transferred housing is less democratic, as well as more expensive to run. (Glynn 2007)

What is happening affects not only tenants in the buildings scheduled for demolition, but many other existing and would be tenants, as the number of houses available decreases. At the same time as good flats are being sealed up, homelessness is rising and homeless households are spending longer in temporary housing.²² Level entry flats in Menzieshill are being left empty, while people with limited mobility are stuck in upper floor tenements.²³ With so many flats unused, the council is receiving fewer rents, forcing it to impose a substantial rent increase on remaining council tenants.²⁴

Justifying Displacement – through Selective Use of Academic Research

What of plans for the sites? A draft consultation paper for the regeneration of the Hilltown was published in Autumn 2006. Its somewhat contradictory language is typical of regeneration-speak. It talks about creating a ‘place where people would wish to live’ and building communities, but

²⁰ Especially of drug-related problems and fires in empty flats

²¹ This consultation, carried out in 2004, produced a 2 to 1 majority against proceeding to a full scale transfer vote.

²² Meeting with Shona Robison MSP and Stuart Hosie MP 6th October 2006, and interview with director of the council’s Homeless Unit, 31st October 2006

²³ Sometimes conditions for those stuck in upper tenements have become so bad that their story has been covered in the local paper, but examples such as Gladys Storrer (*The Courier* 9th July 2005 etc.) and wounded soldier Sandy Gibson (*The Courier* 2nd October 2007) will be only the tip of an iceberg.

²⁴ Rents were raised by around 4% in 2006, 2007 and 2008, and on each occasion the Housing Director commented on the fall in rental income due to council house sales and demolitions. (*The Courier* 17th January 2006 and 2007 and 22nd January 2008)

the plans are founded on displacing many people who wish to remain there, and distributing Hilltown households to other parts of Dundee; a scenario that also makes the promises to 'consult with the community groups' sound a little hollow. No account is taken of the views of existing tenants being forced to leave their homes, for whom these are 'fancy houses for somebody else to buy on my plot'. (Liz, interviewed 28th July 2006) Where the document is unambiguous is that the demolition 'creates the opportunity for new build housing to further increase the proportion of private housing in the Hilltown'. Any new development will be of much lower density than the current buildings, and if much of it is to be private housing that will further reduce the amount of social rented housing available in the area. The two Hilltown areas facing demolition contain between them around 1,000 flats. It is proposed that less than ¼ of the 420 homes proposed for the Hilltown sites will be social housing, which, with additional developments, would create a grand total of 250 social rented homes across the Hilltown by 2034. (Dundee City Council 2006b:7, 12 and 8) Clearly, only a fraction of the tenants having to leave their homes will be able to be accommodated in the area. Is this what the director of housing meant by 'enhanc[ing] the range and quality of housing opportunities'? In Menzieshill, the Council's Housing Strategy Document for 2004-9 gave a short-term target for social rented housing of 90 units, and added that the council 'would welcome proposals for social rented development following demolition of [the] existing buildings' - consisting of 420 council flats - provided housing associations 'can fund [the] land value'. (Dundee City Council 2004:25 and 27) But this is prime land close to the hospital.

An internal council discussion document on 'affordable housing', leaked to housing activists in the summer of 2006, presents the development of private housing on the demolition sites as improving the quality and choice of *private* housing in the city, and as bringing 'regeneration benefits through encouraging more balanced communities with more diversity of tenure'. (Dundee City Council 2006a: 4) Here we see another example of the selective use of academic research. Tenure mix – and implied social mix - is being promoted simply as an unquestioned good. This idea comes out of the arguments for area effects (that is that it is worse to be poor in a poor area than poor in an area of mixed prosperity) – but it was based more on intuition than evidence, and recent research – both qualitative and now quantitative - has put its validity into question.

Atkinson and Kintrea (2004) have used qualitative research in Glasgow and Edinburgh to show that area effects are much more complicated and sometimes contradictory. In practice, stigmatisation and discrimination, lack of useful external contacts and an aggressive territoriality are combined with, and set against, the benefits of sharing a similar socio-economic position with others in the neighbourhood, support of local friends and family, and sense of community. There are also quite separate problems that arise from the uneven distribution of welfare resources, but little to suggest that wealthier neighbours would improve lives. Butler and Robson's interviews with middle-class gentrifiers found social networks in Lewisham that were 'largely exclusive of non-middle-class people' and a social structure in Brixton 'which celebrates diversity in principle but leads to separate lives in practice'. (Butler and Robson 2001: 2150 and 2157) Davidson and Lees's qualitative examination of new build gentrification in Brentford on the bank of the Thames found no evidence of the social mixing that was supposed to result from the Greater London Authority's plans. (Davidson and Lees 2005) And Uitermark et al, (2007: 132 and 137) looking at the introduction of owner occupied housing into a social housing estate in Rotterdam, concluded that attempts to build social cohesion between old and new residents were doomed to

failure since the ‘acceptance of demolition as a solution for social problems pitted residents of new and old housing blocks against each other’. They found that ‘Many tenants in less attractive social housing were considered as a nuisance to other neighbourhood residents’, and that ‘the result of restructuring... is not a cohesive living environment, but rather a neighbourhood where people live their own lives and avoid confrontations with members of other groups.’ Doherty et al have recently completed a large-scale quantitative study using data from the UK census and the Scottish Longitudinal Study, from which they were ‘forced to conclude that the policy of deliberately mixing tenures in housing developments in order to improve social well-being remains largely unsupported by the research evidence so far available.’ (Doherty et al 2006:60) Despite all of this, tenure mix is still rolled out as an answer to social problems, and has become an important route for the promotion of gentrification and home ownership.

Arguments for tenure mix are often prompted by the high proportion of those in social housing who are on low incomes and state benefits. This is a constant cause of comment, though it is an inevitable result of the residualisation of social housing. This residualisation has indeed created areas without that layer of people most likely to have the time and resources to contribute to community life, but further reducing and residualising social housing will not help. What would make a difference, is the re-expansion of social rented housing to provide an attractive alternative to ownership and draw back a wider range of tenants.²⁵

Dundee Council cannot claim to be unaware of some of the knock-on consequences of its policies. The same leaked document also notes that registered social landlords (generally housing associations) are ‘reporting difficulties in competing with private developers to acquire land... for new housing development’ and that ‘[t]here is a danger that RSLs are only able to secure land in locations that are least attractive to the private sector’. (Dundee City Council 2006a:4) The demolitions, as we have seen, will mean a substantial reduction in low-cost rented housing in the centre of the city and in the west end, and new housing association homes are being forced out to cheaper land on the margins. The result will be an increasingly geographically divided city. Many new and existing tenants will also be forced to rely on the expensive and insecure private sector, and the leaked document also notes that ‘there is evidence of increasing levels of buy to let activity which may be fuelling house price increases at the lower end of the private housing market.’ (Dundee City Council 2006a:1)

The End of Democratic Debate

Despite these internal acknowledgements, the effect of the way housing policy is currently being presented – of which Dundee provides just one example – is to shift public debate away from fundamental questions. Major changes become accepted as somehow inevitable, and debate is restricted to the mechanics of implementation. This is demonstrated on a broader scale by the ease with which the focus of debate was moved from ‘council housing’ to ‘social housing’, which deliberately blurred the distinction between council and housing association ownership, and was then shifted again to ‘affordable housing’, which seems to cover almost everything and gives no indication of tenure.

²⁵ While there has been some discussion in Britain of opening up social housing to lower priority groups in areas of ‘low demand’, there is a danger that this will be used as a ploy to raise social rents and bring this housing into the market system. Bramley and Pawson (2002, p414) note that ‘This change will reinforce any policy push towards social rents moving towards a more market-like structure’.

An added twist to all this spin, is the portrayal of the demolitions as resulting from informed debate by elected representatives. While the policies were clearly in line with Westminster and Holyrood objectives, the driving force locally was provided by unelected bureaucrats, who put together the case for demolition. This was brought home to tenants when one of the councillors came to meet them, and confessed to never having seen the crucial DTZ Piedad report; at which point they felt like helping him unceremoniously out of the multi window.²⁶ I doubt if most other councillors had seen the report either, yet they all (whatever their party) voted for demolition with hardly a question asked.

Fundamental issues are not being debated in the public arena of media or government, but that does not mean that the people most affected do not understand what is happening. As one of the concierges in the Derby Street multis said to me:

It's well known it's a government policy isn't it, doing away with council houses... It's like they just put a line through the whole lot... It was introduced from the Tories initially, I think, and Labour just carried it on, didn't they? (Interviewed 18th August 2006)

Profit and Loss

If what is happening here is a part of the neoliberal project to re-establish elite class interests then it is important to see how those interests will benefit. Housing-led regeneration forms an important part of the Scottish Government's plans for privatising public services and boosting private business. Investment in construction will be generally welcomed, but for the same amount of government money, this privatised system produces far fewer homes, and those homes are aimed at a more limited range of the population, all so as to create bigger profits for the developers.²⁷

For the city council, pushed into a new entrepreneurial role, demolition (for which they expect to get government subsidy) means that they do not have to pay the costs of maintaining their homes and bringing them up to the new standards. Valuable city-centre and west-end sites can be sold off to private developers, and the private houses that are built will contribute to making the re-branded city 'a magnet for new talent'. (Dundee City Council, undated:1) The hope is to make Dundee's magnet stronger than those of all the other places with similar policies.

And, as we have seen, all this is being achieved at the expense of those who it was once thought the state had a duty to help. The plans being so unquestioningly promoted would result in a huge net loss of social rented housing. Good value decent housing would no longer be available for a sizable section of the city's population, and a hugely valuable asset, built up over generations, would be dissipated. The most fragile communities and lives are already feeling the brunt of these changes, and Dundee is becoming an even more geographically divided and socially polarised city, with those on low incomes banished to the periphery.

²⁶ This meeting took place in the summer of 2005, before the report had been released to us

²⁷ With the new SNP government having to operate under tight budgetary constraints it seems possible that there may not be as much funding for demolition as had originally been counted on, (*Dundee Courier* 29th February 2008) but there are no signs of a rethink in Council policy.

With thanks to Tony Cox, Tom Slater and the tenants of Butterburn and Bucklemaker Courts and the Menzieshill Multis

A version of this paper was presented at the European Urban Research Association Conference on the Vital City, held in Glasgow University, September 2007

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