3 Demolitions

ELEPHANT PARK

‘I’ve got a friend of mine – Terry – he could only afford to move out of the area with what the council was offering him and ended up moving into a home somewhere just outside Sidcup. Terry’s probably in his late fifties and he lives with his wife. He’s lived here all his life. He’s got people that would see him on a daily basis and his family lives here in the area. He’s now living there isolated just outside Sidcup having broken all of his social ties, he’s now suffering from severe depression . . . It’s not easy to build new social ties, especially the older you are . . . I mean the number of people I heard who’ve passed away as a result of having to move . . . for me, it’s genocide.’

Terry used to live on the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, which has now been replaced by Elephant Park, the new development by the Australian developer Lendlease, which includes 2,704 predominantly luxury apartments, of which only eighty-two are for social housing.* As for the majority of the properties, at the time of writing a two-bedroom apartment on Elephant Park cost anything between £750,000 and £1 million, with 100 per cent of the apartments in the first phase sold to foreign investors.² What has happened on the Heygate is not an isolated incident. Estates all over London, from east to west and south to north, are tipped for demolition in a process that

* Twenty-five per cent are for ‘affordable housing’ but since this was redefined by the Conservatives to mean either up to 80 per cent of market rent or starter homes to buy for £450,000, this is far from affordable even to Londoners on far above average incomes.
Beverley, one of the last remaining residents in Chiltern Block on the Aylesbury Estate. Since the start of the dispute between the council and residents and campaigners, the block has become known as ‘Alcatraz’.
advocates describe as ‘estate regeneration’ and critics condemn as social cleansing. As communities are broken up and tens of thousands of people displaced, this is another defining feature of London’s housing crisis. Down the road in Elephant and Castle tenants and homeowners on the Aylesbury Estate are fighting eviction. Neighbouring Lambeth Council has plans to demolish three estates and partially demolish three more.* The list goes on: the Carpenters Estate and Robin Hood Gardens in East London, which is internationally acclaimed as a modernist masterpiece; Woodberry Down in North London and the Silchester Estate and Alton Estate in West London. In Haringey the council has agreed to proceed with a controversial £2 billion plan with Lendlease that will include the demolition of Northumberland Park. These are just a handful of the hundreds of estates either already demolished or under consideration for demolition, to be replaced by developments of largely luxury apartments which the government argues have increased the overall total numbers of housing, although the amount of social housing has fallen sharply.³ Paul Watt, urban studies academic at Birkbeck College, believes that, on the basis of existing plans, estate demolition is affecting more than 100 estates – a figure which does not include all the proposals currently being drawn up. London councils own on average 25 to 30 per cent of the land in their boroughs – Southwark owns 43 per cent and Islington about a third. Lord Adonis, chair of the National Infrastructure Commission, has stated that he wishes to see London’s 3,500 housing estates undergo ‘systematic estate regeneration’⁴ – which housing activists claim could displace hundreds of thousands of people.  

Soon after the EU referendum, I drove to the outskirts of London to see Terry and his wife, Brenda. Bexley was strongly Leave territory with 75 per cent voting to leave the EU and St George’s flags hanging out of the windows in the surrounding streets. Before they were forced out in 2008, Terry and Brenda, who are now in their late sixties, lived on the Heygate for thirty-four years. Terry, a retired

* Lambeth identified six estates as part of its ‘estate regeneration’ programme with the decision taken to demolish Cressingham Gardens, Central Hill and the Fenwick Estate and to partially demolish and redevelop Knights Walk, the Westbury Estate and the South Lambeth Estate.
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facilities manager, described to me how they had moved into their three-bedroom flat in 1974 when the estate, which was home to 3,000 people, opened. ‘It was virtually day one, it was a brand-new flat. We had the kids’ childhood and their schooling there, to the point they started work. We had facilities – a crèche which my wife was involved in running, youth clubs – it was a close-knit community.’ They bought the flat under the Right to Buy in 1986, though Terry had mixed feelings about it. ‘I was very anti the sell-off of council homes but I thought I’d be in there till the day I died. There was no reason to think otherwise.’

In 2008, they were offered £168,000 for their flat by Southwark Council, which had issued a Compulsory Purchase Order against them and the remaining leaseholders on the estate. Although their own independent surveyor valued the flat at considerably more, they were advised to settle on a slightly higher final offer of £172,000. Speaking at the public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the compulsory purchase of the properties, Terry said: ‘I could no longer afford to stay in the area – the compensation I was offered plus £45,000 of life savings bought me a terraced property fifteen miles out of London. I have been forced to give up my home to accommodate the building of homes for overseas investors.’ This was despite pledges by Southwark Council that residents would be given like-for-like replacement of their homes within the borough, and the council promising that the regeneration ‘offers a rare opportunity to build new homes for all Heygate tenants in the Elephant and Castle area’.5 Instead, research shows that the majority of Heygate tenants no longer live in Southwark, pushed to outlying parts of London, with families uprooted and children taken out of their schools. As for residents who owned their own homes, most of them have had to leave London altogether as prices offered by the council for the compulsory purchase of properties were so low, pushing people out as far as Sevenoaks, Thurrock and Rochester.6 According to Freedom of Information requests the average compulsory purchase price was £95,480 for a one-bedroom flat and £107,230 for two beds.7 A significant number of people, like Terry, forced to leave family, friends and social networks, became depressed and several older residents died during the process.
Many residents and opponents of the council’s plans believed that soaring land values in the area were the main driver, but the deal with Lendlease remained obscure as the council claimed it was ‘too commercially sensitive’ for it to release any information – until embarrassingly an edited version of the confidential agreement was uploaded on to the Southwark Council website by mistake. The document, which was quickly removed, had sensitive sections blacked out, but an error meant it was possible to copy and paste the redacted words. This showed that, having spent £44 million emptying the 22-acre estate, Lendlease paid the council only £50 million for it, a price more than ten times below market value, as reflected by a nearby 1.5-acre site which sold at a similar time for £40 million.8

For Terry and Brenda, the most significant impact of what happened has been the psychological effect of the break-up of the community. ‘It was devastating. My wife’s family had been in the area for a hundred years. We had in the region of thirty family members in Elephant and Castle. There’s one left on the Aylesbury Estate – and she won’t be there much longer,’ Terry said. ‘I was born in Elephant and Castle and I’d always lived around the area,’ Brenda explained. ‘Mum and Dad were Bermondsey born and bred, my grandparents, everyone. Southwark was our place.’ The health impacts are the most clearly visible. Pulling up his trousers Terry showed me mottled, swollen legs, covered in eczema, which seemed to belong to a much older man. ‘Until I moved out I’d never had any of these issues or even been to hospital. Now I have high blood pressure and blood clots on the lung. I’m on about seven tablets a day. The doctors say stress is a part of it.’ As for Brenda, since the move she’s been in a wheelchair. She also has a liver condition, requiring frequent appointments at Guy’s and St Thomas’ Hospital in central London. Fifteen minutes from where they used to live, it is now an hour and a half commute for them. ‘It’s taken me years to get over the shock. I’ve got neighbours here but I haven’t got friends. My friends from London come up once a month but I used to see them every day,’ Brenda told me, sitting with her iPad in her lap opened to Facebook. ‘This is my friend now,’ she said.
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Because the same themes are now playing out all around London, it is worth looking closely at what happened at the Heygate, which was identified as part of an ‘opportunity area’ for growth in the late 1990s at the same time as it became clear that the homes themselves needed investment. Consequently, the council commissioned a report which concluded that the buildings were structurally sound but in need of complete refurbishment and some partial demolition. It also found that ‘the crime statistics show a very low crime rate for this estate’ and a larger than average proportion of elderly people with a significant attachment to the place. The recommendations were for some demolition of the tower blocks and refurbishment of the rest as the most cost-effective solution, environmentally, architecturally and socially.9

But in 2002, a council document identified the Heygate as ‘a barrier to releasing the area’s potential’,10 which put in motion the council’s plans to demolish it. Using language that a PR company might today have told him to avoid, Southwark’s then director of regeneration, Fred Manson, didn’t mince his words, arguing that the area needed a different kind of demographic to prosper. ‘We need to have a wider range of people living in the borough . . . social housing generates people on low incomes coming in and that generates poor school performances, middle-class people stay away.’11 He explained that ‘above thirty per cent [of the population in need] it becomes pathological’12 and claimed that ‘we’re trying to move people from a benefit dependency culture to an enterprise culture’,13 although just getting people to move seemed the main aim as far as the growing number of activists and campaigners were concerned. In 2008, Lendlease were named lead developers. The council’s promise of managed but ‘inclusive gentrification’14 soon fell apart as barely any of the promised new homes were built by the time the majority moved out. As the estate emptied and became characterized by boarded-up properties, the Heygate was portrayed by the council as a dangerous and crime-ridden sink estate, justifying the demolition. The media ran with the story, with a BBC piece headlined ‘Muggers’ “paradise”, the Heygate Estate is demolished’.15 Reflecting a mainstream media narrative
Heygate Estate Leaseholders’ Displacement Map

GIS-based visual representation. (Greyscale adaptation from colour original.)
Heygate Estate
Tenants’ Displacement Map
from Former Heygate Site SE17

GIS–based visual representation. (Greyscale adaptation from colour original.)
which bore no relation to actual crime figures, such commentary has become familiar to estate residents all over London opposing demolitions.

I had gone to see Terry and Brenda a few days after the EU referendum, when few people could talk about anything else. Terry and Brenda had both voted Leave, like most of their new neighbours – the vast majority of whom moved out from inner London over the last generation. But in their case, they both think the way they were treated by Southwark Council informed their decision. ‘We got badly let down and I wanted a different view. We were Londoners. I was so happy there – perhaps it was sour grapes,’ Brenda said. ‘The more I think about it, I think, “did we vote right?”’ Terry wonders. ‘But then I think of a Labour-controlled borough selling us down the line and Labour council leader Peter John hobnobbing with developers in Cannes, and he’s trying to preach to us while living in a luxury development in Tower Bridge. It’s about not having choices. They’ve drained you of all your finances. I wasn’t looking for profit, I was just looking for a home. And I know of people who were offered less than us.’ For Terry and Brenda it was clear that at least the EU referendum seemed to give them a choice, where previously all choice and all control over their future had been taken away.

‘ALCATRAZ’

Now, Labour-run Southwark Council is hoping to demolish the Aylesbury Estate, designed to house 7,500 people. It shot to fame in 1997 when Tony Blair chose it as the location for his first speech as prime minister and stood in the middle of the estate to declare that ‘the poorest people in our country have been forgotten by government’. In 2015, the fight to save the Aylesbury from demolition hit the headlines when Occupy protesters occupied empty flats for two months. Today, the blocks which were part of the Occupy protest are known as ‘Alcatraz’ because of the twenty-foot wooden and metal-spiked fences and checkpoint-style entrance. I’d heard
about Alcatraz and wanted to see it, so I walked through the estate to the Alcatraz blocks, past graffiti stencilled on the walls reading ‘another s**t deal by Southwark Council’ and ‘big fat profits for property developers’. Perhaps as a punishment for the protesters, or so it is regarded as a deterrent, Alcatraz bears no resemblance to any regeneration scheme I have ever seen, not least one which still houses residents. I was told residents were allowed to enter or leave Alcatraz only through a single guarded entrance, which means a walk of half a mile for people who live furthest away from the gate. This is difficult for the elderly or disabled. When I finally arrived, the security guard refused to let me in because I didn’t have permission from the council.

My second attempt to visit Alcatraz, to see Beverley Robinson, chair of the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group and one of the last remaining residents, was, if anything, more forbidding than the first. By now familiar with the single-entry checkpoint, I told the security guard who I was there to see, but to my surprise he told me the entrance was on another part of the estate. I tried in vain to find it, went back to the guard, who sent me away again, all the while getting later for my appointment. Eventually I found another part of the fence where a guard was sitting about thirty yards away, which meant I had to shout across the expanse numerous times before he let me in. When I told Beverley how difficult it had been to find her, she said that was standard practice: her friends were frequently misdirected, the postcode had been removed and the postman was told that no one lived there any more.

‘People no longer come to visit because the fence is so unattractive and they get so much abuse from the security guards,’ she said, adding that she has had scores of emails about the fence from residents coming home who can’t get in. ‘Then they [the council] say they’re trying to protect me – who are they trying to protect me from?’, she continued, referring to the council’s disputed claim that the security was there to protect residents after they had asked for it. She agrees that the fence went up as a result of the Occupy protest, which was not the sort of experience Beverley, who worked as a post office manager for twenty-nine years, was used to, or took
part in. The occupation lasted between February and March 2015, the police finally evicting protesters at the beginning of April. ‘My aim was to get a fair value for my home. I didn’t get involved but they did what they had to do. They’re the foot soldiers on the ground, but that kind of campaign is not for me. I couldn’t break into a flat and sleep rough in there – I don’t even like going camping. But it put the Aylesbury on the map and showed solidarity.’ When I left, she walked me back to the checkpoint where I’d been refused entry and asked the guard why he hadn’t let me in. Although earlier he had repeatedly, and rudely, said I couldn’t go in, now he kept saying he hadn’t refused me entry, but had just told me to go a different way. It was Kafkaesque and unpleasant to find myself on the receiving end of behaviour Beverley and her neighbours have to put up with on a daily basis.

Beverley has lived in her flat for thirty years and bought it under the Right to Buy in 2005, just months before the council announced its intention to demolish. ‘It’s so ironic – it was misrepresentation. I’d saved up quite a bit, put my savings in and paid the rest in mortgage.’ She has been locked in a battle with the council since 2010, when she was offered just £110,000 for her two-bedroom flat, subsequently revalued at £117,000. Either figure makes it impossible for her to buy another similar property in central London. Consequently she set up the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group, which has unearthed jaw-dropping information about just how little the council paid homeowners for their properties. Freedom of Information requests by another homeowner on the estate revealed that the council bought nearly forty properties for less than £100,000, with nine homes achieving values of less than £75,000 and the lowest coming in at £55,000, £57,000 and £63,000.16 It is important to note that the council is legally bound to offer a fair market value and, although this tends to be a bone of contention as the value taken is that of a property on an already condemned estate, it is beyond doubt that these prices bear no relation to the value of land in this part of central London.

‘People ask me, why did I start this – it’s not because I want to be famous, it’s because of the injustice,’ Beverley told me. ‘Most people
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are not going to fight them in court so they just cut their losses and go, but I said no.’ The action group residents want to stay in their own homes, but as the council is determined to plough ahead with the demolition all they can do is struggle to get enough for their homes to stay in the area, or at the very least in London. After she appeared on BBC’s Inside Out programme in 2014 Beverley received a revised offer of £187,000 – which is still £300,000 less than the £487,000 the housing association Notting Hill Housing Trust is asking for a two-bed flat in the proposed new development that will replace the Aylesbury. Not only is she nowhere near being able to afford one of the new homes, she is also priced out of the complex array of options the council claims are open to her, such as ‘shared ownership’ or ‘shared equity’, which come with high outgoings including service charges. Given that, the only choice she is left with is that the council buy back her property and rehouse her as a social housing tenant elsewhere, leaving her to spend the life savings she put into her home on paying rent.

In 2015 a public inquiry into the Compulsory Purchase Orders in the Alcatraz blocks took place, with the widespread expectation that the secretary of state would support the council’s decision to demolish. While residents waited almost a year to find out their fate, they faced what many claimed was continual harassment by the council. Virtually no maintenance was carried out, fire escapes were sealed off, there was no lighting in the stairwells, the heating and gas were cut off and the bins were not emptied. ‘I had no heating for weeks and weeks and then they wouldn’t let the people in to fix it. One evening I came home and saw the gas man at the gate. I heard him saying to the guard, “They’re so mean, they know people are living here and they’re cutting off the gas.”’ When she took it up with the council, she was told that it had been a mistake as they didn’t think anyone was still using gas. On the very day the public inquiry decision was made known, Toby Eckersley, the former leader of the Tory group on Southwark Council and until recently a councillor for thirty-three years, felt compelled to write to Southwark after Beverley found herself with no electricity, no internet access, no hot water or heating and no lift services, which she was told was due to
ongoing works. In his email to head of regeneration Mark Williams, Eckersley wrote:

You need to be aware of the intolerable loss of basic services to which Beverley Robinson has been subject . . . She is not in the best of health, and because of the electricity failures is often unable to communicate by email or charge her phone. Even when the electricity is on it is imprudent to use the lift for fear of loss of power which would entail hours stuck in the lift.[. . .]

It seems to me that the council, whether by act or omission, is behaving disgracefully, and unlawfully, towards its lessee and is at risk of severe reputational damage and litigation costs.

But what started out as a bad day turned into a surprisingly good one when, confounding all expectations, it was announced that on the advice of the Planning Inspector, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Sajid Javid would not confirm the Compulsory Purchase Order, on the basis that it breached the human rights of the leaseholders, according to Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects a person’s ‘right to respect for his private and family life, his home’ and states that ‘there shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right’. But the judgment did not just have recourse to European law, finding that the CPO also breached the Equality Act 2010 as the majority of those affected were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds. In her recommendation the inspector highlighted that ‘the compulsory purchase order would not only deprive them of their dwelling but also their financial security. If they chose not to pursue this option, they would inevitably need to leave the area and this would have implications for their family life, including the lives of those dependent on them.’ This was a huge victory for the residents and a testament to the strength of their campaign and the widespread support it received, with expert witnesses giving their time pro bono. But the fight is nowhere near over. The council appealed the decision in the High Court, where they lost, and at the time of writing they had announced their intention to appeal that decision, which
means the running battle between council and leaseholders will continue to blight the lives of residents, with all that entails. When Beverley phoned me to tell me the news of the secretary of state’s decision, she said she was ‘ecstatic’, but she also told me that the council’s response to the electricity failure in her block was to give her a torch.

The struggle, which has so far lasted twelve years and looks set to continue, is bringing together unlikely bedfellows, from Occupy protesters to Toby Eckersley, who has been one of Beverley’s staunchest supporters. A keen Thatcherite and prominent backer of the Tory flagship policy of Right to Buy, which cemented Margaret Thatcher in power and resulted in the sale of more than 2 million council homes, Eckersley stepped down from Southwark Council, where he had led the Conservative group, in 2014, by which time he had become involved with the leaseholders. Homeowners like Beverley and Terry on the Heygate, who exercised the Right to Buy, are known as leaseholders. Like so many homeowners in the UK, they own the leasehold of their property, while in this case the council retains the freehold, which is central to ownership rights and will be looked at later in this chapter.

‘Most of the resident leaseholders I know best on the Aylesbury bought as a result of the Right to Buy because they wanted a home for life. Between 2001 and 2005 the council was actually preparing quite good plans to refurbish the estate, so they had every reason to believe it would be a home for life. It provided them with the opportunity to be homeowners, investors and to satisfy their aspirations. As a councillor I fought very hard to get Right to Buy in. It’s very bad now that people are being shortchanged and their aspirations shattered,’ Eckersley told me. He feels that the battle to pay residents such paltry sums for their properties amounts to an abuse of power by a public authority. ‘It seems the council instead of acting as responsible public authority, is behaving more aggressively than the worst sort of commercial developer,’ he told me. Tribal loyalties die hard and he still considers himself a Tory, but with growing reservations. ‘I’m rather losing touch with the Tory establishment – I’m probably seen as a disrupter now. There are a mixture of property
Big Capital

rights and human rights which are being interfered with,’ he said. What has particularly upset him is the way that the government refers to places like the Aylesbury as ‘sink estates’, which is ‘frankly disrespectful, particularly on those estates where a fifth to a quarter of residents are leaseholders’.

Toby has a personal reason to feel empathy with Beverley and the other homeowners because Southwark Council had planned to demolish his own home back in the 1970s as part of its slum clearance programme. Then as now, Southwark Council was a cheerleader for demolition, with one former resident recalling the council adopting the slogan ‘let’s rebuild it end to end’. Toby remembers how even the now highly sought-after Georgian squares and terraces of Kennington Park Road and Addington Square came within the ‘red line’ which signified demolition. His own Victorian cottage, tucked between Kennington and the Elephant and Castle, was earmarked for the wrecking ball as part of the wholesale clearance, but he successfully fought the Compulsory Purchase Order, taking the case all the way to the Court of Appeal and winning. His anger at a socialist administration trying to take his property away from him was one reason he joined the Conservatives, but now with a Conservative government supporting estate regeneration by both Labour and Conservative councils, he feels the small property owner has been betrayed. ‘The corporate steamroller seems to me to be taking precedence over the protection of individual rights and property rights. I think it’s going to come back and bite them,’ he said.

‘Sink Estates’

In other parts of Europe, very similar public housing schemes have worked well and continue to function as their architects intended. But in Britain, large-scale housing projects, built according to modernist and socialist principles, collided directly with the individualistic and neoliberal political and economic culture that became embedded from the 1980s. Aspects of New Labour policy attempted a ‘third way’, putting housing associations in charge in place of councils, but
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this failed to turn the tide, and indeed critics claim that instead it significantly ramped up the privatization agenda. Today, the result is the determination, openly admitted by many in government, to get rid of social housing altogether, for all but a tiny minority. In recent years there has been a revival of interest in the Brutalist architectural style which characterizes many postwar estates and those that are listed – and therefore safe from demolition – such as Erno Goldfinger’s Trellick and Balfron Towers and Lubetkin’s Hallfield Estate – are very popular with social housing and private sector residents. Nevertheless, the association between postwar estates and deprivation is strong and is reflected by the frequent references politicians and media make to ‘Sink Estates’.

As with so much that happens in this country, the roots of what was to come for housing were not just down to Mrs Thatcher. It had all started a decade or so before, in the US – both in terms of policy and myth-making, which has played a large part in creating the ‘sink estate’ narrative. In 1972, an American architect, Oscar Newman, published a book called Defensible Space: People and Design in the Violent City, based on a study of crime in three New York housing ‘projects’ – the term for public housing in the US. The core of his argument was that crime was rife in housing projects, but that it need not be seen as the result of social problems but opportunism and could therefore be dealt with through design. His conclusion was that the modernist design of housing estates and tower blocks in particular produced crime (Manhattan skyscrapers notwithstanding). They should be knocked down and replaced with low-rise housing where private territory and boundaries could be marked out and defended, giving individuals a sense of ownership and deterring criminals from entering. Conveniently, this was also a far simpler and cheaper solution than addressing the structural economic causes of deprivation. His ideas coincided with decisions by American policymakers to introduce housing vouchers, rental subsidies similar to housing benefit, subsidizing people to move out of the projects to private rented housing elsewhere – another policy that the UK was to adopt a decade later.

Newman’s views about defensible space and individual
responsibility chimed with an increasingly individualistic and neoliberal political culture and spread like wildfire through American policy circles, where he became the man of the moment. The demolition of one of the largest housing projects in the US, Pruitt–Igoe in Missouri, in 1972, was televised in the US and became a national symbol of his approach. It eerily foreshadows today’s demolition agenda and provides a context for it. A couple of years later, Newman was invited by the BBC to visit the Aylesbury Estate to make a documentary about his ideas for the influential Horizon series. The film intercuts the demolition of Pruitt–Igoe with dimly lit stairwells on the Aylesbury. ‘One wonders, what happens to the children who grow up here? Do they ever really feel any sense of pride,’ intoned Newman as he walked around. ‘One wonders, will these children grow up to become the criminals that we seem to have so much of in America,’ he continued, despite the fact that crime rates on the Aylesbury were low and bore no resemblance to those of the US housing projects Newman had been studying. After the broadcast the architecture magazine Building Design claimed that the estate had been ‘scarred forever by Oscar Newman’s trial by TV’.17

Heavily promoted by geographer Alice Coleman, who became Margaret Thatcher’s adviser, Newman’s ideas on defensible space took off in the UK in the 1980s18 and led to a police-backed design policy, Secured by Design, which has ensured that defensible space, and the high security it brings, has become a condition of planning permission on all new development in the UK, in particular for housing, schools and public buildings. The consequence is that Newman’s emphasis on territory and individual ownership, which does not sit easily with communal public housing, is now reflected in high-security housing estates where gates, grilles and forbidding high fences have become the norm.

Secured by Design guidelines also state that security must be higher in high crime areas – which correlate with poverty – with the result that deprived parts of Britain are taking on an almost militarized atmosphere which feels alienating and intimidating.19 For example, a housing development I visited in East London, which was the winner of a Secured by Design National Award, had small
windows, reinforced steel doors with full-size iron gates in front and a grey aluminium roof. Because the rise of defensible space has paralleled the marginalization of social housing, there are now estates which are heavily ‘defended’ places with high concentrations of poverty and unemployment which do seem to feed directly into the ‘sink estate’ narrative. Work by the consultancy Space Syntax, which found that housing estates were close to areas where the 2011 London riots took place, has also influenced politicians keen to demolish estates.20

For politicians the Aylesbury has been the emblematic ‘sink estate’ virtually since it opened in 1970, even if many of its residents don’t see it that way. But most important of all has been the role of myth-making in creating this narrative which began with Newman and sheds light on the story of decline in public housing more widely around the UK. As far as the British public were concerned the Aylesbury really shot to fame as the poster child for urban deprivation when newly elected Tony Blair stood in the middle of it and talked of ‘estates where the biggest employer is the drugs industry, where all that is left of the high hopes of the postwar planners is derelict concrete’. Since then journalists have referred to the Aylesbury variously as ‘the estate from hell’,21 and ‘hell’s waiting room’,22 despite its low crime figures. The most extreme example comes from Channel 4, which brought the dismal picture of a sink estate to daily audiences of millions. Since 2004, Channel 4’s long running ‘ident’ – identity logo – has been taken from the Aylesbury, with grainy black and white footage shown panning across rubbish-strewn balconies, while the concrete structures shift into place to form the Channel 4 logo; except that, unbeknown to viewers, the washing lines, shopping trolleys, rubbish bags and satellite dishes were never really there23 – they were added in as props by the film makers to make it look as dystopian as possible. While most people watching wouldn’t know the images of decay are from the Aylesbury, the local community certainly does.
THE ‘RENT GAP’: FROM SOCIAL HOUSING TO SUPER PRIME

I’ve put the bulldozing of sink estates at the heart of turnaround Britain.

David Cameron, Sunday Times, 10 January 2016

In this piece in the Sunday Times, which launched the former prime minister’s ‘Sink Estates’ initiative, Cameron stuck carefully to the by now familiar story of estate failure:

There is one issue that . . . for me, epitomises both the scale of the challenge we face and the nature of state failure over decades. It’s our housing estates . . . step outside in the worst estates, and you’re confronted by concrete slabs dropped from on high, brutal high rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers. The police often talk about the importance of designing out crime, but these estates actually designed it in.

While this line of argument was familiar to some, the really interesting part of Cameron’s piece came next:

There’s a second critical by-product of our plan. Tomorrow a report from Savills will show that this kind of programme could help to catalyse the building of hundreds of thousands of new homes in London alone. This is because existing estates were built at a lower density than many modern developments – poorly laid-out, with wasted open space that was neither park nor garden. So regeneration will work best in areas where land values are high, because new private homes, built attractively and at a higher density, will fund the regeneration of the rest of the estate. [. . .]

I believe that together we can tear down anything that stands in our way.

As part of the initiative he announced a proposal to transform a hundred estates, publish an Estates Regeneration Strategy and
establish an advisory panel chaired by Tory grandee Lord Heseltine. As with so many significant changes in the direction of government policy, the ground had already been prepared with a pamphlet published by the Conservative think tank Policy Exchange, together with a consultancy called Create Streets, which suggested that high-rise estates should be replaced with streets. It came out in 2013, shortly before its co-author, Alex Morton, went on to become housing adviser in Downing Street, where he oversaw the passage of the controversial Housing and Planning Act 2016 into law. The Savills report which Cameron referred to, ‘City of Villages: More Homes, Better Communities’ – in fact published by the New Labour think tank IPPR – includes an analysis by estate agents Savills and was edited by Lord Adonis, the former Labour cabinet minister who was appointed by the Conservatives as chair of the National Infrastructure Commission. Adonis was blunt about the motives behind the report. ‘The scale of council-owned land is vast and greatly under-appreciated,’ he told the Financial Times. ‘There are particularly large concentrations of council-owned land in inner London and this is some of the highest-priced land in the world . . . [The] local authority planning regime has got to adapt properly to the potential for [market-priced rent] developments.’

A key point Adonis makes is that although people have bought their own homes that does not affect the council’s right to demolish. ‘It is important to understand that local authority development rights are unaffected by thirty years of “Right to Buy”, which has transferred leaseholds but not freeholds. They do not therefore undermine the power of local authorities – or housing associations . . . – to redevelop estates,’ the report states. In London 50 per cent of all property is leasehold, so according to this logic half of all homeowners in London could at one fell swoop have their property rights removed – although fortunately for the majority of them, their landlord is not a local authority or housing association. Of the 3,500 estates in London, housing hundreds of thousands of people, even now only a small percentage has been redeveloped. Adonis writes in the report: ‘London’s few dozen estate regeneration schemes of recent years have focused particularly on notorious “sink estates”’ – a
claim disputed by many residents. In words to strike fear into the heart of any council resident anywhere in London, he continues: ‘The challenge is to extend the creation of new city villages well beyond such doomed estates. Borough by borough, a city village programme, centred on systematic estate regeneration, is required.’ So it is clear that if these plans are even partially realized they will completely alter the social make-up of London.

This policy – of redeveloping estates – is driven by American academic Neil Smith’s concept of the ‘rent gap’, which he developed as a different way of looking at gentrification. The model favoured since the 1970s maintained that the middle classes moved back to the post-industrial city attracted by new economic opportunities and lifestyle as the former spaces of industry opened themselves up to trendy loft living. Smith looks at the gap between the rent a property currently earns and what it could earn if redeveloped for new inhabitants. He argues that when that gap becomes big enough, developers become interested and private capital flows in, attracted by the potential to make large profits.25 Academics have claimed that the failure to maintain estates, which keeps prices low, contributes to a ‘state-induced rent gap’.26 When he talks of local authorities adapting to the ‘potential’ for market-priced development, Adonis himself is clear that the ‘rent gap’ offered by potentially very high land values is driving estate regeneration. He argues that at a time of acute housing crisis, redevelopment is the only way to build the numbers of houses required, as the sales of new expensive homes also help pay for new affordable homes. Again, this viewpoint frames the housing crisis as being caused by a lack of supply alone, which it is not. Building large numbers of luxury apartments at the expense of poorer people is not helping.

The demolition and rebuild approach isn’t just down to the high land values estates sit on, however. It also comes back to tax. A key incentive for developers and local authorities to pursue demolition over refurbishment is the fact that new-build homes are exempt from the 20 per cent VAT that refurbishment is subject to. Estate demolition has already made its mark on London. It is the consensus among nearly everyone in what is known as the ‘housing industry’, from
the numerous local authorities who have commissioned Savills to undertake research for them, to developers, housing associations and consultants. Despite the tide of local opposition each scheme unleashes, the fact is that councils, who are fully behind this approach, possess the land and can drive the policy forward. It is rapidly becoming the standard orthodoxy. In this it is likely to be enormously helped by new provisions in the Housing and Planning Act granting automatic ‘planning permission in principle’ to brownfield sites, which include housing estates, allowing councils to bypass the consultation process with residents living there. Instead, the National Infrastructure Commission will be the body ultimately in charge of housing, and that is headed up by Lord Adonis himself. The victory of the Aylesbury residents at the public inquiry is therefore remarkable and very important in offering residents and campaigners a way to oppose redevelopment. But it is also notable that the decision to block the Compulsory Purchase Order was based on how the residents were treated by the council, rather than opposition to the redevelopment. The inspector and the secretary of state both accepted that the scheme would benefit the area if it were allowed to go ahead.

After the Aylesbury decision campaigners hoped the tide was turning against demolition, but Chris Brown, who describes himself as an ‘ethical developer’ and is against estate regeneration programmes of this type, believes that little has changed, although the ideological zeal of the Downing Street advisers who initially pushed forward on this has been replaced by a less aggressive approach. ‘There was a genuine attempt to destroy council housing estates in London,’ he told me, but ‘it’s essentially business as usual but on slightly better behaviour, which is a huge disappointment’. Similarly, hopes that the new Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, would stick to his manifesto commitment that estate regeneration would take place only with residents’ support were dashed when his draft good practice guide on the subject failed to include this requirement and actively discouraged giving tenants a vote, claiming there is ‘a potential reason for caution around using ballots or votes, since they risk turning a complex set of issues that affects different people in different ways over many years into a simple yes/no decision’.27
Because of the role played by central and local government in estate regeneration, for many academics the population shifts which result from it are no longer known as ‘gentrification’, but ‘state-led gentrification’. For those at the sharp end, even this change in terminology fails to define it; at an event I attended on the housing crisis in 2016, one member of the audience after another got up to say that the term ‘gentrification’ no longer covered what was happening: ‘It’s the wrong terminology for a state-sponsored demolition programme,’ one said. ‘It’s a positive term for some people which doesn’t describe what is really happening,’ said another. For academic and activist Bob Catterall, it’s ‘domicide’.

DEMOCRATIC FAILURE

While the Heygate and the Aylesbury were successfully labelled as ‘sink estates’ – albeit that many of their residents didn’t see it like that – it is impossible to describe Cressingham Gardens in Lambeth this way. Built alongside the rolling landscape of South London’s Brockwell Park, with its views over London, the estate was described by a past president of the Royal Institution of British Architects as ‘warm and informal . . . one of the nicest small schemes in England’.²⁸ SAVE Britain’s Heritage said it was of ‘special architectural and historic interest’ and hailed it as ‘a remarkable example of a model village layout designed with great imagination and care to provide attractive community living’.²⁹ It is also a great example of the rent gap, sitting as it does on very high land values, with apartments on Brockwell Gate, the neighbouring newly built gated development, selling for £650,000 at the time of writing. Unsurprisingly, residents love living on Cressingham Gardens, although they also complain that repairs and maintenance have been consistently neglected by the council. Even so, 81 per cent opposed Lambeth Council’s planned demolition. Once again, the by-now familiar story of democratic failure is playing out here.

In 2013 Lambeth Council put forward several options for consultation with residents, ranging from refurbishment, building new
DEMO LIIONS

homes alongside refurbishment to partial demolition, full demolition and rebuilding. Groups were set up to consider the various scenarios and Social Life, a consultancy which specializes in community participation in design, was appointed as part of Lambeth’s commitment to being a ‘Co-operative Council’. But before the groups had completed their reports, residents were informed that the refurbishment options would not be consulted on further because they were too expensive. Residents, architects and consultants appointed by the council were left aghast at Lambeth’s treatment of residents and its ‘co-operative’ concept. Commitment to consultation rang very hollow in the context of Social Life’s research, which concluded that ‘the vast majority of residents would prefer to stay on the estate’.

The residents were forbidden by the council to hold meetings in the estate’s community hall, but despite this a very strong campaign built up in 2015. They took the council’s decision to demolish the estate to the High Court, which ruled that a judicial review could be submitted to challenge the decision to ‘abruptly close down’ consultation on options which were strongly supported by residents. To their surprise and relief, the residents, represented by human rights lawyers Leigh Day, won on the basis that the consultation was unlawful, and the council was ordered to consult again, on refurbishment – including a community-developed ‘People’s Plan’. But all that happened is that a few months later the council voted its plan through again, claiming that all the refurbishment options were unaffordable owing to government cuts and constraints on the council’s Housing Revenue Account. Residents then worked tirelessly around the clock and built up a new case, questioning the council’s financial calculations and claiming that the ‘People’s Plan’ was misrepresented. They were granted another judicial review, which they lost. At the time of writing they had applied for permission to appeal, while also considering bringing forward a leaseholder action around the council’s failure to maintain their homes. If all these avenues fail, they will then fight compulsory purchase, like the Aylesbury homeowners are doing, so the whole process will involve more lengthy court proceedings and take years. Because councils hire hugely expensive lawyers in these cases, sagas like this cost vast amounts of
money which could instead be spent on essential public services, including housing.

Although councils have a statutory obligation to consult local residents about proposed new development, accusations of sham consultations, derided as a tick-box exercise, are not limited to Cressingham Gardens. In Southwark, the lobbying company Four Communications has worked with developers to provide the required ‘Statement of Community Involvement’ – meaning community consultation – on no fewer than ten developments in Elephant and Castle, none of which include any social housing. According to campaign group Better Elephant, just thirteen people were consulted about luxury residential tower block Strata Tower.32

This lack of real democratic accountability has long been apparent in the private public partnerships which have characterized housing throughout the UK over the last twenty years. Many stock transfer ballots – where tenants are asked to vote on whether they wish to transfer their homes from council to housing association control – were carried out amid accusations of ballot rigging in local authorities around the country. Wrong-footing opponents by holding ballots early was a favoured tactic. For example, a parliamentary select committee heard how Islington gave one day’s notice of a ballot in 2004. Obstruction and intimidation of opposition campaigns were also commonplace.33 Other examples include holding consultations during holiday periods and dirty tricks used in the forced evictions resulting from New Labour’s Housing Market Renewal Initiative, a programme which ran between 2002 and 2011. The Scottish government’s handling of planning permission for US President Donald Trump’s golf course in Aberdeenshire was also widely questioned: although Aberdeenshire Council rejected the application in 2007, former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond took the unprecedented decision to ‘call in’ the application, which was subsequently given planning permission. This set Trump on a collision course with local residents living in properties near the course, which he wished to acquire and demolish.34 The bullying, intimidation and harassment faced by residents have been documented in the acclaimed film You’ve Been Trumped, which reveals how residents’
Demolitions

water and electricity were cut off and tonnes of earth piled up next to their homes.35

Today, it feels like this failure of democratic representation for local communities, and the dirty tricks that go with it, is becoming standard practice. In a House of Commons debate in 2013, Labour MP Thomas Docherty, a former lobbyist, shared with Parliament some of the techniques of his former colleagues, recounting stories of lobbyists being planted in public meetings to heckle people who opposed their clients’ schemes. His stories chime with a wealth of anecdotal evidence of dirty tricks, including fake letter-writing campaigns and even actors attending planning meetings. Martyn, a film maker from Brighton, described to me how he had been offered ‘cash in brown envelopes’ to attend a planning meeting and pose as a supporter of Frank Gehry’s controversial plans for an iconic new development of 750 luxury apartments on the seafront. He remembers how ‘at least five of us’ from the drama school where he was studying were approached by an events company and asked if they’d like to participate. ‘We were told to go there and shout down the local opposition to the development. A couple of people were pointed out to us – residents, leaders of the local opposition – and we were told to be louder than them and be positive about the development. We were paid on exit, cash in hand, I think it was £50 or £100. I was there and I’m not proud of it. It is something that horrifies me,’ he said.36 In Parliament, Docherty described dirty tricks as ‘utterly unacceptable’, although ‘not a crime’.37 It is this flouting of the spirit of the law while keeping to the letter of the law which, like tax evasion and ‘financial viability assessments’, seems to characterize so much of political culture today. This sort of behaviour is not on the whole illegal but it avoids making any contribution to society and at times spills over into corruption.

One of the most blatant examples I’ve come across of the intimidation that can accompany consultation processes is the admission by a lobbying company called Westbourne of methods whereby ‘we shit them up’ in order ‘to scare the living daylights out of people’.38 In this particular case, Westbourne was explaining to a closed seminar how the company had worked to quell local opposition to
argue the case in favour of building HS2, the high-speed rail link. The lobbyist giving the presentation revealed the technique they used was to create compelling stories to change the parameters of the debate, by inventing a framework which set wealthy residents in the Chilterns – ‘posh NIMBYs’ – against working-class people. The strategy was ‘posh people standing in the way of working-class people getting jobs’, with posters for the campaign asking people to choose between ‘their lawns or our jobs’. A planning academic who attended the Westbourne seminar told me afterwards: ‘It was very coldly targeted and very strategic in the way that images were put forward. That’s the way PR works, but it was so calculating. I came away thinking this has implications for the way democratic debate develops in this country.’

This ‘class war’ narrative is also favoured by local councils in London, with Lambeth pitting leaseholders against tenants and arguing in court that the campaign to save Cressingham Gardens was unrepresentative and driven by the interests of NIMBY homeowners. The same class struggle story was wheeled out again in an attempt to defend Lambeth’s hugely contentious library closure programme which plans to turn libraries into gyms, alongside unstaffed books sections. Labour Councillor Matthew Bennett – in fact the cabinet member for housing – tweeted in response to the occupation of Lambeth’s Carnegie Library: ‘While they knock back wine in the library, almost 5,000 homeless Lambeth children go to bed in temporary accommodation,’ in a much mocked attempt to claim that library cutbacks would hit the middle classes and that the money spent on libraries would be better used to improve housing for working-class tenants. Local people and even fellow Labour councillors were not impressed with the attempt to shift the blame for housing cuts on to the library protesters. Critics on social media accused Bennett of ‘ridiculous doublespeak’ and queried ‘when those children get up, where will they go to make a future for themselves? Not to the libraries you’re closing.’ After questioning the council’s policy towards estate demolition and library closures, Labour Councillor Rachel Heywood was suspended from Lambeth Labour for six months.
DEMOLITIONS

In this topsy-turvy world where cash-strapped councils spend vast sums on legal battles with residents and sell prime land for a fraction of its value, the councils’ argument is that, starved of funds and facing unprecedented cuts, estate regeneration is the only way they can build new housing. Lambeth also claim they are building new council homes through their controversial housing company. But the numbers are minimal; on Cressingham Gardens the net gain in homes for social rent after the estate has been demolished and rebuilt would be just twenty-seven.

It is true that councils are facing a perfect storm of cuts and austerity. But demolition and rebuild is not the answer, and forcing it through not only means eroding local democracy but stands in the way of the need to look at the housing crisis holistically. This is an issue which brings together the influx of global capital with failures in the land and planning system and failures in the benefits system, and cannot be solved simply by building new homes. It also means other ways out of this bind are not considered. The zeal with which so many councils are embracing the demolition and rebuild agenda means a rapid reshaping of London is underway. Although the Conservatives are every bit as keen on estate regeneration, I have focused in this chapter on Lambeth and Southwark. These are Labour councils dominated by Progress, the faction on the right of the Labour Party, and there is no doubt that many of their members believe that the market mechanisms and private financing behind the current approach to increasing private renting and home ownership are the best way – perhaps the only way – of providing public goods such as housing. Proof that there are other ways of delivering significant amounts of housing which work with existing communities, rather than demolishing them, will be looked at in chapter 6.

However, even if the ‘TINA’ argument were taken at face value – Margaret Thatcher’s famous mantra, ‘There is No Alternative’ – there is an undercurrent in play which taps directly into claims from residents that deliberate social cleansing is also a policy aim. Aditya Chakrabortty is the Guardian’s senior economics commentator and spent six months investigating the demolition and rebuilding of the Woodberry Down Estate in North London. He told me how, during
the course of the investigation someone from the council suggested to him that they should speak off the record – which usually implies that there is important, perhaps confidential, information to impart. The council official explained to Aditya, ‘the thing is, what we find on council estates, a lot of people who live on them, they suffer from obesity and a lot of them are benefit claimants, or on drugs, or worse’. There is a symbiotic relationship between the deliberate attempts of state-led gentrification to increase land and property prices – with the consequent change in social composition of the area – and a casual, everyday discrimination against people on low incomes. This is reflected in popular culture with the emergence of reality TV programmes such as Channel 5’s Can’t Pay? We’ll Take It Away!, which shows bailiffs evicting people from their homes. Akin to racism, it is part of a much broader response to – and internal justification for – rapidly rising inequality in every sphere of our lives, described by a friend of mine from a deprived background as ‘a crypto culture of hatred for the poor’. After the EU referendum he felt this came out into the open, with calls for ‘idiots’, ‘plebs’ and the ‘uneducated’ not to be allowed to vote.