

# **Social Housing as Cultural Landscape: A Case Study of Byker, Newcastle upon Tyne**

**JOHN PENDLEBURY, TIM TOWNSHEND and ROSE GILROY**  
Newcastle University  
UK

[j.r.pendlebury@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:j.r.pendlebury@ncl.ac.uk)

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last decade or so in England, validation as cultural heritage has been extended to include the ‘listing’ of large groups of welfare-state housing. Selected principally on the basis of art-historical criteria, but significant also for their historical role as part of the mid-twentieth century approach to solving the housing problems of the working class, the validation of such estates presents new challenges and opportunities for the heritage sector.

This paper is concerned with the potential impact of listing upon one such housing estate; Byker, Newcastle upon Tyne, parts of which are only about twenty years old. Famous nationally and internationally many within Newcastle and Byker itself have a rather less positive view of the estate. Listing, though not yet confirmed, was initially proposed by English Heritage in 1999 and still awaits ministerial decision. In the meantime an active process of preparing for listing has been undertaken with a variety of stakeholders including the principal landlord (Newcastle City Council), residents’ groups and English Heritage, one output of which has been a ‘conservation plan’. In parallel there have been efforts to address the significant social and physical problems that exist within the estate.

Interviews with a variety of stakeholders, combined with documentary research, is ongoing at the time of writing and thus the main focus here is to review some of the underlying issues, with a brief progress report given on the research itself. The focus of the research is the impact of the listing proposal on external and internal perceptions of place. Might it, for example, have a positive effect on community confidence or alter the way external actors, such as the local authority, view the area? More findings will be presented in the conference presentation.

## **THE RISE, FALL AND RISE OF PUBLIC HOUSING**

The scale of the housing problem in the immediate post-war period was such that large-scale public housing was seen as the only solution. Local authorities were already major landlords and were therefore considered well placed to take on this challenge. There was also, however, a certain disillusionment with pre-war slum clearance estates; considered to be drab and monotonous.

In the early post-war period, however, people in poor Victorian housing often welcomed slum clearance and a chance to live with 'modern' amenities. Contemporary accounts of Park Hill in Sheffield, for example, with its 'street in the sky' show that the scheme was initially 'immensely popular' (Morris, 1997: 148). In many cases, however, popularity waned rapidly. Local authorities had failed to understand the massive on-going management implications of the shared semi-public spaces, such as communal stairwells, lifts and lobbies that were integral to the design of non-traditional housing forms and such areas became foci of neglect and vandalism

Anxiety over the use of agricultural land for housing and a fear of uncontrollable urban sprawl, meant that a new emphasis was placed on redeveloping urban slums in-situ at high density, with combinations of flats and houses. The plan was generally to re-house people from a condemned area as quickly as possible into a previously cleared site; once the population was moved their area could be cleared for the next slum clearance and so on. The system never worked this smoothly. Though people in poor Victorian housing often welcomed slum clearance, the new estates of flats often didn't match their expectations and there were endless delays in re-housing. In certain areas, including Tyneside, moreover, slum clearance was concurrent with a collapse of the traditional work base and programmes greatly exacerbated overall population loss (Donnison and Middleton, 1987).

From the mid-1950s to mid-1970s the dominant style of mass local authority housing was industrialised flat building; although high-rise flats even at their peak popularity only represented a small percentage of construction. Moreover, a gas explosion at a high-rise block, Ronan Point in east London, which led to a partial collapse of the building killing five people, led to an almost over-night abandonment of high-rise flat building. The norm became medium rise flats and maisonettes. However, these often proved to be the least popular estates ever built. Management became a key issue. The role of local authorities as landlord was often in direct conflict with political ambition; for example, rent rises were considered vote losers, yet were necessary if maintenance schemes were to be carried out (Power, 1993). A general problem was that unlike other public services, housing had little regulatory structure and at a time when local authority stock expanded rapidly local authorities were often cutting and streamlining and centralising local services. Estates sometimes deteriorated rapidly as a consequence of remote and ineffectual management. By the early 1970s most authorities had 'hard to let' estates, sometimes made up of some of the most experimental modernist schemes (Burbidge et al, 1981). Through the 1970s the popularity of council housing declined and public housing became negatively associated with conditions of mismanagement, decay and deep-rooted social problems. By the end of the next decade many local authorities had addressed these issues by decentralising management. However, the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 had effectively heralded the end of local authorities as major housing providers.

Coincidentally in 1979 a new society 'The Thirties Society' was reflecting a developing awareness and understanding of twentieth century buildings in the UK. Conservationists are frequently proud to see themselves as an avant-garde of changing tastes; the creation of the Georgian Group, Victorian Society and the Thirties Society (now the Twentieth Century Society) have all been considered as examples of the conservation movement anticipating, if not actively leading, shifts in public taste whereby architectural periods that were ignored or despised are positively re-evaluated. In this context it is no surprise that the post-war architectural modern movement was reappraised in due course and campaigning started for state protection of key buildings through listing, notwithstanding the associations still fresh to many of such buildings being responsible for the desecration of traditional townscapes in the

preceding decades. The strength of the conservation movement can be seen in its success in achieving the listing of buildings by the then Conservative government that at the time, in the late 1980s, were generally held to be deeply unpopular. More remarkable still, given the political hue of the government, was the listing of welfare state housing in the form of Alexandra Road Estate, Camden, London in 1993, at the time under threat of insensitive concrete repairs. Admittedly little more public housing was listed until 1997 and a change in government. Subsequently, a number of large-housing schemes have been listed in England, mostly in London. It is also noticeable that listing has focused on the architecturally distinct and thus far has not embraced the more conventional system built estates that are perhaps more representative of the post-war housing story.

## **THE POLITICS OF HERITAGE**

The conservation movement has therefore adjusted its parameters once again to include a new category of buildings. Also of more concern to us, however, is how a wider public perceives the nature of heritage. English Heritage has been responsible for commissioning a series of opinion polls from MORI (MORI, 2000, 2003) which have asked people what images the term heritage conveys. The most popular responses focus around fairly 'traditional' types of heritage such as historic buildings, stately homes and historic parks and gardens. Few respondents considered modern buildings to be heritage, even when prompted.

In the same way that people's perceptions of heritage tend to focus on the constructions of the elite, it has been argued that the mobilisation of the concept of heritage is a political tool of certain classes in society, essentially a culturally-focused part of the upper and middle-classes. Critiques range from grand theory, such as dominant ideology theory (Merriman, 1991), to explorations of more practical politics, such as using cultural heritage in preventing development, the so-called NIMBY phenomenon.

If we consider housing specifically, it is certainly the case that on the whole it tends to be middle-class housing that is culturally validated for protection through listed building or conservation area status. For example, in Newcastle upon Tyne, a city generally considered to be 'working class' and have a smaller middle-class than many British cities, there are currently eleven conservation areas. Nine are predominantly residential and all of these must be considered as essentially middle-class parts of the city. The most recent, in Gosforth, was designated in 2002, after a sustained campaign from residents and local councillors seeking the perceived prestige of conservation area status and concerned about the intensification of residential development in the area with pressure for flat developments to replace single houses and other uses. Though not always popular with individuals, thwarted by the planning system in their desires to develop their property, it is generally considered that a recognised status as cultural heritage is popular with middle-class homeowners and is actively used by estate agents in their marketing.

Yet not all people see property through this cultural lense or with this 'cultural capital'. (Wright, 1985) in describing the gentrification of Stoke Newington in north east London related his conversation with a working class resident of nearby Hoxton,

'she comments approvingly on a house which from any culturally sanctioned perspective is a complete eyesore. Its bricks have recently been covered with fake stone cladding, the sash windows have been replaced with cheap louvers, and the whole place is painted up in gloss so that it shines like a birthday cake...

Somebody owns this place and their renovation of it speaks of pride, self-determination and freedom to this woman who has live her whole life in council flats.’ (p235)

The heritage sector has become acutely conscious of the need to escape its elitist image, especially since the election of a modernising Labour government in 1997 that has shown no great interest in heritage issues. Wider social benefits have been stressed, initially by association with physical regeneration and more recently by claiming heritage as an aid to one of the government’s key policy priorities, social inclusion. As we have touched upon above, large estates of social housing have often been demonised in recent decades, and whilst the reality is not always as bleak as painted, they often are the home to social, economic and housing problems. What contribution could validation as cultural heritage possibly make to help deal with some of these issues? In a previous paper on cultural built heritage and social inclusion (Pendlebury, Townshend, & Gilroy, 2004) we introduced the notion of heritage as ‘historic place’ or ‘opportunity space’. By ‘historic place’ we mean that heritage might contribute to social inclusion through some intrinsic quality that means people define it as heritage and by ‘opportunity space’ that the presence of heritage is a coincidental element, or perhaps an aid to attracting resources, in an area in need of regeneration. Thus in the case of Byker the potential benefits of listed status to local residents that we wish to discuss are whether listed status might have a positive impact on the image of the estate and whether it might help attract resources to aid regeneration. Our focus in this paper is on the first of these.

## **BYKER**

The process of listing addresses the fundamental question of what is valued in a particular place. Forty years ago when the clearance and redevelopment plan for the grid iron pattern of streets of Tyneside flats that made up Byker was put forward, the same question was being asked. Fundamental to the redevelopment of Byker then was the strong wish to preserve the social character of the area. A report to the Housing and Town Planning Committee of 1967 recognised that

“there is a clear desire on the part of residents to participate in the planning process and an equally keen desire expressed by many to contribute to live in an area where roots have been implanted. The task of clearing and replacing the housing in the area will be a difficult and arduous one if the physical opportunities are to be seized and at the same time the spirit of community preserved”.

What that character and spirit was probably differed little from that of working class communities across the region where families lived close to the industries that paid their wages; where girls married the boys they went to school with and set up home in the same street as their parents. What was different was that it was recognised and a response made.

In 1968 Ralph Erskine was appointed architect and planner for Byker. Erskine had the view that the physical fabric of place could be transformed without disrupting relational resources. This was a step change from clearance elsewhere, where the focus was on housing as defective bricks and mortar rather than housing as home and a place of attachment.

“We would endeavour to maintain as far as possible, valued traditions and characteristics of the neighbourhood itself and its relationships with surrounding

areas and the centre of Newcastle.... The main concern will be those who are already resident in Byker, and the need to re-house them without breaking family ties and other value associations or patterns of life” (Erskine, 1968)

The bulldozers arrived in the late 1960s and continued to move around the neighbourhood for a decade. Work started at the north on an area intended for an urban motorway between the major shopping street, Shields Road, and the site. The need to create a barrier to protect housing from traffic noise had caused delays in master planning the site; the solution posed by Erskine was to create a perimeter block incorporating housing that would both act as a sound barrier and make a strong visual signal to all that behind the wall was a separate place – a village in the city – with few pedestrian and vehicular access points through. This is the ‘Byker Wall’. Behind this was constructed a new street layout with south facing communal courtyards replacing the old grid iron pattern. These spaces were filled with planting boxes, seats and tables where neighbours could sit and talk. The dwellings themselves were low rise of varied size to fit the needs of a whole community and characterised by light materials – timber cladding often brightly coloured and metal roofs – all in marked contrast to the old brick terraces and to the prevalent Brutalist architecture of the time.

This was followed by a rolling programme of clearance and rebuilding that attempted to reduce the displacement of residents who would see their new homes being built, then move into them and see their old homes demolished. Erskine’s practice set up office in a former undertaker’s premises in the heart of the Tyneside flats where their open door policy allowed a demystifying of the architectural process. The participative process was perhaps seen to greatest effect in the Janet Square pilot scheme, where open plan living and outward opening front doors were altered in line with local residents’ comments. The city council as landlord also worked to make its practices fit with the needs of the Byker community – so dwellings were pre-allocated with a strong concern for facilitating the retention of neighbourly contacts that were seen to be supportive. The success of this policy can be over emphasised; the redevelopment ultimately allowed less than half of the old Byker residents to return.

The redevelopment was also dogged with problems – industrial action in the 1970s caused delays and the introduction of the Right To Buy (Housing Act 1980) coupled with large scale moratorium on local authority house-building meant that by the early 1980s two large sites were still vacant with no possibility of being developed according to the original plan. These sites were subject to design competitions to allow local developers to build housing for sale (restricted to those who were on the council waiting list) under licence intended to avoid land speculation and to keep prices within the reach of average wage working people.

The southern part of the Byker redevelopment suffered problems of vandalism from the early 1980s. The shopping centre at Raby Cross intended to replace the old Raby Street shopping parade suffered numerous attacks and was subject to remedial action intended to deter vandals while attempting not to signal the escalating problems through heavy duty security measures. These measures had short lived success. The housing in the southern neighbourhoods was also subject to greater damage. The greater problems of south Byker have been the subject of much speculation; for example, as this part of the area was less based on rehoused Byker residents did new residents see it simply as place to live – another council estate and not a place to call home? Decline in this part of the estate reached a head with proposals to demolish a small area called Bolam Coyne in the late 1990s. Such a drastic intervention in a housing estate that has won many national and international plaudits immediately triggered controversy within the estate, within the city and nationally.

Subsequently English Heritage recommended the entire Erskine development for listing, and though after some six years the government has yet to reach a decision on this, planning has gone ahead largely on the basis that listing will happen. Thus a Conservation Plan was commissioned for the estate which identified three key dimensions of cultural heritage significance in Byker, the architectural fabric of the estate, the character this creates and the unique history of its process of development. The City Council also has plans for designating the estate a conservation area. People involved with Byker have also looked outwards; for example, there have been reciprocal visits with the listed Park Hill Estate in Sheffield, a pioneering deck-access housing scheme of a very different architectural character.

## **DISCUSSION**

The research work is on-going at the time of writing so we do not attempt to set out any detailed thoughts about what our findings might be. However, some of the initial indications we have are that there is a real sense of local pride in Byker but that this is not expressed in terms of bricks and mortar and seeing the estate as 'heritage'. Indeed the listing proposal has been perceived by some at least, including local politicians, as a barrier to achieving 'positive' improvements, such as the demolition of Bolam Coyne. The best prospect for changing people's minds about the value of heritage valorisation would be if they could see tangible improvements to the very real problems in Byker coming from this status. None of this is helped by the delays and inertia caused by the government's indecision over listing. In the words of one resident,

'I'm bloody sick of being empowered, I wish someone would get on and do something'.

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