Urban Nightmares and Dystopias or Places of Hope?
Gerry Mooney

Back to ‘Workhouse Social Welfare’?
English Housing Minister Caroline Flint’s suggestion in February 2008 that unemployed council and housing association tenants (collectively termed ‘social housing’ tenants) must make more of an effort to get work, as well as a proposal that new private sector tenants sign ‘commitment contracts’ requiring them to seek work for the privilege of living in a council estate. More recently in July 2008, the Government in London means exclusively, with the council estate. More have come to be associated largely, though by no initial surprise that council tenants are more social welfare policy which, over the period of the enduring legacy in the UK – and across much of the Western world. Her proposal to have council tenants sign ‘commitment contracts’ requiring them to seek work for the privilege of living in a council house smacks of successive generations of social welfare policy which, over the period of the past four hundred years or so – and certainly going back to the Elizabethan poor relief reforms – have sought to focus attention on those deemed to be ‘deserving’.

On stating her position, Flint expressed some initial surprise that council tenants are more likely to be unemployed than other sections of the population and that poverty and unemployment have come to be associated largely, though by no means exclusively, with the council estate. More recently in July 2008, the Government in London launched the Youth Crime Action Plan for England and Wales which promises to further extend the targeting of ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem’ families and the parents of unruly children. Among the targeting of ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem’ families and Wales which promises to further extend the social welfare policy which, over the period of the past four hundred years or so – and certainly going back to the Elizabethan poor relief reforms – have sought to focus attention on those deemed to be ‘deserving’.

This is nothing less than an antipathy to working class cultures and to working class life, an antipathy which is in many respects not that dissimilar from the anti-working class hatred that is central to ‘underclass’ ideologies. Fathers and mothers, not simply ‘benefit’ and ‘dependency’ cultures endure, and in which crime and delinquency apparently flourish, has become a recurring story across swathes of television documentaries and dramas, popular fiction, travelogues and cinema. But, more significantly, over the past decade the ‘moral panic’ that dominated the Tories’ administrations has become increasingly central to New Labour’s electoral and policy making rhetoric. It is this which has provided the backdrop for Flint’s assertions – and which helps to inform a range of more punitive government approaches to crime and indeed to increasing criminalisation.

Territorial Stigmatisation
Flint is but one in a long and growing line of politicians, policy-makers, journalists and commentators who indulge in the popular pastime of territorial stigmatisation:

“Over the last two decades the gap between these worst estates and the rest of the country has grown... It shames us as a nation, it wastes lives and we all have to pay the costs of dependency and social division.” Tony Blair, 1998

“The truth is that council housing is a living tomb. You dare not give up the house because you might never get another, but staying is to be trapped in a ghetto of both place and mind.” Will Hutton, 2007

...there are thousands of people across Britain eking out lives... marked by violence, educational underachievement, unemployment, sickness and disease... At the heart of every thriving city in Britain lies a second city, hidden from visitors’ eyes.” Amelia Hill, 2003

“Ghetto of the workless and the hopeless.” Polly Toynbee, 1989

In these brief extracts there is a shared view across the mainstream political spectrum of the council estate as a place of ‘worklessness’, ‘benefit dependency’, anti-social behaviour and ‘moral decline’ – of hopelessness and despair. These are the kinds of locales increasingly identified by politicians and policy advisors as places where moral breakdown is translated into social breakdown.

This is nothing less than an antipathy to working class cultures and to working class life, an antipathy which is in many respects not that dissimilar from the anti-working class hatred that is central to ‘underclass’ ideologies. Such ideologies construct the impoverished poor as a group cut-off from ‘normality’, as the authors of their own misfortune, evidenced by claims about the disorganised, deviant and depraved lifestyles of those deemed to be part of such an underclass. Dress it up any way you wish, by all means use the term ‘socially excluded’ and there’s no need to make reference to the ‘underclass’. But there’s no escaping that what we have in these brief comments is the continuing prevalence for a place and people stigmatisation that is shaped and influenced by decades of conservative thinking around poverty and disadvantage. In this approach structural factors such as class, racism and state oppression are completely neglected in favour of an attack and demonisation of public welfare as a major factor that underpins the reproduction of poverty, family dysfunctionality and which contributes to wider issues of law and order, community fragmentation and breakdown. We find ourselves in a position now, once again, of having to rebut such ideas and discourses, to reject victim blaming and individualist understandings wherever they emerge.

‘Nightmares’, ‘Dystopias’ and Moral Panics
While the spectre of the council estate plays an important symbolic role in such representations and discourses, the city or the ‘urban’ is an ever present backdrop. In other significant ways this also echoes a long history of anti-urban sentiment which together with anti-poverty discourses have come to be entrenched in different and complex ways to construct particular locales as dystopian and pathological. Steve MacKe’s ‘Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City’, explores ‘The Cinema of Suburban Paranoia’, MacKe neatly considers the important ways in which these visions of an urban nightmare influence mainstream US cinema. These sentiments are echoed in films such as Batman (1989), Bonfire of the Vanities (1990) Grand Canyon (1991), Judgment Night (1993) and Seven (1995), among many others. Here, urban violence, gang warfare and the stock story of apocalyptic urban social breakdown provide the backdrop. But if the racialised discourse is couched in other terms, on the blogosphere, web, and in video home entertainment systems, such sentiments are rarely hidden but given much more of a voice. Many video games (the Grand Theft Auto series or
A Failure of American Liberalism?
The dominance of conservative and right-wing views circumscribing the city, disadvantage, and poverty, is accompanied for MacKay by the collapse of US liberalism. In particular, the Clinton Presidency was held to be particularly culpable of surrendering to conservative ideologies, reflected in the 1994 ‘Crime Control Bill’ and then in 1996 the ‘Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act’. These two acts played to conservative-inspired fears of urban breakdown, dependency and worklessness. But the liberal surrender went beyond the Clinton administration, a ‘victim-blaming discourse’ gripped liberal thinking. This was reflected in “It is not British civilization that ails, the ‘estates’ for someone to infer a normality of suburban US life. All this reminds city’, contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity.”

“…you only have to say the word ‘estates’ for someone to infer a vast amount of meaning from it. It’s a bruise in the form of a word; it hits the nerves that register shame, disgust, fear and, very occasionally, fierce pride.”

Urban Apartheid UK Style
“Council estates are nothing to be scared of unless you are frightened of inequality. There is a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter.”

“Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Particular Kinds of People in Particular Kinds of Places
“Word play association with the term ‘council estate’. Estates mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless petty stupidity, a kind of stir-craziness induced by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity.”

Council estates have long been vilified, likewise estate residents have rarely been viewed in positive terms: ‘sink estates’, ‘problem estates’, ‘deprived’ and ‘depraved’ estates. As in the USA, a great deal has been made of the way in which council estates are bequeathed by the legacy of inter-war British urban planning, of the kind that is increasingly common in social commentary and in policy-making discourses, such as ‘positive thinking’, that suggests all that council tenants need is the right attitude (being more aspirational!) and a more ‘forward looking’ frame of mind.

Council estate living can be tough – especially when living on low incomes and in acute material poverty – but to suggest that there is a council estate frame of mind (my words not hero’s implies something that is not quite the norm; whatever that may be. As we have seen, language is an important part of the battle around poverty, inequality and social justice that legitimises and exacerbates already prefigured prejudices. This means that we need to be continually alert to the ways in which it can be used to ‘other’ particular groups.

A Wall in the Head?
“To be working-class in Britain is also to have a wall in the head, and, since council housing has come to mean housing for the working class (and the non-working class), that wall exists unbroken throughout every estate in the land.”

One of the Cutteslowe Walls: (left) standing, (right) demolished.

Metaphors which work to demonize teenage mothers are also unruly youth.

The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of cultures of poverty arguments, for example), which was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the ‘inner-city’, contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of the suburban middle classes. All this reminds us of the close interconnections between the constructions of particular places and particular kinds of people and populations as problematic.
the negative associations and views that it is “second class” housing.

To return to the idea of a workhouse social policy: As New Labour becomes increasingly more punitive around benefit entitlements, with recently announced plans25 to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, such as tidying parks, at a rate of £1.70 per hour! And with council tenants now being told by Caroline Flint that their tenancy may depend on them taking up paid employment, policing, regulating and disciplining poor people is increasingly the order of the day.

Landscapes of Class

...these entrenched quarters of misery have ‘made a name’ for themselves as repositories of all the ills of the age, places to be shunned, feared and deprecated. It matters little that the discourses of demonisation that have mushroomed about them often have tenuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such negatively motivated areas of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants.”...Lac Wacquant, ‘Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium’

The “urban outcasts”31 of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff of myth, of ridicule but also of vicious class hatred. As such the class-basis of these discourses are somewhat neglected by both Macek and Hanley. The construction and representation of particular places as problems does not happen in isolation from the wider class relations which permeate society and which underpin right-wing and conservative ways of thinking (as well as shaping some of the ‘left’ of centre discourses highlighted here).

The idea of the ‘ghetto poor’32 or ‘slum poor’ has a long and pernicious history which they are constituted are not seen to warrant identities and cultures and the processes through which US liberals couched their embracing of euphemisms reminds us again of the ways in which US liberals couch their embracing of euphemisms for problem people. The use of such recalcitrants, as in some ways less adaptable and poor and disadvantaged groups are portrayed as territorially ‘test’ the surface is a pathological view of working class life. As Chris Haylett has forcefully argued:

“The issue then, is not so much the existence of working-class conditions (of hardship, exploitation and so on) as the particular ways in which they are problematised and the solutions attendant upon these ways of thinking. Put bluntly, where working-class identities and cultures and the processes through which they are constituted are not seen to warrant debate, target problems easily become targeted lives, little more than the adjuncts of rationalistic theory and policy-making. It would seem that this elision, practiced by politicians and theorists alike, is partly about a troubled approach to relationships between class and culture. Working-class cultures are positioned at the apex of those troubles, as problematic, in need and usually ‘in receipt’ but not capable of giving or teaching anything of worth to dominant centres of value (public space, political institutions, middle-class ways of being).”...Hanley holds on to the idea that council estates can be places that can offer hope and they can be places of resistance. Indeed, if council housing were the uniformly appallingly places they are thought to be, why have many tenants fought and voted against council stock transfer? Council housing has played a significant historic role in housing the housing needs of millions of people in the UK. What is needed now is a vast investment in remaking council housing, not its complete and utter destruction – but this is also tied to a wider commitment to re-establishing welfare and social need as a right, not a punishment! This, of course, would have to include the reintroduction of the basic democratic mechanisms of local government that have also been eroded. As Macek shows in the context of the contemporary United States, free market policies have failed. In the face of the celebration of the market by New Labour, such ‘solutions’ are also failing here in the UK.

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Notes

3. Many benefits and social policies are more complicated than they used to be, having an array of eligibility criteria and conditions attached to them. Drug users risk benefit cuts. Jobcentre staff will be able to withhold cash and force claimants to attend treatment programmes, The Observer, Sunday July 20, 2008 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jul/20/drugspolicy.welfare?gusrc=rss&feed=uknews
4. The Blair government created 3,322 new criminal offences in nine-years from starting office in May 1997, one for almost every day it had been in power and twice the rate of the previous Tory administration. “Blair’s ‘flexenized law making’; a new offence for every day spent in office”, The Independent, Nigel Morris, Wednesday, 16 August 2006.
11. The nature of paid employment today is that benefits workers are themselves are in receipt of benefits In the face of mass privatisations of sections of the Department for Work and Pensions, the government’s functions of Jobcentres, Mark Serwotka of the Public and Commercial Services union was reported in the Guardian as saying: “We have far too many members administering government benefits that they also have to claim just to scrape together a living...” The Guardian, Tuesday February 17, 2004 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/feb/17/uk.whitleall
24. As Unison declined in 1999: the “Scottish Executive is budgeting for further real cuts in public investment in social housing”, and “Past under-investment means there is a massive repayments backlog”. http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/response/ghosting.html
25. Hanley, p.11.
27. Hanley, p.4.