# The Housing Question Redux

## Neil Gray

**Militant Modernism**
Owen Hatherley
Zero Books, 2009
978-1-84694-176-4

**Where the Other Half Lives:**
**Lower Income Housing in Neoliberal World**
Glynn, Sarah (ed)
Pluto Press, 2009
978-0-74532-857-7

*Right*: Hutchesontown C: The Gorbals

Public housing is in a period of major decline. Long-term disinvestment – associated with an ideological shift towards the neo-liberal shibboleths of something called 'the market', fetishised as an abstract, uncontrollable, autonomous force – and private property have rendered the construction of new public housing virtually unthinkable at the level of governance. Housing costs are an ever-present concern, yet its socio-political relevance is often overlooked – even as housing costs, as a percentage of median income, have increased exponentially[1]. The sub-prime mortgage crisis, and its disastrous repercussions in the global economy, put housing on the map again, but the reaction of neo-liberal governance has only been to deepen the ideology that caused the crisis in the first place.

In 1979, council housing represented just under a third of all Britain's housing stock (Glynn p.25), and in Scotland, over half the population once lived in homes provided by the public sector (Glynn p.27). The regressive defamation of this everyday reality, and the naturalisation of home ownership as first preference in housing relates to a state-sponsored ideological offensive of major proportions. A recent article by Maya Gonzalez for *Endnotes*[2] explains how the 'preference' for home-ownership in the US was engineered by fiscal restructuring of the state in the 1930s. By the middle of the decade, the federal government had set up the mechanisms for the promotion of national economic growth through a flexible market for consumer credit. Credit both stabilised the economy and fuelled debt-driven economic expansion; a credit revolution that actively promoted economic growth based on the mass production and consumption of commodities. Central to the reproduction of labour-power, housing was *the* key commodity. New mortgage guarantees insured private lenders against loss, and established the use of long-term mortgages: the Federal Housing Association mortgage insurance programs established in the National Housing Act of 1934, and the Veterans Administration mortgage guarantee programs of 1944 privileged the expansion of the markets for home-improvement and for privately owned homes in the US[3]. These financial arrangements effectively entrenched the kind of debt-financing that helped derail public housing, prioritise private home ownership, and stimulate the commodity-economy. These policies of debt-driven expansion finally imploded in the sub-prime mortgage crisis.

In the UK, a key issue for Thatcher's success in the Conservative election campaign of 1979 was the sale of council houses. The 'Right to Buy' scheme gave massive discounts for long-term council tenants to buy their rented properties, at the same time as it offered the promise of social mobility and a foot on the property ladder. By offering huge discounts on council homes, the state subsidised the sale of the better part of council housing stock in order to break up Labour-dominated estates and establish a distinct private sphere through which the values of the consumer/citizen could be established in working-class estates[4]. The sale of council housing was a key factor in the housing speculation that followed: a massive transfer of wealth from the public to the private domain. Building new homes for rent made no sense for councils if they could just be bought up on the cheap through 'right to buy'. Loss of rent revenues through reduction of stock also impacted heavily on the maintenance of remaining council homes. Moreover, any money gained from sales was ring-fenced to pay off local housing debt. Years of disinvestment and ghettoisation have resulted in a negative cycle of stigmatisation with council housing routinely viewed as housing of last resort[5]. To the despair of the radical left, owner-occupation since the late 1980s has seemed a more assured way of improving many individuals' standard of living than collective action. The sale of council housing is one of the most important material conditions underlying the advance of individualism, consumerism and neo-liberal ideology in the past two decades.

The Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010 represented another massive assault on social housing. The government announced a budget cut for the construction of affordable homes over the next four years of nearly 50%, from £8.4 billion to £4.5 billion[6]. Meanwhile, the system for managing council housing financing – the Housing Revenue Account subsidy system – is set to be replaced with an undisclosed 'self-financing' arrangement. Funding for a promised 150,000 new 'social' homes, it is proposed, could be raised by allowing Housing Associations to charge their tenants a new 'Affordable Rent' tenancy at 80% of the market rate. The principal of secure tenancies is also under threat. For new tenants, Government will give Councils and Housing associations powers to grant 'fixed-term tenancies' with a minimum time period of two years, abolishing the right to existing secure or assured lifetime tenancies. Government is also consulting on whether existing tenants should continue the right to a lifetime tenancy if they move. Social polarisation will be further cemented by allocating on the basis of those who are, "the most vulnerable in society and those who need it most", reinforcing existing policy and further tarnishing the principle of social housing for all[7]. Meanwhile, Government proposes to reduce Housing Benefit by 10% for job seekers who have been out of work for more than 12 months. Unemployed people will have to make up the rent shortfall from the £65 they get on Job Seekers Allowance, even as almost half of those on Local Housing Allowance (for those renting privately) are already £100 a month short of what they need to pay the rent[8].

Public and social housing is being attacked like never before, and much of it is justified by a campaign of vilification which judges the people who live in public housing, just as harshly as the public housing itself. *Militant Modernism,* by Owen Hatherley, and *Where the Other Half Lives*: *Lower Income Housing in a Neoliberal World*, edited by Sarah Glynn, however affirm the benefits of public housing in quite different ways, but in ways that help provide a critical, progressive conjuncture if we think them both at once. At a time when the dogma of 'no alternative' is a neo-liberal commonplace – despite signs everywhere of that creed's decadence – Hatherley's excavation of 'Socialist Modernism' and Glynn *et al's* affirmation of collective housing struggle offer primers for a different kind of future. *Militant Modernism* ranges widely, delivering perceptive insights across the historical avant-gardes, popular culture, Russian sci-fi modernism, Disurbanism, the 'SexPol' of William Reich, Brechtian aesthetics, and more besides. *Where the Other Half Lives* meanwhile, interrogates the present state of public housing internationally by way of varied contributions from France, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the US. For the purposes of this review, I want to concentrate on those elements in each book which consider housing and urban questions in the UK.

### Militant Modernism

Owen Hatherley's *Militant Modernism* attempts to resuscitate a radical modernism from its ossification within academia, the heritage industry, and the jaded discourses of 'leftism'. Appearing as part of the *Zero Books* series, the title makes good on the imprint's manifesto claim that "another kind of discourse – intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist – is not only possible: it is already flourishing". A dedication to the Southampton City Council Architects Department, and a quote from John Ruskin's *A Defence of the Idealists* (1853), frames the eclectic, but critical tone of a wide-ranging excavation of Utopia from the "futures ruins" – those architectural relics of modernism still extant in urban life.

Hatherley asks if the modernist impulse to 'erase the traces' – to destroy in order to create – can revive a once radical modernism that would certainly reject current attempts to replicate or 'preserve' aspects of its original intentions. Modernist conservation organisations like DOCOMOMO[9], he argues, have granted Modernism museum status, but in doing so they have surrendered the radical heritage of modernism. As Pawley contends, this tendency meekly accepts Modernism's "absorption into the art-historical classification system as a style…converting their once proud revolutionary instruments back into monuments for the delectation of the masses alongside the palaces of the ancient regime…" (p.5-6). Hatherley's argument, however, follows Walter Benjamin, whose "destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and space is stronger than any hatred" (Cited, p.4). Benjamin's desire to 'live without traces', manifested his desire to supersede the historical accretion of decadent bourgeois culture superbly evoked in the re-purposed image of Klee's 'Angel of History'[10]. His "dialectical, double-edged" acumen, aimed to blast open the capitalist dream world, with its proliferation of phantasmagorical commodities, "into an entirely new world; one shaped by the promises of the dream itself" (p.4). For the avant-garde modernisms, as for Benjamin, 'erasing the traces' meant "outrunning the old world before it has the chance to catch up with you" (p.5). For Hatherley, modernism had no interest in continuity: the shift from 19th century encrustation to the stark, unfinished concrete wall was "brutally short and sharp"; not merely progression, but "an interruption, a rupture, a break with the continuum altogether…" (p.6)

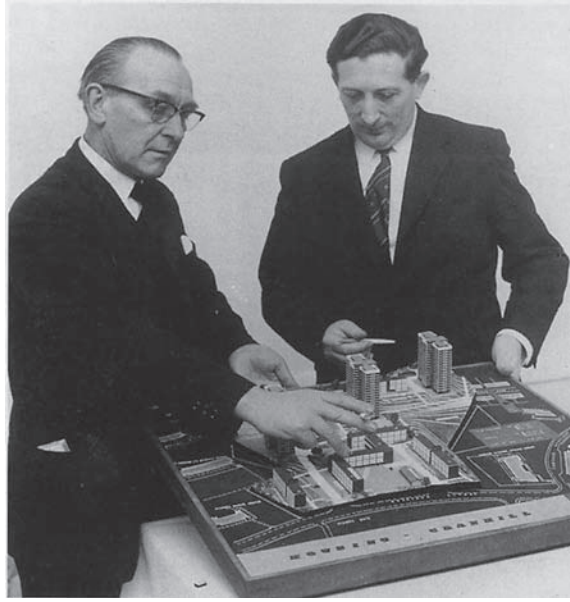
*Militant Modernism* was written with the coda "that the Left Modernisms of the 20th century

continue to be *useful*: a potential index of ideas, successful or failed, tried, untried or broken on the wheel of the market or the state" (p.13). Even in their ruinous state, suggests Hatherley, they offer "spectral blueprints" (p.126): alternatives to the neoliberal dogma that 'there is no alternative'. Hatherley's 'nostalgia for the future' resides in his reflection on modernist architecture as the radical remainder of the more progressive aspects of social democracy: the once futuristic walkways, precincts and high-rises of modernism, even in their dilapidation, engender a critique of the conservatism, and inequality reproduced through contemporary planning and architecture. What remains of Council Housing and the NHS are the vestiges of that 'Eldorado for the Working-Class' envisioned by Aneurin Bevan and others. For Hatherley, these contested remains of modernism represent an epochal moment when the working-class got ideas above their station. The worth of his *untimely* thesis lies in its unfashionable determination to consider the more radical moments of modernism dialectically. With a nod to Brecht and Eisler, he points us 'Forwards! Not Forgetting'.

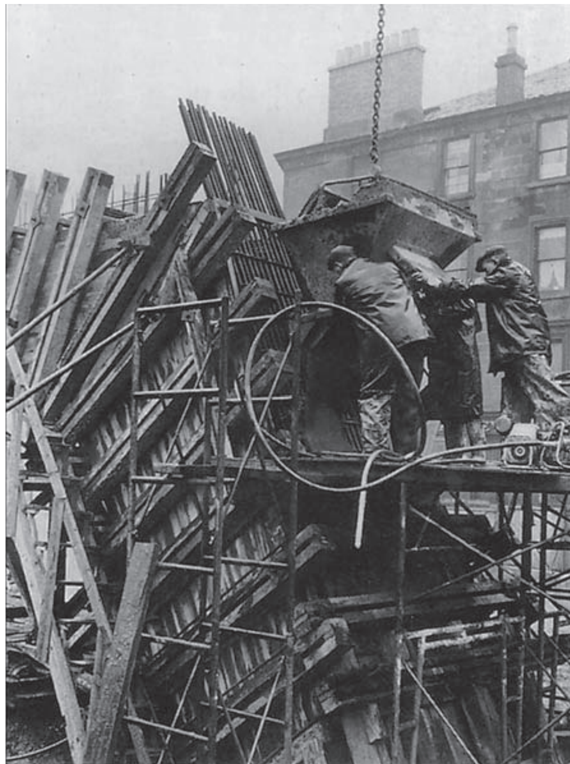
When the Situationst Internationale (SI), developed the theory of the *dérive* ("a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society; a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences"[11]), they updated techniques from the Surrealists, and cultivated an urban critical praxis as a means to critique the Haussmanisation of Paris and the *ideology* of urbanism[12]. They thus sought out the labyrinthian alleyways of old Paris where Hausmann's hand had no dominion; where odd corners, the working-class, and worn surfaces could still afford to exist. But, for Hatherley, the SI were prone to nostalgia, and for him the modern *dérive*, in a UK context, would have to take place among the concrete walkways of the 1960s (p.11), rather than the quaint streets of Victoriana, which might be the perverse analogue to those Parisian zones investigated by the SI. The contention is debatable: the *dérive* is a mode of experimental critical enquiry, and the point is surely that *everything* must come under critique in a society dominated by capitalist relations. However, Hatherley's argument generates a stimulating eulogy to the *New Brutalism* – a harsh architectural interlude within modernism – that presents a hypothesis which is original and provocative.

Brutalist architecture took its name from the French term *breton brut*: raw reinforced concrete, cast in rough, unfinished form; while the term *The New Brutalism* derives from a Reyner Banham book on the architectural movement. The buildings of New Brutalism fetishised "hardness, dynamism, scale and rough edges" (p.17), and were informed by the advanced urban industrial landscapes of the UK; the most developed industrial nation in the 19th century. The return to pre-industrial arcadia, evoked in the phrase 'An Englishman's Home is his Castle' is both patriarchal absurdity, and retro-feudal myth. As Hatherley notes, a 'castle' intimates a functionalist fortress, not a Mock-Tudor home in suburbia. A closer analogue is a high-rise modernist housing estate like Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar, London. Hatherley is at pains to stress that there is no pristine return. Britain's role in the brutal industrial revolution made it an "industrial island machine" (Cited, p.20) whose Edenic contact with 'the soil' was irrevocably ruptured. Vorticism, which shared ideas with cubism and futurism in the mid-1910s, understood this new reality well, setting itself apart from the Futurists' romantic veneration of the machine age (developed from the point of view of 'primitive' Italian rural life). Vorticism, in contrast, had been "warped, 'modified' by the presence of the machine from birth" (p.23). Wyndham Lewis's famous riposte to the Italian Futurist, Marinetti, captures this particular strain well: "you are always on about these driving belts, you are always exploding about internal combustion. We've had machines in England for donkey's years, they're no novelty to *us*" (p.24).

While Vorticism failed to stamp its presence on everyday life, effectively wrapping up with the onset of World War I, the *New Brutalism* was



*Top left:* Councillor David Gibson, Housing Committee Convenor of Glasgow Corporation (left) and George Bowie, Chief Architect of Crudens Ltd.



*Bottom left:* Hutchesontown C, concrete pouring, main columns.

a product of a Social Democratic institution (London's metropolitan government in its changing guises: LCC, GLC) and had a chance to influence the quotidian through (limited) architectural commissions. *New Brutalism* regarded itself as the *real* fulfillment of modernism's initial radical impulses, and in tracts like 'Criteria for Mass Housing' opposed itself to the established practice of the 'classical' modernists of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). 'Angry young London architects', like Alison and Peter Smithson, were immersed in the problem of producing architecture of everyday use-value for the proletariat, at the same time as they pursued 'shocking' avant-garde techniques in 'bloody minded' architectural form. Concrete manifestations of the Smithson's theory of 'streets in the sky' were realised in the Golden Lane project, and the Robin Hood Gardens estate. They saw themselves as, "building for the socialist dream, which is something different from complying with a programme written by the socialist state" (p33). For Hatherley, Brutalism was defined in some relation to the pop, sex, and glamour of its times. In one memorable passage, Hatherley pays homage to Pulp's "ten minute fantasia", 'Sheffield: Sex City', in which the concrete lines and walkways of Park Hill are imbued with a sense of mesmeric eroticism, finally climaxing in a collective orgasm on Park Hill at 4.13 am (p.37). The Barbican complex, meanwhile, is "as mysterious and attractive as a JG Ballard heroine" (p.34), while Eros House is noted as a reminder of the "strangely lubricious" (p.36) tone that creeps into the aesthetic of Brutalism. JG Ballard's *Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash,* and *Concrete Island* have covered similar territory before, but Hatherley's account adds a particularly *architectural* slant to the popular, everyday conjuncture of flesh and concrete, adding a cultural and aesthetic dimension largely absent from accounts of public housing.

For Hatherley, the remaing 'cities in the sky' are persistent vestiges of socialist modernism, a modernism now being dismantled at frightening speed through urban development projects that routinely mask the real class content of gentrification through the utilitarian euphemism of 'regeneration'. Strangely, for a polemic so firmly wedded to notions of radical rupture ('erasing the traces') the concept of *creative destruction*, the Schumpetarian mantra for neoliberal modes of devaluation and 'renewal', appears only latterly. Even when this rhetoric was firmly wedded to municipal socialism, as with Glasgow in the 1960s (the 'shock city' of the modernist housing revolution), the process and result was ambivalent to say the least. When David Gibson, Glasgow's post-war 'housing crusader' ("arguably the most remarkable of Western Europe's post-war municipal housing leaders"[13]), worked with engineer Lewis Cross to develop a programme of house building in Glasgow, their "extreme concern for output" was driven by the maximisation of 'productivity'. They eagerly embraced 'package-deal' housing contracts in a process of ever diminishing returns in terms of quality. In the 1960s, under their leadership, high-rise flats made up nearly 75% of all completions compared to less than 10% in all other post-war years: this period marked "the most concentrated multi-storey drive experienced by any city in the UK"[14]. Cross's crude utility was notorious. One planner said of him: "He had no conscience, no soul, no heart – just a machine for producing numbers!"[15]. Of course, there was a context for this 'no-holds-barred' productivity. The post-war housing crisis risked causing major social unrest. The 'numbers game' was fought out by both major parties in electoral competition. As well as easing working-class discontent in a period of near full employment, investment in public housing (reproduction) eased upward pressure on wage-bargaining at the level of production[16].

These arguments shouldn't detract from some of the gains that were made in eradicating the worst of tenement slum housing and preventing more overspill to the 'new towns', but a one-sided defence of socialist modernism borne from its most avant-garde tendencies fails to account for the rather more banal conditions of most post-war public housing. Meanwhile, only latterly does Hatherley mention the working-class people who live in the kind of blocks he lauds. He is right to note that tenants frequently want to stay in council flats, despite virulent campaigns of defamation waged on public housing. But his argument that tenants like the "views and the open space" (p.42) is insufficient even if it does express a moment of truth that detractors rarely acknowledge. One flat in a block may be suffused with light, and benefit from fantastic views; another in the same block might lie in the shadow of the building, be prone to damp, and have a less than glorious perspective. Depending on what is being allocated, in a vastly reduced market, it's a bit of a lottery. Another explanation might be that those people who want to remain in public housing are often being offered an *even worse* option in 'stock transfer' regeneration packages. Above all, public housing remains the cheapest option[17], and wanting to remain in council housing is a thoroughly pragmatic and common-sense decision. The widespread rejection of 'stock transfer' from Council Housing to Housing Associations across the UK has shown that tenants have a healthy distrust of hyperbolic 'regeneration' rhetoric[18].

Hatherleys' tribute to militant modernism provides a stirring counter-narrative to stigmatizing discourses, but at times his argument founders on an outlook that privileges the aesthetic over a deeper analysis of the role of working-class antagonism in securing public housing, and the constitutive role of economics in determining outcomes in the built environment. As Frederic Jameson once observed, "Of all the arts, architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship" [19]. For a book about 'socialist modernism', it is surprising how little discussion of capital there is – even accounting for an understandable rejection of vulgar Marxian economics. While Hatherley's book sheds new light on many cultural aspects of militant modernism,

Sarah Glynn *et al's* substantive and empirical account of public housing in *Where The Other Half Lives* helps fill in some of the aporias in his account. *Where The Other Half Lives* can't match the imaginative vigour of *Militant Modernism*, but it does benefit from situating itself very much from within the perspective of collective class struggle in housing.

## Everyday Modernism

"Public ownership allowed for a municipal form of collective control, took both the land and housing out of the property market, boosted the role of elected local councils and provided a decent home at affordable rents for more than a third of the population by the late 1970s, dramatically reducing the social power of capital and the disciplinary role of rents and mortgages in the labour market.
– Stuart Hodkinson[20]

Hodkinson's appraisal of public housing as part of a great account of housing privatisation in *Where The Other Half Lives* does a good job of summarising its positive role in countering the tyranny of private rent, even if ambivalence remains, for this author at least, over "the role of elected local councils" in the ownership and management of public housing. As well as a bulwark against rent hikes, municipal housing has also been an "expedient service", obfuscating the failings of the private market. Glynn cites Peter Malpass who has argued that state intervention in council housing has played a significant *supporting role* for the private sector by supplying needs not met by the market, securing government contracts for the construction industry, and withdrawing when housing construction becomes more profitable for the private sector (p.23-24). Nevertheless, Hodkinson's summary of the social *benefits* of public housing provides an important rejoinder to a dominant narrative of stigmatisation. As Glynn observes, an emphasis on the continuity of capitalist control of the housing market risks obscuring the role of working class struggle in securing affordable homes. She cites a Community Development Project report in 1976 which contrasted "the political struggle of the working class to establish a socialised form of housing which recognised the right of everyone to a decent house at a reasonable cost", to the political 'Right' who "have always tried to contain development of council housing by narrowly defining the purposes for which it is to be provided, and creating an alternative to it more closely related to their interests" (p.24).

While Hatherley's version of militant modernism tends to reify the 'roles' of specialists in modernist housing (architects, planners, artists, film-makers, etc), *Where the Other Half Lives* emphasises the role of collective working-class agency in obtaining decent, affordable housing. This agency was borne from necessity. In 19th century *laissez-faire* capitalism, the ruling classes believed it was neither right nor necessary to intervene in housing markets. Until after World War I, nine out of ten households rented their home from private landlords, and rack-renting and slum conditions were endemic. By 1917, as the Scottish Royal Commission acknowledged, there was more than enough pre-war evidence to show "the inability of private enterprise to provide houses for the working-class". All of this is widely known, and the slum conditions of the period have been detailed extensively. More important is the antagonistic response of the working-class to these conditions, and the reaction this elicited from government. The Industrial Unrest Commission of 1917, for instance, recorded that slum housing had become an important source of social tension; while the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland conceded that, "Before the war, the demand for better housing had become articulate; to-day, after three years of war, it is too insistent to be safely disregarded any longer" (p.15-17).

The 'threat from below', expressed in powerful tenant protests in the 1910s, lay not only in their immediate impact but in their relationship with an increasingly powerful labour movement. Just as history demonstrates the inability of the

market to provide decent housing for a large section of population, it also shows that tenants' organisations have been pivotal in securing better housing and rent control legislation. The Glasgow rent strike of 1915 is a celebrated example, which Glynn gives detailed attention (p.283-290). The rent strike arose from profiteering rent rises during the war. As workers crowded into Glasgow to take up jobs in munitions factories and engineering and shipbuilding works, housing supply became scarce and overcrowded. Private landlords capitalised on this situation by raising the rents. The resultant anger of tenants was organised through work-gate meetings and through groups of women in the tenements who fought evictions, went on rent strike, and organised mass demonstrations. A government inquiry was set up, but the landlords' response was to *raise* the rents again, and to take eighteen tenants to small debt court. A demonstration of thousands, including all the men from five shipyards and an ordnance works, threatened a general strike and the case was dropped. With strikers still out after eight days, the government conceded and froze rents at pre-war levels.

Housing campaigners continued to apply pressure on government at the same time as workers fought for better conditions. By 1919, the threat of revolution, if not revolution itself, gave rise to the Government bringing tanks and soldiers to George Square in order to quell workers' demonstrations (backed by widespread strike action) for a shorter working week. When Lloyd George debated the 1919 Housing Bill in Cabinet, he argued: "Even if it cost a £100 million pounds, what was that compared to the stability of the state" (p.287). Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Local Government Board told the House of Commons, "the money we are going to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution" (ibid). From the point of view of government and business, investment in housing was necessary to defuse political agitation, but the reforms wrung out of the government in the Housing Acts of 1919 and 1924 were hugely significant gains nonetheless. Threat proved itself. As Glynn notes, there was also a growing awareness on 'Red Clydeside' that rent would have to be found from wages. Questions of reproduction were being linked directly with those of production, with women playing a decisive role in working-class composition at the time. As surplus capital is increasingly invested in urban landscapes rather than industry and manufacturing, the lessons of the 1915 Rent Strike at a reproductive as well as productive level are extremely prescient today.

For Glynn, at the heart of today's housing crisis lies "the prioritisation of the house as investment rather than as home, that is, of its exchange value over its use value"[21]. Speculation in housing, assisted by decades of deregulation in banks and building societies, alongside the distribution of 'soft' mortgage deals, has led to enormous price rises, and until recently, the promise of high returns. This in turn led to more speculative activity, further exacerbating the problem of spiralling rents. However, as Glynn points out – and as the differing US and UK contexts briefly outlined in the introduction show – there is nothing inherently natural about home-ownership. Swedes, Germans, Swiss and Dutch people of all classes still live in good quality public housing, while in the UK many people have chosen to live in public housing for a range of reasons including security of tenure, affordability and size of home. However, with the onset of Thatcherism, private home ownership began to dominate, with council housing increasingly under-funded and stigmatised, just as private home ownership was both subsidised and eulogised through right-to-buy. Disinvestment and poor management have since resulted in council housing that has come to be seen as a residual second choice for those unable to afford their own home (p.26). As Glynn notes, such systemic inequalities are crudely ignored in the resultant false choice between degenerated council housing and regenerated 'social' housing.

Glynn's purview suggests other histories unrealised. In the post World War II reconstruction, Aneurin Bevan, as Health Minister in charge of Housing, offered a "glimpse of a socialist vision" – housing as a universal public service, just like the National Health Service (p.20-21). Bevan's redefinition of the Housing Act in 1949 removed "for the Working Classes" from the Act's title, and his conception of housing, located firmly within Labourite Keynesian principles of equitable redistribution, was one where good quality homes in mixed communities would be built by local authorities for people of all backgrounds. Bevan failed to nationalise housing, but he did ensure that four-fifths of the country's new homes were provided by Local Authorities at a quality standard still recognised today (p.22-23). Post-war economic restraints, the prioritisation of foreign policy and defence, and the scale of damage done to Britain's housing stock during World War II, meant that Bevan's hopes for quality universal housing provision were quashed by the realpolitik of the 'numbers game'. But the scale of ambition in his proposals are striking in comparison to contemporary demands for the 'Fourth Option' in housing (direct investment as an alternative to the three options of 'stock 'transfer' of council housing to Housing Associations, PFI schemes, and control by Arms Length Management Organisations[22]).

In fairness, the less than inspiring demand for a 'Fourth Option' is an index of the current status of Council Housing amongst a raft of public-private options – signified, in the parlance of 'regeneration', by 'social' not 'public' housing – that threaten to engulf public housing in a wave of privatisation. These institutional co-ordinates are, of course, as much a heritage of 'the Left' as they are of 'the Right', as witnessed by the catalytic role the Labour Party have played in prosecuting neoliberalism. In this context, Glynn's criticism of neoliberalism, central to her overall argument, is in certain respects flawed. For instance, she argues that, "Neoliberalism, as the name implies, is based on a return to the ideas of free-market liberalism that predominated before the development of the welfare state and the Keynesian mixed economy" (p.9). Further, she asserts that neoliberalism, "dismantling the regulatory and distributive structures of the Keynesian mixed economy" (p.38), is diametrically opposed to anything that interferes with capital accumulation. However, it is important to realise that neoliberalism is profoundly *assisted* by the state, which under neoliberal conditions pro-actively regulates the planning and institutional landscape *on behalf* of neoliberal accumulation strategies.

As Foucault insisted, power is *productive*. Cuts in state budgets are also opportunities for capitalist growth in former state sectors. It would be better to theorise the neoliberal state, along with Hardt and Negri, as "not really a regime of unregulated capital, but rather a form of state regulation that best facilitates the global movements and profits of capital"[23]. Neil Smith usefully elaborates on this point, framing the roots of neoliberalism in the 18th century liberal assumptions of Locke and Smith – e.g. the free exercise of individual self-interest leads to the optimal collective social good, private property is the foundation of this self-interest, free market exchange is its ideal vehicle. Twentieth century US liberalism (Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, JF Kennedy), emphasising social compensation to counter the excesses of capitalism, was not so much a misnomer as a re-appropriation of liberal terms in an attempt to *regulate* their sway, but by no means to break their original axioms. Contemporary neoliberalism "represents a significant return to the original axioms of liberalism" but this time galvanised by 20th century liberalism, resulting in "an

unprecedented mobilisation not just of national state power but of state power organised and exercised at different geographical scales"[24]. Henri Lefebvre's conception of the State Mode of Production (SMP) is also useful here. For Lefebvre, the SMP is intimately bound up with state productivism, whereby the state assumes responsibility for ensuring capitalist growth. The SMP thus provides a means to understand the continuity of capitalism through Western liberal democratic models such as social democracy, Fordism and Keynesianism. Through the SMP, social democratic forms are directly inscribed into the state form, serving as a crucial fulcrum and legitimising tool for state productivism[25]. But as Benjamin Noys recently wrote, we miss the point if we simply say that neoliberalism is as statist as other governmental forms. Drawing on Foucault, he argues that, "the necessity is to analyse how neoliberalism creates a new form of governmentality in which the state performs a different function: permeating society to subject it to the economic". In the words of Foucault, Neoliberalism intervenes on society so that competitive mechanisms "play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society and by intervening in this way its objective will become possible, that is to say, a general regulation of the society by the market". Thus we move from "a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state."[26]

The state thus needs to be conceptualised as a demoted but *active partner* in neoliberal accumulation strategies, and this necessitates a more critical position to social democracy than Glynn allows. This has serious consequences for the way change is conceptualised. As Glynn acknowledges, one of the main reasons for the atrophying condition of council housing in the UK has been grass-roots reliance on the Labour Party, with its emphasis on parliamentary socialism. This adherence to the Labour Party and the state is in contrast to many European socialists who were more wary of state involvement, setting up independent tenants organisations to advance their claims (p.29). The current situation in the UK, where tenants sit on Housing Association committees with the landlords, is indicative of a situation where tenants have been fully incorporated into the management structures of private companies, surrendering whatever independence they had into the bargain[27]. While Glynn is deeply critical of these developments, an inadequate theorisation of the complicity of social democracy in the neoliberal conjuncture puts her at risk of falling behind her own analysis, and eliding a self-critical conception of where the new methodologies for radical housing change may arise. However, despite these concerns, or perhaps even because of them, Glynn *et al's* contribution provides an excellent overview of the housing debate as it currently stands.

## Summary

In the introduction to the recent collection of writings by the Situationist International (SI) – *The Situationists and the City* – Tom McDonough argues that what is important about the SI is not the plans they produced in their 'architectural interlude' (1957-62), but their critique of urbanism and their challenge to its very premises and ways of thinking. Resisting the viewpoint that the SI had some interesting ideas but rarely put them into practice, McDonough suggests that the most compelling moments of SI theory are precisely those ideas which express a radical resistance to incorporation and assimilation into the mainstream histories of the 20th century and the historical neo-avant-gardes[28]. Borrowing heavily from Henri Lefebvre, the SI set about a radical critique of functionalism and modernisation in planning and architecture. Urbanism was seen as the *very technology of separation*, and modernist architecture, for them, lay somewhere between the barrack and the prison. As Guy Debord wrote in 1967, "The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for moulding its own territory, which constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this

*Previous page and left*: Photographs by Colin Woon from the Campaign To Save Robin Hood Gardens.

project. Urbanism – 'city planning' – is capitalism's method for taking over the natural and human environment"[29].

Even if a "certain utopian irresolution" (McDonough p.16) hung over the SI project of unitary urbanism, their critique of functionalist planning as a concrete expression of the hierarchical organisation of advanced late capitalism casts a long shadow over the housing question as a discrete and specialist mode of inquiry. Hatherley, in a positive review of Glynn's book, hints at a possible resolution when he asks if we can ever regard council housing as *our* architecture, or rather, "an architecture we defend as best we can for want of something better"[30]. Defending council housing, just like defending all those other state institutions currently being attacked by 'The Cuts', risks obscuring all the cuts that have preceded the current ones, and hiding the incorporation of social democracy into Fordist/Keynesian modes of state productivism on behalf of capital. What we defend has already been cut, and this history, and those who sanctioned it, must be recognised. However, Hatherley's point leads us to certain unavoidable realities. We defend Council Housing, education ("the sausage factory"[31]), the NHS, welfare provision, transport services, etc, because of solidarity, and because if we don't the options are even worse. But in doing so we risk delimiting the parameters of struggle – only talking about what the telly talks about. These 'minimum' demands are necessary, and Glynn's book lays some of them out very well, but without 'maximum' demands (the radical construction of a new world) the claims of the present risk being defined by the limited parameters of a circumscribed past.

The SI have received sustained critique over the years[32], but their refusal of utopian project building, following Marx's aversion to formulating abstract schemes within capitalist relations, led them to a position whereby revolution was viewed as the most exemplary critique of human geography; and the riot the most refined critique of urbanism (p.28-29). If that sounds implausible in these austere times, it's worth remembering – as Glynn's history of council housing shows – that many of the reforms of the past have emerged from the existence, or threat, of revolutionary activity backed by sizeable working-class movements.

### Notes

1 "In the late nineteenth century the typical mortgage taken out by a skilled worker would take ten to twelve years to pay off. Now the standard length of a mortgage is twenty-five to thirty years". 'The Housing Question', *Aufheben magazine*, #13, 2005: http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-13-2005/the-housing-question

2 This brief summary can do little justice to an excellent article. Gonzalez, Maya, 'Notes on the New Housing Question: Home Ownership, Credit and Reproduction in the US Post-war Economy', *Endnotes*, # 2, April, 2010: Misery and the Value Form: http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/3

3 See the graph in Gonzalez's article for an indication of the sharp incline in homeownership rates after these housing credit was made widely available. Ibid.

4 For a good overview of housing in the UK context, see, 'The Housing Question', *Aufheben magazine*, #13, 2005: http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-13-2005/the-housing-question

5 Ibid.

6 Gillman, Blake. *Inside Housing*, 27th October, 2010. http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/housing-management/spending-review-is-assault-on-tenants/6512224.article

7 For a summary of the proposed changes, see, Dept for Communities and Local Govt, 22nd November 2010, 'Local decisions: a fairer future for social housing'. http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/1775586.pdf

8 Stop Cuts – Invest in Council Housing, Defend Council Housing Briefing, August, 2010. http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/

9 International Committee for the Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modernist Movement (DOCOMOMO).

10 See 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, Pimlico, 1999.

11 See, http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/1.definitions.htm

12 "The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for molding its own territory, which constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this project. Urbanism – 'city planning' – is capitalism's method for taking over the natural and human environment. Following its logical development toward total domination, capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into its own particular décor".
Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone books, p.121.

13 Glendinning, Miles and Muthesius, Stefan, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland,* Yale University Press, 1994, p.220

14 Ibid, p.224.

15 Ibid, p.226.

16 'The Housing Question', *Aufheben magazine*, #13, 2005: http://libcom.org/library/aufheben/aufheben-13-2005/the-housing-question

17 View comparative graph between local authority and Housing Association rents, 2001-2008. http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/ihstory.aspx?storycode=6508126

18 Defend Council Housing website. http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/dch_novotes.cfm

19 Jameson, Frederic, *The Cultural logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, p.5.

20 Hodkinson, Stuart, 'From Popular Capitalism to Third-Way Modernisation: The Example of Leeds, England', in, Glynn, Sarah (ed), *Where the Other Half Lives: Lower Income Housing in a Neoliberal World*, Pluto Press, 2009, p.99.

21 Glynn, Sarah (ed), *Where the Other Half Lives: Lower Income Housing in Neoliberal World*, Pluto Press, 2009, p.40

22 See Defend Council Housing website: http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/dch_stockoptions.cfm

23 Hardt, M and Negri, A, *Multitude*, Penguin, 2006. p.280.

24 Smith, Neil, in, *Spaces Of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring In North America And Western Europe*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002. 'New globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy', p.82

25 Introduction, Brenner, N, Elden, S, eds, *State, Space, World: Selected Essays/Henri Lefebvre*, University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

26 'The Grammar of Neoliberalism', 2010 http://chi.academia.edu/BenjaminNoys/Papers/285622/The_Grammar_of_Neoliberalism

27 Tenants are bound by company law to support their Registered Social Landlord (RSL). http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/dch_StockTransfer.cfm

28 McDonough, Tom, ed, *The Situationists and the City*, Verso Books, 2009, p.2.

29 Available on Bureau of Public Secrets website, Ken Knabb, ed. http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/7.htm

30 Hatherley, Owen, 'Architectures of Dereliction', *Mute* magazine, June 2010. http://www.metamute.org/en/content/architectures_of_dereliction

31 Really Open University. http://reallyopenuniversity.wordpress.com/sausage-factory/

32 Some of this critique has constructively advanced SI positions. See for instance, Barrot, Jean, 'Critique of the Situationist International', in, *What is Situationism? A Reader*, ed, Stewart Home, AK Press, 1996.