



Housing – Critical Futures.

Statement by: **Dr Glyn Robbins**

Defend Council Housing.

--

Council Housing Past, Present and Future

Several events were held across London on Valentine's Day 2015 under the heading 'We Love Council Housing'. In Bethnal Green people met at the Boundary Estate, the birthplace of British council housing and joined a guided tour through 150 years of housing and architectural history that considered the past, present and future of UK housing policy.

The Boundary is a monument to the enduring legacy of public housing investment and the ability of concerted political intervention to relieve a housing crisis. The conditions of the Victorian slums, like the Nichol rookery that stood on the site of today's Boundary, compelled action. The fledgling London County Council's 'Housing of the Working Classes' department, under the visionary leadership of architect Owen Flemming, set new aesthetic standards. The meticulously designed estate of 23 individually-styled tenement blocks, completed in 1900, provided homes for 5,500 people alongside shops, public baths, workshops and laundries – a genuine 'mixed use' development. In 2006, the forces of privatisation circling around council housing tried to entice tenants to transfer the estate to a housing association, but this was overwhelmingly rejected. As a result, the Boundary stands as a publically-owned firebreak against the rampaging, speculative east London property market.

Round the corner in Columbia Road is Leopold Buildings, testament to a very different housing policy tradition. Built in 1872, the ornate façade conceals a more insidious agenda.

The block was built by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company, one of the philanthropic organisations that evolved into housing associations. This was housing provision based not on entitlement, but charity. However, the relatively modest returns of the Victorian 'Five Percenters' are dwarfed by the bank balances of today's commercially oriented, but reputedly non-profit 'Registered Providers' (RPs) such as the Peabody Trust which completed its first block just down the road in Commercial Street in 1862. Today Peabody has a stock of 28,000, a portfolio of commercial property and various trading arms. Although the majority of their homes are for 'social rent', an increasing proportion are of other types, including housing for sale and let as misnamed Affordable Rents at up to 80% of the market level. Its 2013 annual accounts showed an 'operating surplus' from its rented homes of £35 million and reserves of £290 million. Peabody's chief executive receives a salary of £200,000, typical of the inflated pay for bosses of 'social' landlords.

Proceeding east along Columbia Road we find 19-storey Sivill House and the 265-home Dorset Estate, designed with love by Skinner, Bailey and Lubetkin and products of the literal and figurative high watermark of council housing. Between 1951 and 1964 at least 100,000 municipal homes were built a year – under a Tory government! But it was the aim of 'more houses more quickly', allied to the unscrupulous role of some private builders that led to the denigration of council housing, particularly after the partial collapse of Ronan Point in 1968.

However, the shifting perspectives of high-rise are illustrated a bit further along Old Bethnal Green Road by Keeling House. Designed by Dennis Lasdun and completed in 1957, Keeling was the first listed municipal tower block, but Lasdun's hope of recreating the communal qualities of traditional streets was undermined by structural defects. By the early 1990s, Keeling stood empty and symbolised 'everything wrong with doctrinaire post-war planning' ('The Independent' 27th Jan 1993). This facile judgment is contradicted by Keeling's current status. The block was needlessly given away to a private developer by the Council in 1998 and is now marketed as luxury accommodation where a two-bedroom flat costs £500,000+ to buy, or £2,000 a month to rent - a grotesque demonstration of the over-heated housing market that is destabilising and distorting urban areas by making them impossible to live in by people with low or medium incomes.

Across the road though is another reminder that there is an alternative to the impotence of current housing policy and the anarchy and waste of the market. The Minerva Estate, built by the

Borough of Bethnal Green, was part of the post-war house building programme that saw one million homes built in five years - 80% of them council homes – amidst the social and economic wreckage of war. The Architectural Journal of the time commented with wonder:

'Every flat has a dresser, a broom cupboard, fuel storage bunker and is fitted with wardrobe cupboards in every bedroom. There is a solid fuel fire in the living room and gas or electric fires in the main bedroom.'

The Minerva used recycled concrete to reduce costs and innovative design to optimise space, but was also part of a philosophy that sought to do more than just build homes, eloquently expressed by Aneurin Bevan:

'We should try to introduce in our modern villages and towns what was always the lovely feature of English and Welsh villages, where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street. I believe that is essential for the full life of a citizen... to see the living tapestry of a mixed community.'

This short 'walk' illustrates that arguments for and against council housing are not architectural or technical, but ideological and political. The incremental stigmatisation of and under-investment in public housing obscures the fact that in the 1970s, 30% of us were council tenants and 50% of completions were by local authorities. Since then, house building has reduced by two-thirds, councils have been virtually eliminated as providers of new homes and RPs have utterly failed to fill the gap.

As in the Victorian and post-war eras, we have an acute housing crisis. The solution cannot be found via the untrammelled market or attempts to mediate it through 'the third way'. Defend Council Housing argues the only way out is to rediscover the best traditions of public intervention, but learn the lessons of the past, and produce a new generation of well-designed, energy efficient, secure, affordable, publically-owned council homes. We can't afford not to.

Dr Glyn Robbins is a housing worker and long-time supporter of Defend Council Housing. He is a regular contributor to the Guardian newspaper.

Defend Council Housing opposes the privatisation of council housing in the UK and campaigns for a 'fourth option': direct investment in council housing.
<http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/>