



Social housing and working class heritage

Social housing: winners and losers

Violet Sloane

resident, Carpenters Estate

Violet Sloane: I've lived here most of my life, 65 years, it's a lifetime so it was, all my life has been this estate.

Paul Akinrinlola & Ben Soyemi

ex-residents, Carpenters Estate

Paul Akinrinlola:

Me and Ben lived on the estate for about fifteen years, we grew up together, I think best of friends. If we weren't on this estate we probably would have never met each other and it's one of those things that is life changing.

Carmen Grimes

ex-resident, Carpenters Estate

Carmen Grimes:

The good thing is everybody knows your name. I mean I'd be walking in a total opposite direction – hello, hello, hello – and I think that's great.

Mick Aldridge

resident, Carpenters Estate

Mick Aldridge:

I'm on the top floor of one of the three tower blocks with a glorious view, it's not just a place to live, it is my home.

Eddie Benn

resident, Carpenters Estate

Eddie Benn:

It's not like just three tower blocks set alone, or just some low-rise flats set alone, or just some houses set alone – it's a mixture of all three and it's the basis of our community spirit, definitely.

Mick Aldridge:

The threat to this estate overall appears to be that the council want to somehow capitalise from its proximity to the Olympics and its proximity to the new Eurostar station, and all the commercial development that's taking place, and I think that we're now being looked at as a bit of a goldmine.

Eddie Benn:

We are a little bit like an island in as much as we're separated from the rest of Newham by the high street and the railway, but that might be one of the reasons why we've got such a good community spirit. This estate is well worth preserving.

Dr Roger Bowdler

English Heritage

Roger Bowdler:

Quite a number of public housing developments have already been listed and these date from the very earliest ones in the mid-19th century from the years around about 1850 right up to some of the estates not finished until the late 1970's.

Sue Clifford

Common Ground

Sue Clifford: Our colleagues in conservation are spending all of their effort in the special, the rare, the spectacular but the context that everyday surroundings make for most people is actually often more important.

Dr Nicholas Bullock

University of Cambridge

Nicholas Bullock:

My understanding of listing legislation is it's very difficult to construct in the way it's currently framed, an argument about the strength of local sentiment.

For some estates listing has meant survival. Others have not been so lucky.

Roger Bowdler:

The overwhelming consideration we'll be addressing is that of architectural interest. It's the planning sophisticated – what's the elevational treatment like? Is there a clever use of materials or construction techniques?

Roger Bowdler:

There's always a problem in that it is not clear which buildings are going to enter the canon of being historic buildings, and there's always a vulnerability about the buildings that are not very old, but no longer young, there's a dip in their fortunes, and it's the loss of important, very significant schemes, like the Quarry Hill estate in Leeds of the 1930's that concentrates our minds and makes us try harder.

Quarry Hill, Leeds

Roger Bowdler:

With the benefit of hindsight, we can consider which claims to Quarry Hill we might have pursued. It clearly is a really impressive Viennese inspired, very grandiose example of public housing. It exemplifies interwar municipal ambition.

Nick Bullock visited Quarry Hill just before it was demolished in 1978.

Nick Bullock:

My impression of wandering around, talking to the few people that were left, in entirely casual and anecdotal terms, was that they were pretty devoted to it. I remember being taken in by little old ladies and that sense of identification with where they lived was very strong. They believed in Quarry Hill, they didn't want it to be knocked down.

Park Hill, Sheffield

Roger Bowdler:

Park Hill really is up there with the elite of listed buildings because it is such a dramatic and monumental approach to city-making. It's one of the most exciting examples in post-war England of Le Corbusier's vision of stacked, high-rise living, the streets in the sky idea.

Nicholas Bullock:

Here was a suggestion of the terms in which you could make real the combination between social reform, the new architecture and social reforming agenda which supposedly took account of the way in which the households to be re-housed were thought to live.

Robin Hood Gardens, London

Roger Bowdler:

One of the most disputed of recent listing cases has been that of Robin Hood Gardens in Blackwall in London's docklands, and that was an extremely interesting and hard case for us, I have to say.

Nicholas Bullock:

My impression is that Robin Hood Gardens has had a much tougher life. If you use an estate as a sink estate, if you pack in vulnerable families, it's likely to suffer.

Roger Bowdler:

When it was built next to nothing was said about it, and what little was said about it was very critical. It's only now that the issue of listings has come forward that suddenly its champions are advancing in their thousands.

Trellick Tower, London

Roger Bowdler:

Erno Goldfinger's Trellick Tower is listed at Grade II star and embodies for us at its most dramatic the phase of high-rise living and Goldfinger's designs enormously powerfully realised with the lift shaft beside the very tall and slender slab, forming a very powerful composition, some call it sculptural.

Nicholas Bullock:

Those buildings are part of the pathway that architectural historians pick through the development of particular architectural styles. But it seems to me you could construct a series of rival histories, and those which were meritorious depend very much on the frame of reference you're working with.

Sue Clifford:

There isn't very much room for the way in which people who live in a place particularly are connected in with the arguments about listing. You know people tend not to be of architectural merit or, indeed, of historic worth as far as the buildings are concerned and yet, of course, the stories of the building are what makes it important.

Nicholas Bullock:

The grounds for listing make it difficult to bring in the play of local sentiment as a rationale for preservation and I suppose if you think back over the history of the development of the legislation of listing, essentially it's framed in terms of architectural and planning history, rather than in terms of social history.

Sue Clifford:

It seems to me that the only way of keeping places that are significant and precious to people amongst them is actually to encourage people to stand up and say what it is about this place that's important.

Some residents actively explore their memories.

Eddie Benn:

Some five years ago a history group was formed. That consists of more senior citizens of the estate, people that have lived here basically all their life.

Violet Sloane: When we went on this nostalgic trip down to, down Carpenters Road, it was really sad, we were able to go into Burberry's that was 'cos that was derelict really, and that was a shame because that was a lovely factory as well, it was sad, because you haven't got that any more and it's gone.

Woman: Maureen, they reckon this is the old Yardley's!

Woman:

They said this is the old Yardley's, this, can you recognise it...?

Man:

It's all being developed, you know what I mean, luxury flats.

Woman:

Luxury flats – I won't be able to afford one, and neither will you!

Violet Sloane: Let's face it, we haven't got many more years and it's sad that it's all going to be, if no-one talks about it or remembers or says anything it's going to be lost for ever, and no-one's going to know. Actually I'm getting choked about that.

Sue Clifford:

Professionals often arrive with a level of expertise, which is huge but it's tumbleweed. It's been learnt elsewhere, sometimes in libraries, often on the ground, but it's knowledge that only has a few dimensions to it. And if you can bring together that tumbleweed expertise with the deep knowledge that local people have then you're working towards making much better decisions.

Roger Bowdler:

We've actually got a designation basis in this country we can be proud of, but it does require specialist knowledge and a fairly expert articulation of what the claims to special architectural and historic interest are. While I know that that can be presented as an elitist, top-down, viewpoint I think we've got to be honest about what it is that experts can provide. Experts play a really important part in a fairly complex debate about what is of enduring special interest, or architectural value, if you will.

Sue Clifford:

I would love to think that in twenty-five years' time the whole idea of putting a red line around something and saying this is better than that would have fallen out of the way of doing things, and it's because once you draw a line, whether it's for a building, or for a national park, or a site of special scientific interest, what you've done effectively is to degrade what's outside it.

Roger Bowdler:

We haven't formally been asked whether the Carpenters Estate should be listed but if I was to give an off-the-cuff indication as to whether it would be; I'd have to say I'd be surprised. From my understanding of the estate, the architectural interest is actually not that high. It isn't, I'm afraid just a question of lives that have been led there.

Nicholas Bullock:

I wouldn't want to make the case for its preservation as being one of those buildings, which was an essential stepping-stone in the development of modern architecture. I suppose what I'd be wanting to argue was that it's a reminder of the way in which the East End was being modernised at that time. So I can understand people who see it as a reflection of the area they grew up in.

Mick Aldridge:

I'm no architect, I'm no architectural historian, but often it's the basic things that get thrown away because people think they're of no worth in themselves, and once they're all gone then there's a big gap in people's memory and in people's community feeling, you know, oh, there used to be a skyline there, what was there, what did they look like, what did they feel like, nobody can remember any more.

Carmen Grimes:

Why wipe out memories of a lifetime, you know, for something that's going to last for possibly what – four months? – the Olympics.

Mick Aldridge:

It would probably have been wrong to try and seal the whole place in aspic. It's a living estate and it needs to keep on living but it needs to keep on living in tune with the people that are there.