



Social housing and working class heritage

Social housing: winners and losers

Eddie Benn

resident, Carpenters Estate

Eddie:

That is our heritage, it may not be in the form of a lovely Grade II listed building, but it is heritage, so how can you ignore that?

Mick Aldridge

resident, Carpenters Estate

Mick Aldridge:

You know the bottom line is that the council has got a responsibility and it, you know, it takes our money and expects our votes, and it really ought to do something.

Lorraine Pearmain

resident, Excalibur Estate

Lorraine Pearmain:

Everyone's distressed on this estate, it's tore people to pieces, you know, but I really mean what I say, I'm not moving. This is going to kill me.

Jim Blackender

resident, Excalibur Estate

Jim Blackender:

No, we're very passionate about saving it, and we won't give up, there are bailiffs and bulldozers, that's our motto.

This is the story of two different estates campaigning for their survival

Sue Clifford

Common Ground

Sue Clifford:

It takes vigilance, it takes enormous persistence, and it takes a kind of energy that people can only sustain for a certain amount of time.

Eddie Benn:

The advent of Stratford City has always cast a shadow over the future of this estate. If we walked outside of this building and got up on the roof and looked around us we're surrounded by new build, which is a little bit daunting in as much as you wonder are we going to be swallowed up – are we going to find ourselves homeless?

Carmen Grimes

ex-resident, Carpenters Estate

Carmen Grimes:

For the last, I believe it's five or six years, we've been talking about a master plan, a master plan that's going to improve the estate, improve the quality of life on the estate; we've recently we've also been talking about the Olympics. Now although the Olympics are, they're welcome, but they should not in any way overlook the fact that the Carpenters Estate exists,

people on the estate exist, their lives are going to improve, their buildings are going to improve, they're going to get what they want; we don't just want the Olympics.

Eddie Benn:

Whilst we were consulting with LBN and architects for some six years now, these consultations are required in law, and I've always been convinced that a lot of these meetings are just a PR exercise to keep us quiet, keep us happy.

Excalibur is one of the UK's largest estates of postwar prefabricated houses

Jim Blackender:

On the Excalibur Estate there's a hundred and eighty seven pre-fabs. We have a pre-fabricated church as well, which is a bit like an Anderson shelter, it's a beautiful little church, and it's a great community, a great place to live, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. Lewisham Council, which is the landlord, want to transfer the stock to a housing association, which in this case is London and Quadrant, and London and Quadrant want to demolish the estate, demolish the pre-fabs and build a high-density housing estate, comprising of roughly about five hundred homes. The choice is do we want to live on a high-density housing estate, or do we want to keep a vital part of history and continue into the future the way we're living now, and we all want to continue with what we've got. When we heard that we were facing demolition we formed a group which was called the Worried Tenants Group, and it was about five or six of us to begin with, and our hope is to fight to keep the Excalibur Estate and hopefully get some of the pre-fabs listed, and maybe turn the rest into a conservation area.

Dr Nicholas Bullock

University of Cambridge

Nicholas Bullock:

People have seen the architectural merit in prefabs for some time. The prefabricated house was meant to have its own aesthetic, and in those terms was meant to be something other, it wasn't part of a continuous architectural debate. It just came into being with its own particular identity.

Dr Roger Bowdler

English Heritage

Roger Bowdler:

They've got architectural interests. They've got constructional interests. They've got enormous social and historical resonance too, so we do take pre-fabs very seriously, but it must be said against that that an awful lot of them have undergone extensive change, and because they were mass-produced anyway there's an awful lot of the same sort of thing and so we are, perforce, selective.

Jim Blackender:

We're three years into it now and we think our campaign has actually grown and got bigger over the years, and we've got more enthusiastic about saving the estate, and the more obstacles that are put in front of us, then it appears that the greater we are at fighting it, and we come together quite strongly. Again, we think we've got quite a unique group and everybody's got their own job to do and they do that quite well, you know whether it be at the archives, or getting in touch with politicians, or getting in touch with the media.

On Carpenters Estate, residents have also been engaging in direct action.

Carmen Grimes:

On the Carpenters Estate back in 2003 we started up a campaign called TBAG – TBAG stood for Tower Block Action Group. We hung banners from the walls, we demanded habitable conditions for the residents on the estate. We called down the local press, a local film producer, made some videos. We made a deputation to the Mayor. We tried and we tried, and we got nowhere. They refused basically to accept that we existed. They refused to

accept that we needed answers, you know as far as they were concerned they were going to tell us what was happening, and we were to accept it, and a lot of people unfortunately think they have to abide by those rules. There are no rules. We have a right to speak and we will continue to do so.

Sue Clifford:

When you're the underdog and when you have all these professionals being thrown at you in all kinds of different ways it's really hard to keep going 'cos it's usually only a few people who are the ones who have either the time or the passion to just keep on going.

Eddie Benn:

Sometimes you feel that the council box you into a corner, and that seems to be the only answer to the situation you're in. That I find very challenging.

Violet Sloane

resident, Carpenters Estate

Violet Sloane:

We've had lots of meetings about what's going to happen on this estate with the master planners. Filled in questionnaire after questionnaire, and you'd sit there with some officials, and you'd have big sheets of white paper, and what you would like, what you wouldn't like, or all that, and we did all that – and this has been done not once, it's been done many times over the six years – and we've all said now we are not going to fill in another questionnaire about the estate because we've done it all, but no-one seems to answer the questions you've asked, right, no-one seems to answer you. They never give any answers, and every meeting we've been to we know no more than we did six years ago so, to me, they will do what they want, whoever the group of them will be, they will decide.

Sue Clifford:

Professionals find it easier to hear a middle-class voice. I think very often people who haven't been through any professional route have a more difficult time expressing themselves. The more deprived you are, the more deprived you are of power. Local people are at the bottom of the heap, and therefore they have to be more deft, more professional, more knowledgeable, and more passionate and persistent than anybody else.

Carmen Grimes:

I do believe that the residents do get listened to – by the architects, possibly by the master planners. The only thing is when the questions are taken forth to Newham council who are ultimately in charge of responding, that's where I think it falls on deaf ears.

Sue Clifford:

People involved with buildings and with building heritage tend to perform within their own jargon dialect, as it were, so they have their own way of communicating with each other, which doesn't necessarily jump the void to ordinary mortals.

Carmen Grimes:

What we're now demanding is not only habitable conditions on the estate but we also want to know what's happening to the estate as a whole. We don't want people to move off of the estate and feel that they have to go because it's something that they've been pressured into.

Mick Aldridge:

There are certainly one or two residents known to me who've been here since the place was built and they're not really being listened to, and it's a, you know, more than a crying shame, it's really veering into scandal territory.

Carmen Grimes:

What we want is for those in charge of the master plan, if there is going to be one, to understand that these residents want to be recognised as the Carpenters Estate, and in order to be recognised you have to make a stand and that is what we are going to do. We had

decided to restart TBAG but this time we are going to be recognised, we're going to be listened to and action will be taken. No more filling in forms, we're going to fight all the way with this campaign. We're going to have everybody listening to us.

Mick Aldridge:

Living one's life as a campaign is very wearing and, you know, far from everybody can do it, so it's unfair to expect people to live, you know, the life of a firebrand 24/7, but at the same time it's also unfair to leave everybody in so much doubt.

Roger Bowdler:

If the residents of an estate feel particularly strongly about the place they live I think it's essential that their feelings, their attitudes, their sense of place is listened to and respected very fairly, but it is a separate exercise from that of statutory designation. Listing's not a popularity contest, it's about assessing claims, lasting claims to special, architectural and historic interest, and some of the claims to special interest are they're quite arcane, they're quite complicated.

Mick Aldridge:

The people here are prepared to troop along to dull meetings with master planners week after week, year after year. There are enough tenants that care that can tell the council something and they are prepared to keep biting that bullet even though they're not getting any clear information from the council so I may have thrown in the towel but others haven't, thank heavens.