

The Housing Crisis After Grenfell

Wandsworth Young Labour Reading Group

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A Very Political Tragedy

Dawn Foster 14 June 2017

Today's horrific fire in London's Grenfell Tower is a symbol of a deeply unequal United Kingdom.

A fire rages in Grenfell Tower, a block of council housing in Kensington, west London, earlier today. Jason Hawkes

Every time a tragedy occurs, you can rely on a wave of commentators chiding any attempt to "politicize" the situation. With today's Grenfell Tower fire in West London, those voices were prominent immediately. And no wonder: the atrocity was explicitly political.

In the richest borough of one of the wealthiest countries in the world, people in social housing, many on low incomes, were killed and injured in a fire that could have been prevented or contained. Rather than diverting blame from those responsible, or treating it as an act of nature, our responsibility is to ask why it occurred.

Time and again, residents reported serious concerns about the safety of the building to the management organization, the local council, and the member of

parliament (recently unseated in the general election). They were met with silence, and several told me on the scene they were convinced it was because they were poor, living in a rich borough that was determined to socially cleanse the area as part of a [gentrifying project](#).

Today's fire in Grenfell Tower is not outside of politics — it is a symbol of the United Kingdom's deep inequality. The block of 120 apartments housed between 400 and 600 people, some in very crowded conditions. Tenants reported problems with elevators, emergency lighting, wiring, and boilers. Even the most minor improvement required constant badgering. People were given the message that they were lucky to have any home at all, let alone in a borough that harbored such wealth.

[In November](#), a blogpost on the residents association's website warned:

It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders . . . their sordid collusion with the RBKC Council is a recipe for a future major disaster.

The result of the disaster they predicted is evident: a blackened skeleton on the skyline in West London. The fire is still burning, but every home in the block is destroyed. Those who survived have lost everything. Many people are still missing, and the death toll continues to rise. The surrounding streets are full of people fighting back tears, aided by scores of volunteers handing out water.

Housing has become the barometer of inequality in the UK: home ownership levels [are falling](#) and rents [are rising](#). Meanwhile, the Conservative Party has mounted an attack on social housing, ramping up private sales of council homes. Theresa May's new chief of staff, Gavin Barwell, was one of a series of housing ministers who [sat on a report](#) warning that high-rise blocks of flats such as Grenfell Tower were at risk of fire. He [failed to carry out](#) the review that had been requested.

The Conservative Party makes no bones about which side it represents in Britain's housing divide. When Labour proposed an amendment to the government's Housing and Planning Bill last year that would have required private landlords to make dwellings "fit for human habitation," seventy-two Tory members of parliament [who were landlords](#) voted against.

Last week's general election showed a widening divide in Britain, between those who can afford housing and those struggling to keep a roof over their head. The Conservatives promised little on housing in their manifesto, expecting a core vote of homeowners to turn out. Instead, huge numbers turned out to vote for a Labour Party that promised to build houses and tackle sky-high rents.

The only way to stop tragedies like Grenfell Tower from happening again is to accept that adequate housing is a right, not a privilege. People on low incomes deserve governments and local authorities that value their lives. Our homes should protect us, not put our families at risk.

Margaret Thatcher famously argued that there was no such thing as society. It was an idea that did immense damage, particularly to those who need social housing. But, in places like West London, on days like today, it is proven wrong in a fundamental way. The local community pulled together, offering places to stay, taking donations, coordinating resources.

The volume of rage at the tragedy, and the fact it seems so preventable, has forced politicians to promise investigations. The battle now is to ensure that this anger is turned into change. Survivors must be properly housed. Those who could have prevented the fire must be held accountable. People living in similarly dangerous conditions across the country must be given urgent assistance. The housing crisis must be tackled.

As one resident told me, many people will have died locked in their homes, aware that nobody had cared for their safety while they lived. The only way to change a world where that can happen is through political action.

<https://jacobinmag.com/2017/06/grenfell-tower-fire-inequality-housing>

The tale of Battersea power station shows how affordable housing is lost

Initially, the developers promised 636 affordable homes. Now, they have reduced the number to 386.

Peter Watts 22 June 2017

It's the most predictable trick in the big book of property development. A developer signs an agreement with a local council promising to provide a barely acceptable level of barely affordable housing, then slashes these commitments at the first, second and third signs of trouble. It's happened all over the country, [from Hastings](#) to [Cumbria](#). But it happens most often in London, and most recently of all at Battersea power station, the Thames landmark and long-time London ruin which I wrote about in my 2016 book, [Up In Smoke: The Failed Dreams of Battersea Power Station](#). For decades, the power station was one of London's most popular buildings but now it represents some of the most depressing aspects of the capital's attempts at regeneration. Almost in shame, the building itself has started to disappear from view behind a curtain of ugly gold-and-glass apartments aimed squarely at the international rich. The Battersea power station development is costing around £9bn. There will be around 4,200 flats, an office for Apple and a new Tube station. But only [386 of the new flats will be considered affordable](#).

What makes the Battersea power station development worse is the developer's argument for why there are so few affordable homes, which runs something like this. The bottom is falling out of the luxury homes market [because too many are being built](#), which means developers can no longer afford to build the sort of homes that people actually want. It's yet another sign of the failure of the housing market to provide what is most needed. But it also highlights the delusion of politicians who still seem to believe that property developers are going to provide the answers to one of the most pressing problems in politics.

A Malaysian consortium acquired the power station in 2012 and initially promised to build 517 affordable units, which then rose to 636. This was pretty meagre, but with four developers having already failed to develop the site, it

was enough to satisfy Wandsworth council. By the time I wrote *Up In Smoke*, this had been reduced back to 565 units – around 15 per cent of the total number of new flats. Now the developers want to build only 386 affordable homes – around 9 per cent of the final residential offering, which includes expensive flats bought by the likes of Sting and Bear Grylls.

The developers say this is because of escalating costs and the technical challenges of restoring the power station – but it's also the case that the entire Nine Elms area between Battersea and Vauxhall is experiencing a glut of similar property, which is driving down prices. They want to focus instead on paying for the new Northern Line extension that joins the power station to Kennington. The slashing of affordable housing can be done without need for a new planning application or public consultation by using a "deed of variation". It also means Mayor Sadiq Khan can't do much more than write to Wandsworth urging the council to reject the new scheme. There's little chance of that. Conservative Wandsworth has been committed to a developer-led solution to the power station for three decades and in that time has perfected the art of rolling over, despite several excruciating, and occasionally hilarious, disappointments.

The Battersea power station situation also highlights the sophistry developers will use to excuse any decision. When I interviewed Rob Tincknell, the developer's chief executive, in 2014, he boasted it was the developer's commitment to paying for the Northern Line extension (NLE) that was allowing the already limited amount of affordable housing to be built in the first place. Without the NLE, he insisted, they would never be able to build this number of affordable units. "The important point to note is that the NLE project allows the development density in the district of Nine Elms to nearly double," he said. "Therefore, without the NLE the density at Battersea would be about half and even if there was a higher level of affordable, say 30 per cent, it would be a percentage of a lower figure and therefore the city wouldn't get any more affordable than they do now."

Now the argument is reversed. Because the developer has to pay for the transport infrastructure, they can't afford to build as much affordable housing. Smart hey?

It's not entirely hopeless. Wandsworth may yet reject the plan, while the developers say they hope to restore the missing 250 units at the end of the build.

But I wouldn't hold your breath.

<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2017/06/tale-battersea-power-station-shows-how-affordable-housing-lost>

The Permanent Crisis of Housing

Under capitalism, housing is never secure for the working class.

David Madden and Peter Marcuse 10 February 2016

The symptoms of housing crisis are everywhere in evidence today. Households are being squeezed by the cost of living. Homelessness is on the rise. Evictions and foreclosures are commonplace. Segregation and poverty, along with displacement and unaffordability, have become the hallmarks of today's cities. Urban and suburban neighborhoods are being transformed by speculative development, shaped by decisions made in boardrooms half a world away. Small towns and older industrial cities are struggling to survive.

In America, the housing crisis is especially acute in New York City. The city has more homeless residents now than at any time since the Great Depression. More than half of all households cannot afford the rent. Displacement, gentrification, and eviction are rampant. Two pillars of New York's distinctive housing system — public housing and rent regulation — are both under threat.

But housing problems are not unique to New York. Shelter poverty is a problem throughout the United States. According to the standard measures of affordability, there is no US state where a full-time minimum-wage worker can afford to rent or own a one-bedroom dwelling.

Nationwide, nearly half of all renting households spend an unsustainable amount of their income on rent, a figure that is only expected to rise. This is not only a big-city issue. Around 30 percent of rural households cannot afford their housing, including nearly half of all rural renters.

In fact, the housing crisis is global in scope. London, Shanghai, São Paulo, Mumbai, Lagos, indeed nearly every major city faces its own residential struggles. Land grabs, forced evictions, expulsions, and displacement are rampant. According to the United Nations, the homeless population across the planet may be anywhere between one hundred million and one billion people, depending on how homelessness is defined.

It has been estimated that globally there are currently 330 million households — more than a billion people — that are unable to find a decent or affordable home. Some research suggests that in recent decades, residential displacement due to development, extraction, and construction has occurred on a scale that rivals displacement caused by disasters and armed conflicts. In China and India alone in the past fifty years, an estimated one hundred million people have been displaced by development projects.

And yet if there is broad recognition of the existence of a housing crisis, there is no deep understanding of why it occurs, much less what to do about it. The dominant view today is that if the housing system is broken, it is a temporary crisis that can be resolved through targeted, isolated measures. In mainstream debates, housing tends to be understood in narrow terms.

The provision of adequate housing is seen as a technical problem and technocratic means are sought to solve it: better construction technology, smarter physical planning, new techniques for management, more homeownership, different zoning laws, and fewer land use regulations. Housing is seen as the domain of experts like developers, architects, or economists. Certainly, technical improvements in the housing system are possible, and some are much needed. But the crisis is deeper than that.

We see housing in a wider perspective: as a political-economic problem. The residential is political — which is to say that the shape of the housing system is always the outcome of struggles between different groups and classes. Housing necessarily raises questions about state action and the broader economic system. But the ways in which social antagonisms shape housing are too often obscured.

Housing is under attack today. It is caught within a number of simultaneous social conflicts. Most immediately, there is a conflict between housing as lived, social space and housing as an instrument for profit-making — a conflict between housing as home and as real estate. More broadly, housing is the subject of contestation between different ideologies, economic interests, and political projects. More broadly still, the housing crisis stems from the inequalities and antagonisms of class society.

Reposing the Housing Question

The classic statement on the political-economic aspects of housing was written by Friedrich Engels in 1872. At the time, few disputed the fact that housing conditions for the industrial proletariat were unbearable. What Engels called “the housing question” was the question of why working-class housing appeared in the condition as it did, and what should be done about it.

Engels was generally pessimistic about the prospects for housing struggles per se. Criticizing bourgeois attempts at housing reform, he argued that housing problems should be understood as some of “the numerous, smaller, secondary evils which result from the present-day capitalist mode of production.”

He concluded, “As long as the capitalist mode of production continues to exist, it is folly to hope for an isolated solution to the housing question or of any other social question affecting the fate of the workers.” For Engels, housing struggles were derivative of class struggle. Housing problems, then, could only be addressed through social revolution.

We take from Engels the idea that the housing question is embedded within the structures of class society. Posing the housing question today means uncovering the connections between societal power and the residential experience. It means asking who and what housing is for, who controls it, who it empowers, who it oppresses. It means questioning the function of housing within globalized neoliberal capitalism.

However, residential struggles today are not simply derivative of other conflicts. Housing movements are significant political actors in their own right. The housing question may not be resolvable under capitalism. But the shape of the housing system can be acted upon, modified, and changed.

The social theorist Henri Lefebvre helps us understand the political role of housing and the potential for changing it. In his 1968 book *The Right to the City*, Lefebvre argued that industrial insurrection was not the only force for social transformation. An “urban strategy” for revolutionizing society was possible.

Given changes to the nature of work and of urban development, the industrial proletariat was no longer the only agent of revolutionary change, or even the predominant one. Lefebvre claimed that there was a new political subject: the city dweller. More generally, Lefebvre invokes the politics of “the inhabitant,” a category that includes any worker, in the broadest sense, seen from the perspective of everyday social and residential life.

Lefebvre is vague about what exactly the inhabitant as a political subject will accomplish with the urban revolution. But he does point to a different way of inhabiting. He imagines a future where social needs would not be subordinated to economic necessity, where disalienated dwelling space would be universally available, where both equality and difference would be the basic principles of social and political life.

Whether or not anything like Lefebvre’s urban revolution is on the horizon, we can use his ideas to understand a basic point: the politics of housing involve a bigger set of actors and interests than is recognized either by mainstream debates or by conventional political-economic analyses such as that offered by Engels.

In the orthodox account, the only conflicts that matter are those surrounding exploitation and value. But the ruling class also needs to solidify its rule, and preserving the ability to exploit is only one aspect of this. There are also political, social, and ideological imperatives that significantly affect residential conditions.

In the financialized global economy — which was only beginning to emerge when Lefebvre was writing — real estate has come to have new prominence in relation to industrial capital. Housing and urban development today are not secondary phenomena. Rather, they are becoming some of the main processes driving contemporary global capitalism.

If Lefebvre is right, housing is becoming an ever more important site for the reproduction of the system — a change that might open new strategic possibilities for housing movements to achieve social change.

Whose Crisis?

Critics, reformers, and activists have invoked the term “housing crisis” for more than a hundred years. The phrase once again became pervasive after the global economic meltdown of 2008. But we need to be careful with this usage of the concept of crisis.

The idea of crisis implies that inadequate or unaffordable housing is abnormal, a temporary departure from a well-functioning standard. But for working-class and poor communities, housing crisis is the norm. Insufficient housing has been the mark of dominated groups throughout history. Engels made exactly this point:

The so-called housing shortage, which plays such a great role in the press nowadays, does not consist in the fact that the working class generally lives in bad, overcrowded or unhealthy dwellings. This shortage is not something peculiar to the present; it is not even one of the sufferings peculiar to the modern proletariat in contradistinction to all earlier oppressed classes. On the contrary, all oppressed classes in all periods suffered more or less uniformly from it.

For the oppressed, housing is always in crisis. The reappearance of the term “housing crisis” in headlines represents the experiences of middle-class homeowners and investors, who faced unexpected residential instability following the 2008 financial implosion.

The idea of a housing crisis is politically loaded. Though the concept of crisis has a long history in critical theory and radical practice, it can be deployed for other purposes. In the United States, the discourse of housing crisis is often used to condemn state “interference” in housing markets. In the United Kingdom, the crisis frame is invoked in support of granting new legal powers to developers in order to override local planning guidelines.

Discrete moments when housing crises become acute tend to be interpreted away as exceptions to a fundamentally sound system. But this is an ideological distortion. The experience of crisis in the residential sphere reflects and amplifies the broader tendencies towards insecurity in capitalist societies.

Housing crisis is a predictable, consistent outcome of a basic characteristic of capitalist spatial development: housing is not produced and distributed for the purposes of dwelling for all; it is produced and distributed as a commodity to enrich the few. Housing crisis is not a result of the system breaking down but of the system working as it is intended.

We should reject ideological versions of the concept of housing crisis. But the term is still useful. For those compelled to dwell in oppressive and alienating conditions, housing crisis is not empty rhetoric; it is daily reality. To millions of households, “crisis” describes precisely the chaos, fear, and disempowerment that they experience. The state of their housing is critical indeed.

Our objective, then, is not to argue for the resolution of some temporary crisis and return to the status quo. We use the concept of crisis to highlight the ways that the contemporary housing system is unsustainable by its very nature. We point to the crisis tendencies in housing under contemporary capitalism, in order to draw attention to the urgent but systemic character of these problems.

In Defense of Housing

We do not seek to defend the housing system as it currently stands, which is in many ways indefensible. What needs defending is the use of housing as home, not as real estate. We are interested in the defense of housing as a resource that should be available to all.

Housing means many things to different groups. It is home for its residents and the site of social reproduction. It is the largest economic burden for many, and for others a source of wealth, status, profit, or control. It means work for those who construct, manage, and maintain it; speculative profit for those buying and selling it; and income for those financing it. It is a source of tax revenue and a subject of tax expenditures for the state, and a key component of the structure and functioning of cities.

Our concern is squarely with those who reside in and use housing — the people for whom home provides use values rather than exchange value. From the perspective of those who inhabit it, housing unlocks a whole range of social, cultural, and political goods. It is a universal necessity of life, in some ways an

extension of the human body. Without it, participation in most of social, political, and economic life is impossible.

Housing is more than shelter; it can provide personal safety and ontological security. While the domestic environment can be the site of oppression and injustice, it also has the potential to serve as a confirmation of one's agency, cultural identity, individuality, and creative powers.

The built form of housing has always been seen as a tangible, visual reflection of the organization of society. It reveals the existing class structure and power relationships. But it has also long been a vehicle for imagining alternative social orders. Every emancipatory movement must deal with the housing question in one form or another. This capacity to spur the political imagination is part of housing's social value as well.

Housing is the precondition both for work and for leisure. Controlling one's housing is a way to control one's labor as well as one's free time, which is why struggles over housing are always, in part, struggles over autonomy. More than any other item of consumption, housing structures the way that individuals interact with others, with communities, and with wider collectives. Where and how one lives decisively shapes the treatment one receives by the state and can facilitate relations with other citizens and with social movements.

No other modern commodity is as important for organizing citizenship, work, identities, solidarities, and politics.

It is this side of housing — its lived, universally necessary, social dimension, and its identity as home — that needs defending. Our challenge as analysts, as residents, and as participants in housing struggles is to understand the causes and consequences of the multidimensional attack on housing. Our goal is to provide a critical understanding of the political-economic nature of housing, such that we may develop a greater sense of the actions needed to address housing's crises today and in the future.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/housing-crisis-rent-landlords-homeless-affordability/>