

Call and Response: Popular Media and Architecture in London's Historic Housing Crises

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The term 'housing crisis' is rarely defined, but it is generally understood as a moment when affordable housing becomes scarce. Such imbalances are persistent in cities within a free market economy, pushing land and home prices up as demand outweighs supply. They have become of increasing concern in both the developed and developing world, and many experts agree that a major component of any solution must be to build our way out of scarcity.¹ But this problem-solving mindset, founded on the classical economic theory of supply and demand, betrays the productive nature of crises. Crises are born out of popular, qualitative sentiments and can raise questions about the architecture of housing itself. This article considers historic and contemporary housing episodes in London, a city in which crises have featured prominently in the production of the built environment since the nineteenth century. It reveals how architecture did not only solve problems but contributed to the discursive formation of questions.

According to the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, the term 'crisis' lacks precision. Koselleck traces a genealogy of the word from its origins in the Greek *krino* – 'to separate, judge, decide' – which developed significance in the three professional realms of law, theology and medicine. A crisis could be the judgement that marked the end of a legal case, the apocalyptic last judgement for humanity or the turning point in a disease when the patient either recovers or perishes. The medical term was carried into the modern era through a metaphor for political strife infecting the body politic. Later in the

nineteenth century the same metaphor was introduced in relation to market busts: like the congested arteries of a sick patient, the imbalances of supply and demand caused shocks to the system.² As this article will reveal, these various definitions continue to emerge in reference to housing crises: from the Victorian evocation of a medical and moral apocalypse, to an early-twentieth-century market imbalance that cascaded into a political conflict, to the framing of post-war reconstruction as an historic moment of opportunity. This is in contrast to how the term is used today: not as Koselleck's 'horizon of expectation' that brings decision and relief, but as a chronic condition.

Koselleck also discusses how crisis is a fuel for populism: since the enlightenment, it has been a tool for special interest groups to challenge absolute power. Conceptual bifurcations – society from state and moral critique from political authority – created space for popular sentiment to question business as usual. Crisis is a subjective construction, invoked to impose a choice between right and wrong. [Fig.1] Koselleck's concern is that this modern tendency amounts to a 'pathogenesis' formed through constant revolution, in which popular morality interferes in the accountable management of the state.³ But as we will see, there has been a shift in who presents this ultimatum and who is called to answer it. Across a 200-year arc, housing crises have been reformulated, from a qualitative problem that architects helped to frame in the Victorian Era, to a quantitative problem framed predominantly by economists today. While historical crises were

collectively constructed through popular sentiments, the debate today rests on an experts' understanding of supply and demand, largely devoid of appeals to the senses.

Crisis is a way of reading history through the moments that bookend epochs.⁴ It plays an essential role in Thomas Kuhn's famous theory of paradigm shifts, whereby innovation occurs through the creative destruction of the old, not through linear progress.⁵ Even the commonplace economic crisis – an eddy caused by the inherent imbalances needed to create surplus value in a capitalistic economy – can cascade into political and cultural transformations. As revealed by Jürgen Habermas, the role of the state, when charged with the thankless responsibility to manage anarchic capitalism, is called into question when crises occur. Attempts to re-establish institutional legitimacy entail reforms to existing systems.⁶ Housing crises do not just catalyse a numeric upswing in house production but leverage change to building practices, domestic values and architecture.

This article therefore looks at several critical episodes when housing was transformed through the blood and fire of conflict. While these episodes are well-known in British architectural history, I look at them through the lens of criticism: considering who challenged the status quo, how dilemmas were framed and how the architecture of housing mutated as a result. I look primarily at popular media, considering the contributions of architects and other figures, and question the comparatively passive role that architects have taken today.

Victorian overcrowding: the medical and moral apocalypse

While the Victorians were familiar with economic booms and busts, few attempted to connect the irrationality of the market to the housing conditions they witnessed.⁷ Rather, the crisis was framed through the sights and smells produced by housing shortages. There was a proliferation of new commercial enterprises to accommodate workers,

from 'rookeries' – maze-like passages that filled the interiors of deep, dense urban blocks – to 'lodging houses' that filled old abandoned mansions with seas of mattresses. The cause was rapid migration which created an insatiable demand for housing: by 1866 there were 680 000 casually employed labourers in central London who were essentially 'on call' at any time, placing pressure on centrally located lodging.⁸ But it was the effects, rather than the root causes, that were of great interest to architects and other reformers.

Friedrich Engels noted that the poor had perhaps always lived in dire straits,⁹ but in the second half of the nineteenth century, special interest groups began to take notice of the unwholesome state of the poor. One motivation was epidemic: cholera outbreaks in 1849 and 1853 and waves of typhus plagued the city. Diseases that were perceived to spread in the congested, poorly ventilated dwellings of the poor touched the lives of the better off as well.¹⁰ Another risk was political: the ruling class feared that the 1848 revolutions that beset the continent could spread to Britain, and saw the terra incognita of London slums as breeding grounds for radical dissent.¹¹ Architect and editor George Godwin claimed that 'if there were no courts and blind alleys there would be less immorality and physical suffering', linking urban morphology to 'evil habits'.¹² Finally, an emerging evangelical morality could not accept the ways that strangers mingled in such intimate quarters, as multiple families often shared houses with 'flesh pressed against flesh', in the words of Robin Evans.¹³ What epidemiologists today call 'social bubbles' had a deeper moral dimension.

This newfound popular concern was encouraged by a new form of media: illustrated periodicals such as the *Illustrated London News*, *Punch* and *The Builder*, which all emerged in the 1840s and gave its middle-class readership an elevated consciousness of the urban affairs surrounding them.¹⁴ Columns reporting on London slums often stood side by side with exotic accounts of British colonies,



Fig. 1: A nineteenth-century understanding of crisis. Source: *Punch Magazine*, 16 May 1868

sensationalising conditions and giving readers an agency to judge. Popular media was the maker of crisis in the 1850s, giving different professionals and special interest groups a space to criticize the laissez-faire processes of urban development. Medical professionals such as Hector Gavin scientifically plotted out sanitary arrangements and the spread of disease. Preachers like Thomas Beames illustrated the immoral conditions of the poor, in a plea for action. Reporters such as Henry Mayhew sensationalised the lives of those living in slums, while Godwin's periodical *The Builder* focused on the relation with the built environment. Charles Dickens illustrated conditions through fictional novels as well as editorial commentary. The explosion in interest even led to new enterprises in 'slum tourism' as the rich wanted to see first-hand what they had read about.¹⁵

In both their illustrious descriptions and supplementary graphics, this brand of literature attempted to capture the chaos and desperation of slums through accumulating filth, soot-covered walls, piles of bodies and the ubiquity of rats – all of which became recurring symbols of plague in the popular press.¹⁶ [Fig. 2, 3] Far from objectively describing places or events, metaphorical imagery evoked the medical and moral connotations of crisis, indiscriminately mixing physical and spiritual 'evils'.¹⁷

With all the changes occurring in the Victorian city, references to the apocalypse were ever-present in literature. For optimists, technological development as exhibited in the Crystal Palace could contribute to a 'New Jerusalem', a holy city for a new age. For pessimists, the 'brick and mortar deserts' of urbanisation and environmental disasters recalled a collapsing Babylon.¹⁸ Father Beames frequently conjured biblical imagery in speaking of London's rookeries as a 'vast Babel or Babylon',¹⁹ or the 'city of God's wrath' that would face its end if it did not restore its morality.²⁰ The pious medical officer William Rendle exclaimed, 'our religion and our social institutions are on trial in this matter.'²¹ Though the term 'housing crisis' was rarely used,

the issue was frequently put in eschatological terms that recalled the Last Judgement, the moment where the city would be saved or be damned.

When the word 'crisis' was actually invoked, it was as a premonition. Speaking of overcrowding, Lord Ashley (later crowned Lord Shaftesbury, the pre-eminent evangelical housing crusader) exclaimed in a letter to *The Times*: 'the change which is gradually taking place in London is rapidly bringing matters to a crisis.'²² This matched how the term was used in politics, denoting an oncoming moment of tribunal decision between two opposing viewpoints – in this case between state intervention or urban decline.

Responses to crisis put this concern for hygiene and morality in architectural terms. But within the architectural discipline there was still some division of labour, between those posing questions and those answering them: Godwin was heavily engaged in documenting conditions and lobbying for new housing standards, while the preeminent housing architect Henry Roberts limited his work to designing solutions to the problems of overcrowding. His treatise *The Dwellings of the Labouring Classes* defers to the arguments by other reformers, before quickly moving to his designs: demarcating social bubbles, articulating spatial relationships, delineating circulatory networks and devising the standards for ventilation and daylighting.²³ An obsession with such concerns, born out of this corporeal conflict, became the basis for modern architecture in the twentieth century.²⁴

Interwar shortages: overcoming 'business as usual'

After World War One, the term 'housing crisis' became widely accepted and understood as a form of market failure, but it was woven into a political critique that led to new architectural standards. During the war, the state had redirected industry towards munitions production, essentially freezing the normal processes of housing construction and maintenance for a five-year period. There was a halt

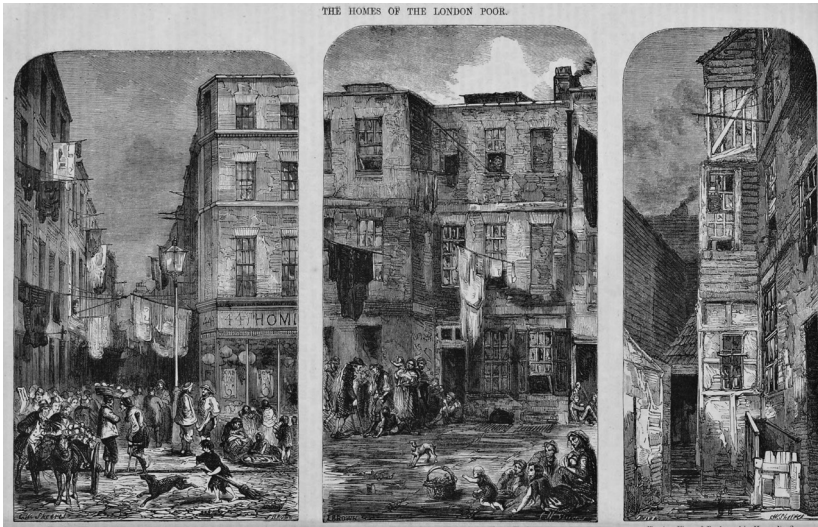


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2: A 'rookery' in the architectural press, depicting an increasingly intimate procession from street to court to alley, with an increasing level of dilapidation. Source: J. Brown, 'The Homes of the London Poor', *The Builder*, 18 November 1854.

Fig. 3: Lodging House in Field Lane. The image depicts the stratification of sanitary, criminal and sexual ills. Source: *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 20 November 1847.

in the production of building materials. Labour diminished as over five million British men – the majority of able-bodied workers – enlisted in the armed services and the war interrupted the training of new workers. The total number of building craftsmen in the UK was cut in half, declining from 720 230 in 1901 to 365 000 by 1920.²⁵ Inflating house prices led to rent strikes and in 1915 the government introduced a rent cap. While previous housing shortages affected the worst off, these caps prevented even the better-off from securing housing.²⁶ Put succinctly in one editorial, the supply crisis was 'like the old game of musical chairs. There are thirteen people with only twelve chairs to sit upon.'²⁷

So deep was this crisis that it would not be possible to return to normal. In fact, the term 'business as usual' emerged out of the war: in 1914 the government claimed that the Germans would be easily defeated with no need to disrupt the economy. But as the war dragged on, 'business as usual' slid into a concerted effort to win. 'Total war' relied heavily on propaganda to motivate the country, appealing to a sense of patriotism. As asked in one Irish recruitment poster, 'Is your home worth fighting for?'²⁸ This question would take on another meaning after armistice, when nearly five million soldiers returned from the continent to their squalid Victorian tenements and terraces – reminders of class immobility.

After the war, the media focused on poor living conditions, with all the usual suspects from Victorian reportage: rats, rotting floorboards and soot-covered ceilings.²⁹ But the crisis took on a different dimension because wartime interventionism placed responsibility on the state to manage production after armistice, turning an economic crisis into a political one. Soldiers had 'been through hell ... they want something very much more positive than [preventing German victory]; and, what is more, they mean to have it'.³⁰ Labour movements seized the opportunity to postulate that 'the men who suffered, worked and fought for their country will not accept the pre-war conditions of life on their return'.³¹ One

article in *The London Magazine* presented the housing question with an ultimatum: 'bricks and mortar cost less than revolution', suggesting with tongue in cheek how aristocratic estates could be subdivided if the state did not take action.³² [Fig. 4] If the war was a crisis that devised new nationalistic sentiments to protect the homeland, those sentiments were transferred onto the subsequent housing crisis. Writings no longer talked about perfunctory 'dwellings' for the working class but of 'homes', emphasising a desire for domestic autonomy, security and tranquillity. Fearing an epidemic of communism that was spreading across the continent, the Liberal government begrudgingly took a step towards improving housing through direct intervention. Prime Minister David Lloyd George's 'Homes Fit for Heroes' programme attempted to kill three birds with one stone: to manage the quantitative supply crisis by building homes with state financing; to prevent an economic crisis by employing demobilised soldiers in construction; and to contain a political crisis by improving domestic conditions. This had immense aesthetic implications, as it was not enough to build more tenements. [Fig. 5] New housing had to be of a different nature from that of the past.³³

As once put by economist Milton Friedman, 'when [a] crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around'.³⁴ The 'Homes Fit for Heroes' programme picked up an idea lying around: the sensibilities and aesthetics of garden cities. Ebenezer Howard's garden city concept from twenty years earlier had been a rallying critique towards capitalist accumulation and urban concentration. The very first passage of the book could be seen as a poetic definition of crisis itself: 'new forces, new cravings, new aims, which had been silently gathering beneath the crust of re-action, burst suddenly into view'.³⁵ But the solutions proved detachable from the original critique. Though the new government programme employed the garden city designs of Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, they applied them to suburban housing

estates for workers around London. While they featured low-density settlements of semi-detached houses with gardens and meandering roads, they did not address Howard's call for autonomy and decentralisation.

Unwin himself was part of the Tudor Walters Committee that set the standards for new council estates. His influential pre-war publications *Town Planning in Practice* and *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding!* presented low-density settlements as an economic and pleasant alternative to typical speculative development. The picturesque placement of roads and buildings also offered more to the senses than the mechanical grids of urban developments. The semi-detached house with its hipped roof expressed some degree of individuality and enclosure, while pre-war terraces expressed soldiered repetition and endlessness.³⁶ Unwin's writings were appeals to experts – architects, developers and politicians – and employed plans, diagrams and calculations when presenting his ultimatum. [Fig. 6]

The post-armistice government programme, on the other hand, appealed to the public to buy into the virtues of private property, attempting to defuse a potentially combustible working class. Council housing estates effectively 'trained' the working class in how to maintain their own house, with fixed floor plans for single families, private walled gardens and strict rules regarding maintenance.³⁷ The council housing boom was closely mirrored by a speculative housing boom, supported by new 'building societies' that offered mortgages to a great spectrum of workers.³⁸ The crisis, which had been framed as an ultimatum between architecture or revolution, found its resolution in the aspirational qualities of home ownership. It prompted a paradigm shift as Britain morphed into a property-owning democracy in the twentieth century, ushering in not just new aesthetics but new economic concepts such as the 'property ladder' that still haunt the contemporary city.

Post-war reconstruction: framing an historical opportunity

The post-World War Two period is often characterised by its enthusiasm for expertise, as the newfound welfare state gave the reigns to architects and planners who experimented in new forms of high-rise housing, high-tech building methods and comprehensive urban design. But it was also a period of immense effort to bring the public on board with the ambitious housing programme that would make a strong break with the past. This was a component of the new welfare state, emerging not out of a fear of revolution as was the case after World War One, but out of a consensus based on principles.³⁹ The wartime coalition government's Beveridge Report set a course to attack the 'five giants' that had allowed inequality and suffering to continue. Idleness, want, disease, ignorance and squalor were the effects of business as usual, to be slain through new employment programmes, social security, the national health service, public schools and an enlarged council housing programme.⁴⁰

Crisis is a malleable term without clear boundaries, though it is generally considered more severe than a risk but less urgent than a disaster.⁴¹ As London lost 80 000 homes to the Luftwaffe and 700 000 were damaged beyond repair, this was a disaster more than a crisis per se.⁴² Heightened urgency can actually prevent a paradigm shift, as power is relinquished to existing modes of practice, given the impatient need to act. This was certainly the case in the immediate aftermath of destruction: government resources were funnelled towards repairs, temporary shelters and a continuation of pre-war estate development driven by numeric housing goals. But there was nevertheless frustration with this continuation of the status quo. Many architects saw the disaster as an opportunity to rebuild London along different lines.⁴³ The post-war Minister of Health and Housing Nye Bevan argued that 'while we shall be judged for a year or two by the number of houses we build, we shall be judged in ten years by the type of houses we build', turning the crisis from a purely quantitative into a qualitative one.⁴⁴

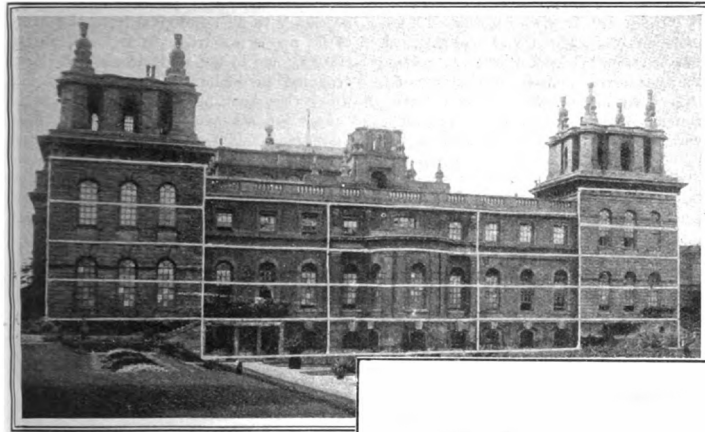


Fig. 4

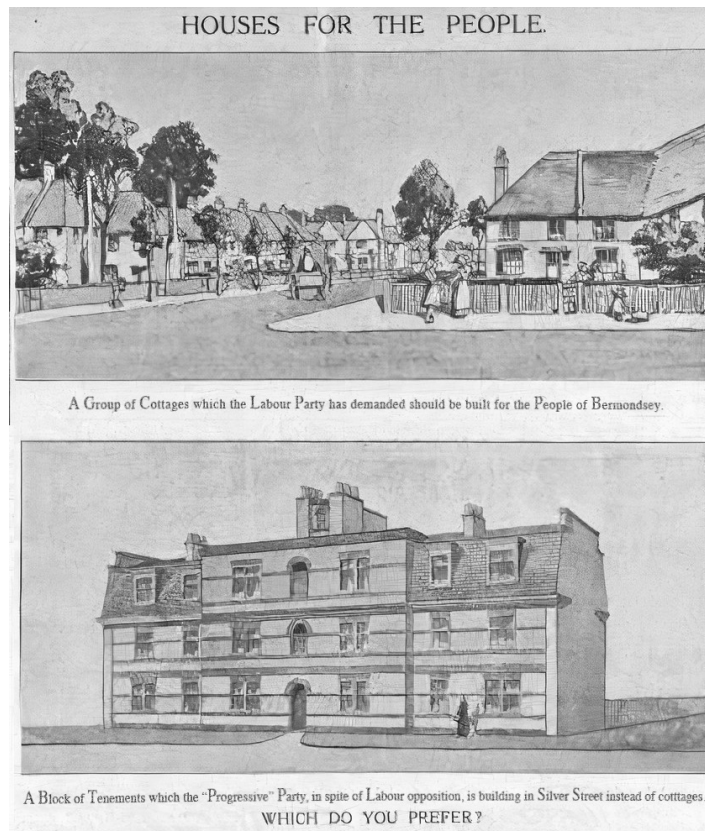


Fig. 5

Fig. 4: A magazine article about the housing shortage proposing that if the government does not step up to organise a massive building campaign, the alternative should be to seize and subdivide the estates of the wealthy. Source: Desmond Shaw, *The London Magazine*, August 1920.

Fig. 5: In the early years after the war, the emerging Labour Party promoted single-family houses for workers. Source: *Bermondsey Labour News*, 1922, Southwark Local History Library and Archive, The Wellcome Trust, licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Licence.

Diagram I.

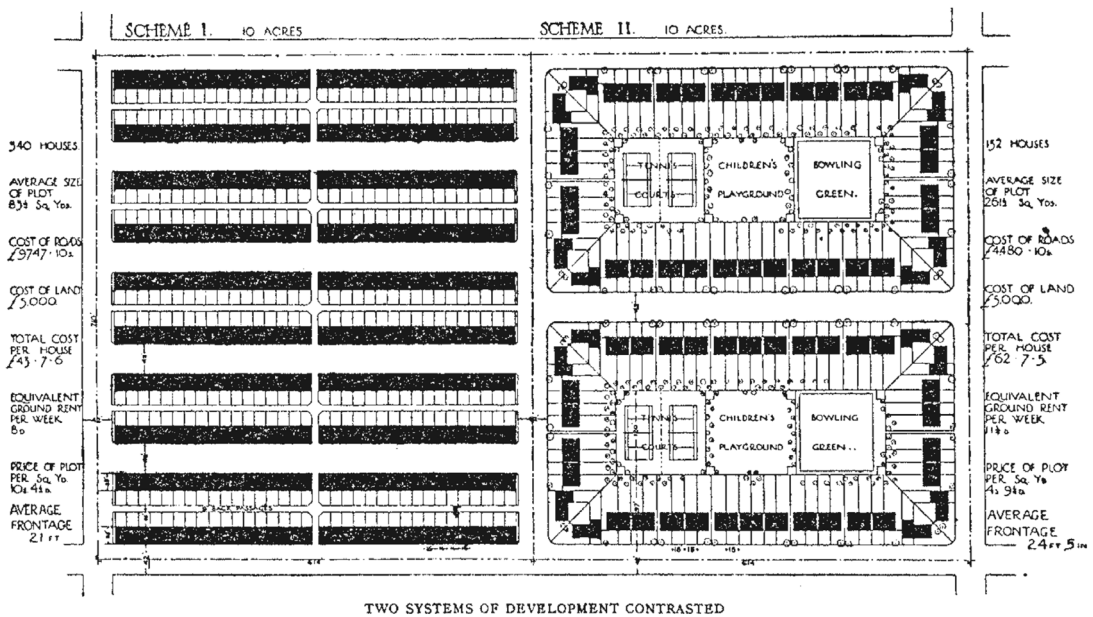


Fig. 6: Raymond Unwin's contrasting of two systems of development: 'business-as-usual' speculative development versus lower-density garden suburbs. Source: Raymond Unwin, *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1912).

The London County Council (LCC) municipality pitched this to the public as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity with their 1943 *County of London Plan*. LCC leader Lord Latham heralded the plan as a weapon in London's war 'against dirt, decay and inefficiency'. In an overt homage to Churchill's famous 'finest hour' speech, he referred to the problem as 'a grand opportunity... if we miss this chance to rebuild London, we shall have missed one of the grand moments in history'.⁴⁵ He recalled how London had previously failed to answer destiny's call in 1666, when the city was rebuilt as before after the great fire, rejecting Christopher Wren's plan for a more monumental urbanism.⁴⁶ For Koselleck, this concept of crisis as a 'final reckoning of universal significance' has been a method to place everyday decisions on a historical trajectory of immense gravity.⁴⁷

The *County of London Plan* was developed while the bombs were still dropping on the capital. Eager to rally public support for the ambitious plan, the LCC disseminated the ideas through various popular media: public exhibitions at County Hall and the Royal Academy, a promotional film and an abridged Penguin edition of the plan with illustrations by Ernő Goldfinger.⁴⁸ [Fig. 7] Throughout the era, LCC architects often drew twin sets of plans: technical drawings for experts and communicative drawings to share with local inhabitants.⁴⁹ The publication of hundreds of different pamphlets and books and the widespread use of abstract graphs, diagrams, maps and plans were meant to create a technically literate and congenial public.

LCC propaganda was thorough in its attack on pre-war conditions: the old *laissez-faire* cacophony of industrial and residential development, obsolete housing and congested streets. The film 'Proud City' explained that while London had once been a constellation of towns and hamlets with their own centres and boundaries, uncontrolled growth had dissolved those boundaries. [Fig. 8] It made a popular appeal to make London great again by restoring the concept of neighbourhood units at

different scales.⁵⁰ It also attacked what Minister Bevan called 'East Ends and West Ends', the spatial segregation of the city that had maintained an antiquated class system.⁵¹

The 1951 Festival of Britain also used its platform to criticise the status quo. In addition to a prototypical new neighbourhood built in the East End, the exhibition featured a replica of a typical 'jerry-built' house: imitating shoddily built cottages that were typically erected by speculators. 'Gremlin Grange' featured 'all the major mistakes of which unscientific builders are guilty'. [Fig. 9] It featured a leaking roof, an uneven foundation, poorly designed chimney flues, cracked walls and inadequate daylighting.⁵² It served as a foil, demonstrating that industrial methods of construction were both superior and necessary to meet housing demands. As one reporter claimed, the British public was accustomed to thinking of the home in 'old-world terms', with their preference for 'Tudor, ingle-nook, the roses round the door'.⁵³ The crumbling pavilion was a reminder of what could occur if they did not adapt their preferences and seize the opportunity the crisis had presented.

It goes without saying that the architecture of housing in this period placed itself in juxtaposition with the old. Many council architects were heavily influenced by the continental avant-garde modernists. One of the ubiquitous photographic tropes of the era is that of the modern tower rising from the ancient city. But the meaning of such dialectical images shifted in the period, from first optimistically signalling the beginning of a new epoch, towards later vilifying failed paternalistic housing.⁵⁴ Part of that shift occurred decades after construction, as Thatcher's 'right to buy' policy and the marginalisation of council housing created stark divisions between the private and public realms.⁵⁵

London today: folk politics and the perpetual crisis

Since the 2008 global financial crisis – not a housing supply crisis but one that involved home

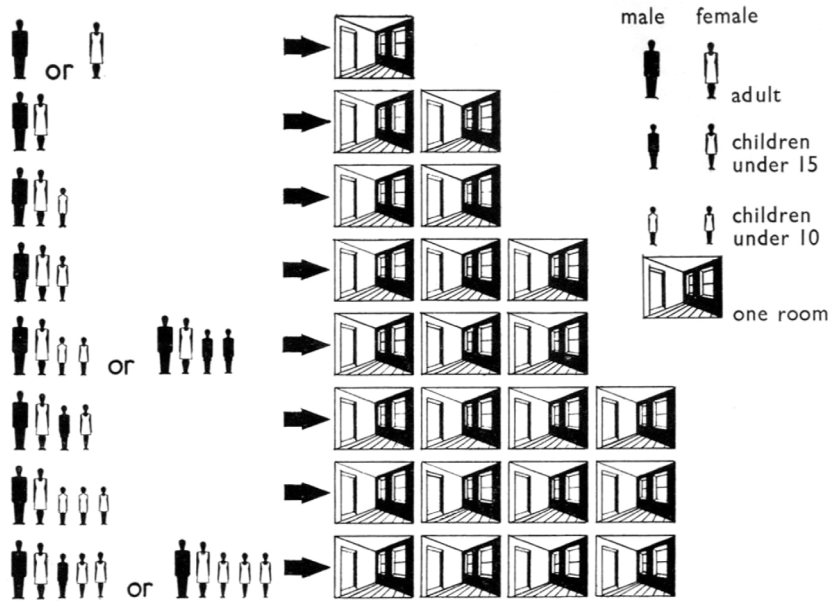


Fig. 7

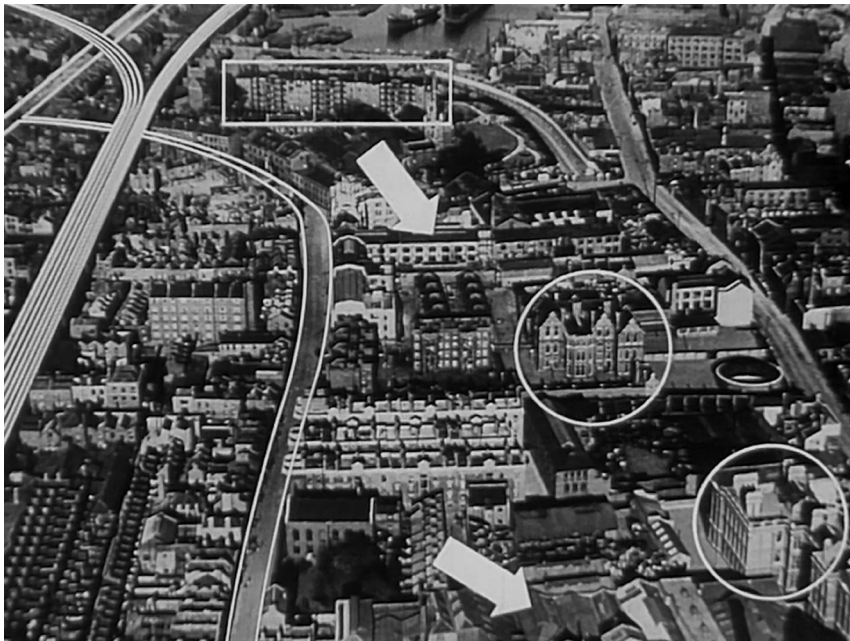


Fig. 8

Fig. 7: Diagram of housing needs, from the popular illustrated edition of the 1943 LCC plan. Source: E.J. Carter and Ernő Goldfinger, *The County of London Plan* (London: Penguin Books, 1945).

Fig. 8: An image of overcrowded and chaotic Stepney in East London used as evidence to highlight the need for urban planning. Still from the LCC's promotional film 'Proud City', 1945.

mortgages – there has been much scholarship on crisis in general. But rarely is the premise of crisis itself questioned.⁵⁶ Chronic shortages in London, festering over several decades for a variety of reasons, have severely hindered affordability and led to a universal recognition of the crisis and agreement around its solution: build more houses.⁵⁷ This is founded in the classical economic theory of supply and demand, a *ceteris paribus* ('all else being equal') condition that only works in stasis.⁵⁸ Some marginal voices warn that increasing supply would rather lead to an 'if you build it, they will come' scenario.⁵⁹ Beyond these minor opinions, popular consensus has revolved around a unquestioned theory of supply and demand.

At the same time, the term 'crisis' has lost its productive urgency. Crisis was once, in the words of Koselleck, 'meant to reduce the room for manoeuvre, forcing the actors to choose between diametrically opposed alternatives'.⁶⁰ But this is no longer the case. The systemic questions of land scarcity, construction expense and unequal access are no longer building 'towards a crisis' and therefore resolution. The term is used rather to describe a pervasive phenomenon.⁶¹

While earlier generations of architects were engaged in debates, today they have relegated themselves to solving problems posed by others, or they pose questions external to their discipline.⁶² With such a high level of public economic literacy, the situation is devoid of popular appeal to the senses. For example, a comprehensive 2015 report and exhibition by the New London Architecture research centre frames the crisis in a series of statistics and graphs. It presents the viewpoints of real estate developers, bureaucrats and project managers, who place the issue within their disciplinary understanding, focusing on the need for planning reforms, political action or land assembly. But the discussion of architecture is limited to the responses to a design competition, defined along topics such as densification and faster construction.⁶³

As another example, Patrik Schumacher, principal at Zaha Hadid Architects, has penned an essay for the Adam Smith Institute in which he blames the UK's regulatory regime for housing shortages. He claims that Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) democratic action blocks new development, motivated by a desire among the property-owning class to keep prices high.⁶⁴ What is striking is that Schumacher, an architect at a firm renowned for its striking taste, makes no mention of aesthetics in this five-thousand-word statement and shrugs off concerns that deregulation will usher in a new era of slums.

In the absence of any qualitative agenda, architectural initiatives that address the crisis are largely ineffective. They could be categorised by what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have recently coined 'folk politics': a brand of do-gooder populism that relies on 'common sense' notions of the world – intuitions that are historically constructed and not always correct. Folk politics places emphasis on the human scale, the authentic and the immediate while looking with suspicion towards the strategic and scalable.⁶⁵ Folk political solutionism has become commonplace in the architectural discipline, reacting to what is perceived as an external problem, rather than initiating a change to the discipline itself.⁶⁶ Spatial immediacy makes every problem local, but it avoids confronting a housing crisis that is regional or international in nature, linked to global flows of labour and capital. Temporal immediacy, favouring action today over planning for tomorrow, can be seen in the popularity of 'pop-up' solutions, 'meanwhile projects' and infill housing that make insignificant contributions to the housing question.⁶⁷ Conceptual immediacy emphasises the uniqueness of every problem while doubting universality, making each group's housing problems distinct and rendering collective action impossible. The result is a blooming of self-help housing, promoted by architects that want to build and a municipality that wishes to divert the problem to the individual.⁶⁸ Instead of criticising the neoliberal agenda that places responsibility on the individual, the architecture of self-help legitimises it.

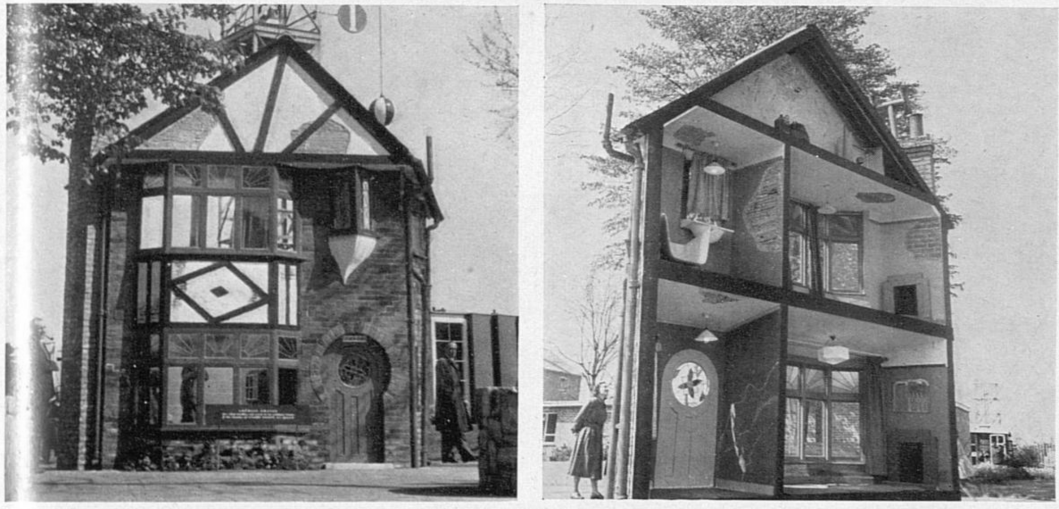


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Fig. 9: 'Gremlin Grange', a pavilion in the 1951 Festival of Britain which depicts the practices of 'unscientific builders' as a foil to modern construction methods. Source: 'Live Architecture at Poplar', *The Sphere*, 2 June 1951.

Fig.10: 'New development may be the cause of ugliness; but it can also be the cure'. Source: *Living with Beauty* (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 30 January 2020).

In a recent article on the narratives of the London housing crisis, Julia Heslop and Emma Ormerod point to the Grenfell Tower disaster of 2017 as a moment in which the prevailing practices of deregulation and austerity were challenged. The fire, which killed seventy-two inhabitants and injured seventy more due to fire-combustible cladding panels added in a retrofit of a social housing block, was deemed a symptom of social neglect that had valued a cosmetic improvement over the lives of those who lived there.⁶⁹ Though the disaster has contributed to a growing discourse on inequality, it has not yet generated a strong architectural response. Architects sympathetic to social housing are uneasy about further condemnation.⁷⁰ And the fire has sparked doubt about the safety of new flats, putting architects in a tricky situation amid the pressure to densify.⁷¹

But there is one faction that recognises how aesthetics contributes to the crisis: the conservative 'Policy Matters' think tank. Their 2018 publication 'Building More, Building Beautiful' claims that the poor quality of new developments is to blame for NIMBYism. [Fig. 10] The document was headed by Sir Roger Scruton, a long-time critic of modern architecture's 'problem-solving approach'.⁷² The think tank claims that if new developments looked better, locals would be more welcoming and more houses could be built.⁷³ The document's findings were transformed into the government 'Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission'. Taking the side of the NIMBYists who want to protect their assets, the Tories have problematised the crisis around the issue of poor contemporary design. They promote a 'fast track' for good design, allowing developers with a proven track record to skip part of the approval process.⁷⁴ The government has also established a new steering group that will 'embed beauty, design and quality into the planning system'. This task force is headed by Nicholas Boys Smith, whose campaign group 'Create Streets' promotes 'beautiful, sustainable places of gentle density that will be popular'.⁷⁵

There are a number of contradictions between the movement's rhetorical populist call for beauty and its prescriptions of what is beautiful. It bemoans architects' elitism and promotes individuals' choice, yet Scruton requests 'education of the general public to *want* specific details, specific styles, specific materials'.⁷⁶ Boys Smith claims that 'we go with what the people prefer', but simultaneously pushes specific designs supported by a vast catalogue of 'scientific' expertise: studies that correlate urban form with crime rates and facade expression with behaviour.⁷⁷ Populism here meets a strain of pseudo-scientific paternalism. The movement vilifies modernism's association with mass production, yet it champions Victorian and Georgian styles that were themselves products of ruthless template-based speculation. It attacks twentieth-century council housing as 'vertical slums', but some critics claim that the Conservative Party's simultaneous deregulation efforts will usher in the 'slums of tomorrow'.⁷⁸ And finally, it is unclear how the commission's 'fast track' policy, favouring large-scale developers with predictable design methods, would actually concede more democratic control to locals.

Unsurprisingly, the architectural community has been quick to shake off this new movement as a 'tedious hangover from 1980s', referring to Prince Charles' former appeals for vernacular architecture. By dismantling the welfare state and its architecture, the new movement apparently seeks an appropriate image for a hierarchical society rooted in an inegalitarian past.⁷⁹ Architect Douglas Murphy calls the commission an 'alt-right aesthetic movement' and claims that 'our current housing crisis has almost nothing to do with aesthetics, modern or traditional, but rather is to do with land, wealth and exploitation'.⁸⁰

But despite the commission's dubious intentions and contradictions, it has picked up on something that the Left has long ignored. This is not a return to Prince Charles's style wars, but an unearthing of two hundred years of urban trauma associated with

housing crisis. While architects promote density on economic and ecological grounds, congestion conjures images of slums in the popular imagination.⁸¹ Even in commendable new council housing, architects fall back on Victorian-era housing types such as back-to-backs, long condemned for their poor lighting and ventilation.⁸² Co-living is heralded as a hip new method to overcome demographic problems, but there are still fears in the popular press that ‘decent homes’ will become ‘scenes of filth and degradation’, recalling Victorian concerns about overlapping social bubbles.⁸³ And self-building is celebrated by entrepreneurs and architects as way of bypassing a dysfunctional market, but it might all sound like jerry-building in the ears of the public.⁸⁴ Attempts to solve a quantitative crisis run up against a long-gestating qualitative one, which requires engagement with popular sentiment.

Conclusion: challenging scarcity

Crisis is controlled by narratives that are sedimented in the public imagination. The narrative use of the term has itself evolved: from a moral judgement, to a question of political legitimacy, to a historic rupture and finally to a permanent condition of scarcity today. While poor conditions in the nineteenth century were building ‘towards a crisis’ and therefore a resolution, the gravity of the term has been lost today. The types of images used in discourse across time reveal a gradual shift in how the housing question has been framed: from a qualitative problem presented in illustrations to a quantitative problem presented through statistics. There has likewise been a gradual shift in the role of the architect: from contributing towards the construction of the problem and offering a qualitative solution, to responding to a numeric problem today, when the discipline’s aesthetic capacity apparently matters very little.

In order to corral the crisis into the realm of architecture, one productive route might be to consider the cultural formula of scarcity that has fed the numeric problem. As Jeremy Till reveals, concepts

of scarcity have shifted across time from Malthus to environmentalism and have become enacted in architecture, a discipline wrapped up in economic means of building.⁸⁵ Scarcity is not always determined by the planet itself but by human agents that regulate supply in the interest of stabilising prices.⁸⁶ The British concept of the property ladder, using the home as a tradeable asset, places exchange value over use and feeds on the insufficiency of housing stock.

The property ladder is founded in a belief that the market is a zero-sum game, where one’s loss is another’s gain. This is a folk economic theory – a populist idea based on intuition rather than scientific fact.⁸⁷ Economists have already suggested that policies should be changed to incentivise development and reduce asset protectionism.⁸⁸ But this might require a simultaneous popular and cultural shift, from exchange value towards use values, from the image of the home as fixed asset towards an image of the home as a site of production, from an implied competition between adjoining pieces of property to an implied collaboration. This would require an embrace of large-scale and long-term planning beyond the confines of individual projects with which architects have become comfortable – overcoming the folk-political tendency to make immediate but ineffective gestures. Taking a cue from the right-wing Building Beautiful movement, an adequate supply need not be met with resistance, if aesthetic and urban considerations make a positive contribution towards the city.

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Biography

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