

The Height of Ignorance in Housing

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Housing is bought and sold, and it is sometimes rented for an economic price. In this way it is a commodity, like motor cars, television sets, and other things we can obtain in markets. But housing is much more than an economic commodity. It expresses life's aspirations; our experiences of home are implanted in our mind and our memories; and in all sorts of ways it can influence the nature of relationships between children, men, and women. Housing has a part in the creation and reinforcement of relationships among people. Seen in this way, housing is associated with ideals, with expectations, and with hopes in our very humanity. It is meant to be a dwelling where there is peace, security, warmth among those who live there, and some sense of independence. Human realities do not always harmonise with human ideals.

But ideals have some sort of a chance where a home can be created in a neighbourly and secure environment. Ideals can fall apart where the housing is seen as oppressive and depressing, or in places where public areas are vandalised and unsafe to walk through. The rich can buy their way out of bad places, but the poor and those on modest incomes have much less choice. Consequently it does matter a lot in the way housing either creates good human responses or, in contrast, sets the scene for social anonymity and destructive relationships.

The height of ignorance in high housing is also there for all to see. It reaches to the sky, sometimes standing thirty storeys tall. This sort of housing was built in large volume during the 1960s in Western Europe, and, in Britain it marked a break with the past when housing for the workers had been built in cottages and terraces. A cottage is built by carpenters, bricklayers, labourers, and people who use their hands in traditional skills. It can be loved, made snug and warm in winter, and adorned with flowers from the garden in summer. Children can play outside, with mother casting a caring and supervising eye from a window not far away. By contrast, a high-rise block is represented by architects and professionals as a 'technological masterpiece' of the twentieth century. It is systems built, having steel girders bolted together, concrete panels, aluminium frames for the windows, and a

large number inscribed on the wall to identify it from those around it which, otherwise, look the same. Apartments in the blocks are sanitary and functional, and within the walls women, children and men can make them reasonably homely. Outside the walls, problems can arise. Lifts can be vandalised, thieves and perverts can walk in a highly peopled but anonymous environment, and children's play areas are a distant view from windows set twenty storeys into the sky. The contrasts are stark, and often they are personally important in the lives of people, with some considerable social implications.

Much high-rise housing has been associated with oppressive social conditions. At the worst, crime and vandalism dominate the environment, and sometimes the psychologically depressed leap to their suicide. These are extreme examples, and we can acknowledge that some high-rise housing has worked satisfactorily for its residents. The really interesting point, however, is that the idea of modernised life in tower blocks was born of social idealism. Where the results were bad, they were not intended at all, for the architects, town planners, and housing managers had something very beneficial in mind. They believed that high density living would create a sense of 'community' and an everyday experience of apolitical 'socialism' in the lives of the people. This was deeply embedded in housing theory and housing history. What was different about the 1960s was that the technology for massive production became readily available. Systems building became widespread, with some early initiatives originating in France and Denmark. It was not cheap housing, and except for some isolated luxury expression for the rich, in countries such as Britain and Australia it was not the type of housing favoured by those who purchased for home ownership. However, the situation was entirely different for public housing and for strongly subsidised 'social' housing in Britain, Western Europe, and in East European socialist countries. Government housing agencies were supported with powerful subsidies from central governments to build in high volume to overcome large shortages. The urgency was to build extensively to fill chronic deficits in housing supply in countries which had experienced rapid urbanisation, wartime devastation, and low rates of production in the economic depression of the 1930s. The systems technologies and the subsidies at hand in a period of economic growth and full employment seemed to provide an appropriate solution to the housing problem.

The housing theory supporting high-rise housing was an entangled and confused mixture of ideas from town planning, socialism, and the circumstances of history. Some of the key elements from social and housing theory run along the following lines. Some reformist socialists believed that home ownership was 'capitalist', and argued that rental tenure in public housing was more expressive of nonexploitive socialism. But tenure was not the only issue perceived to be relevant in housing. The theory of 'environmental determinism' was implanted deeply both in the town planning profession and among socialist reformers. In practical terms in housing, this meant that advocates saw high-density living and the provision of community facilities such as kindergartens, laundries, and meeting rooms as the way to create socialism

and a sense of community. By contrast, they argued that owner-occupied cottages encouraged a privatised and greedy way to living. Some advocates for high-rise housing went further, drawing upon economic arguments. They argued that high-rise housing is a better economic proposition than cottage or terraces because it saves land and it requires less expenditure on access roads, drainage, sewerage networks, piped water, and electricity cables. All of this became a professional belief system, and when it was challenged by critics in the early 1970s it was strongly defended on the basis of 'clan loyalties' and the survival of housing bureaucracies.

Some aspects of 'clan loyalty' and idealism had been written into housing history. Housing provides a way of conspicuously demonstrating principles in practical projects. Sometimes projects attract publicity and attention, even on an international scale. Such was the case of Vienna in the 1920s. In the years 1919-1934 the Social Democrats controlled city government in Vienna. They set about reforms, creating a system of progressive taxes, and adopting strong initiatives in social welfare, particularly in housing (Hardy and Kuczynski 1934). A solution to the housing problem required cheap land and initiatives in constructing new dwellings. Initially, the city government constructed temporary (emergency) housing and finished some unfinished private rental housing. Then in 1923 it launched a vast building programme. Some construction was in the form of four, five and six-storied tenements, set around open squares and having communal laundries and kindergartens. These housing projects attracted a wide European interest which was symbolised in the description of 'dwelling palaces' for the workers. Vienna became part of the folklore of housing history. When the more recent systems building technologies were ready for use in the 1960s, they came into a historical context where more ideology ran in favour of high-rise housing. A new generation of architects embraced the new civil engineering technology in housing. Tall blocks could be built in open spaces with trees and lawns. The built form could be accepted as 'daring', 'bold', and expressive of 'modernity' and 'progress'. Architects were confident that the new creations could work well socially. They would bring people spatially together; working class street life in the terraces could be taken into new surroundings, with 'streets in the sky'; and people could be separated from unsafe motor traffic on the real streets. Professional confidence was strong in the technical qualities and the high standards available in a 'modern' technology.

The theory and the ideology rested upon abstract argument rather than evidence. It also excluded any critical alternative arguments. In fact, the theory could be challenged and unpicked, point by point. Some densities can be too high for reasonable living conditions, and some relatively high densities can be achieved in projects with mixtures of terraces, cottages, and low-rise (walk-up) apartments. When all economic costs are considered, high-rise housing is more expensive per dwelling than cottages or terraces. High-rise adds substantially to construction and maintenance costs (Stone 1963). High-density also adds demands upon local schools, health, and other services which may have to be expanded. Rather than just privatising life, cottages

and terraces may add to socially co-operative behaviour in the family and in the wider community. It is easier to design space in a flow from personal, to semi-public, and then to public characteristics, and all of this is important in the idea of defensible personal space and social interaction. High-rise often just creates private space set starkly against an anonymous public space, and it has open areas which are underused. Home ownership is not egalitarian, though the poorest are often excluded for reasons of affordability and preference. Ownership in housing to moderate-income groups will provide some limited, but important, equalising tendencies in the ownership of wealth. It is, of course, also important to provide a good stock of private and social rental housing for reasons of increasing housing opportunity and as a counter to income and housing poverty. The foregoing statements can be used thematically and critically to challenge those who gave cause for high-rise blocks in mass public housing.

Clearly we can find good intellectual reasoning to reverse and reform the 1960s expressions of systems built housing. But reform is seldom achieved from intellectual argument alone: power has ultimate significance in the battle for persuasive intellectual arguments. The reformers opposing high-rise might expect contention, disinformation, censorship, and suppression. Clan loyalties to an entrenched belief in the virtue of high-rise housing would mean that a contest for persuasion and power would ensue. A possibility would then arise that attempts would be made by the advocates of high-rise housing to use their power to suppress opposition. They had the power of employer control in the bureaucracies administering housing. This gave them control and power over employment, research, publication, and support from the construction industry which depended upon housing contracts. As for the reformers, they had to win power, taking opportunity in research, in the media, and occasionally in the housing bureaucracies.

The remainder of this article examines the contest for power and persuasion, with an emphasis upon the history of suppression and its nature. My approach is to focus on the personal experiences of one of the advocates for reform. The reasons for this are several and they add interest to the wider contest between protagonists and antagonists in high-rise housing. Ultimately it is individuals who are suppressed, and consequently suppression has its personal and human dimensions. Also, this contest for power and persuasion ranged over a period of some two decades, and sometimes it is possible to find a personal and career life in housing which covered the whole period in varied situations. We can find such a biography of life in housing. Joan Ash served as an elected representative on London County Council, with extensive experience on its Housing Committee. After she departed from the Council with some disillusionment, within a few years she joined a housing research team which was pioneering sociological survey work in some of London's public housing estates. Her interpretations of tenants' attitudes differed from those of her more conforming colleagues and her research contract was not renewed. In her next housing experience, Joan Ash joined a research team in

the British government's Department of the Environment. Her role was to bring sociology into interface with architectural design and thereby to try to influence new design work in housing. This clearly would bring sociological research into contention with high-rise housing. Sometimes the results of the sociological work were ignored; and publications delayed for years. Joan Ash left the Department of the Environment, and has since been a housing consultant, author on housing, and much involved in the development of international sociological conferences on housing. Joan Ash is an Oxford graduate, a mother, and a good companion to those who travel and write about social housing. She lives in a pleasant home of character; set in trees, in Kingston-on-Thames, London. Joan Ash has seen and visited housing estates throughout Britain, in the United States, in Singapore, in Australia, in Hungary, in Sweden, and in many other places. She is very much at home among the poor and in areas where ethnic minorities live. What follows is very largely a biography of her housing life.

Housing policy and the London County Council

The London County Council (LCC) has a central place in British housing history. It was created under the 1888 Local Government Act, with the result that London had a new democratically and directly elected metropolitan government, replacing the indirectly elected Metropolitan Board of Works. From the beginning, it was moderate socialist theory and working class politics which influenced the LCC, ensuring strong support for public housing and municipal socialism. Wishing to have clearer powers and effectiveness in public housing, the LCC made representations to central government, and those were met under the 1890 Housing of Working Classes Act. Public housing was set to expand in London and in British provincial cities. In London the LCC continued the slum clearance work begun by the former Metropolitan Board of Works. It moved towards a monopoly in social housing by imposing higher and uneconomic standards on the East End Dwelling Company and other organisations building low-profit and nonprofit housing for workers. The LCC justified its policies on the basis of improving standards of convenience and beauty in low-income housing. In fact, the LCC was proud of its innovation in housing. After 1897 it built some suburban rental estates, adding to its inner-urban tenements and slum clearance work.

Public housing expanded in volume and significance, following the 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act. This Act provided central government subsidies for public housing constructed by local government. Boosted by subsidies, by the 1960s British public housing provided over 30 per cent of the total housing stock. During the course of the history of public housing, some features were incorporated into subsidies for slum clearance which, later, facilitated high-rise housing. In the late 1920s, Sir E. D. Simon, Lord Mayor of Manchester, 1921-1922, publicised the case for more effort in slum clearance. He advocated heavier subsidies for slum clearance, linked to family size and to local governments' slum clearance activities. The 1930 Housing Act gave effect to Simon's ideas, and under some economy measures during

the Great Depression, public housing in the 1930s became confined to slum clearance. The wider subsidies for new construction were restored after the Second World War. It was at that stage that Joan Ash was elected to the LCC.

Joan Ash was an elected councillor on the LCC from 1946 to 1949, and she was a member of the Housing Committee from 1946 to 1955, serving her last six years as a coopted member. This was a period of gross housing shortage following wartime devastation, a cutback in building in the Depression, and continued population growth. The urgency was to build in volume, with little time for consideration of the finer points of the sociology of housing. Generally the new tenants were pleased to have housing at all, and the LCC provided higher standards of comfort and convenience than those found typically in low-income private rental housing. Tenants had some housing choice. Inner-urban housing was mostly in tenement form, with central areas having densities of 200 persons per acre in high-rise flats, and other noncentral areas having densities of 100 to 136 persons in mixed developments of houses, low-rise and hiag-rise tenements. It was not until the 1960s that 'high-rise' went above six storeys. Other tenants could choose suburban housing estates built in the form of houses, but requiring longer journeys to work.

Joan Ash has reflected upon her experience in those crucial years when housing was desperately short in supply. She learned some years later that an LCC architect had designed some 'blind side' houses which could achieve densities of 100 persons per acre: but the Housing Committee was not informed of this. Such townhouse developments, of course, became popular in the private sector, and they were cheap to construct. Generally, the Housing Committee could not act effectively, either in policy development or in review of housing project proposals. The projects presented to the Committee were fully detailed and scarcely capable of substantive amendment. Professionals and chief officers dominated the process of conceiving, producing, and presenting project proposals within their preordained density norms. Discussion was all but eliminated. In Joan Ash's words (1987, p. 2):

"We backbenchers spent hours at Council and Committee meetings, but anything more than a brief intervention from us was regarded as a nuisance. At Council meetings the Chief Whip was busy going round telling members NOT to speak. The show was run by party leaders, who were also chairmen of the major committees, working closely with Chief Officers. Backbenchers were needed only to vote and as a pool from which to draw replacements for members retiring from official positions."

As we might expect in the nine years that Joan Ash spent on the Housing Committee, "there was never once a discussion on housing policy, either in the housing majority party group or in the Committee." In particular, there was also never any discussion of housing design, housing form, or management problems. Officers simply presented project proposals and statistics on building volume and slum clearance. Members of Council sometimes visited 'showpiece' estates, but did not view and visit estates generally to find out

how residents felt about the housing, or to evaluate in critical perspective. Joan Ash, who was on the LCC Education Committee, did visit schools and learned about actual teaching conditions from a friend, but she had no such contacts in housing. In housing, Joan Ash was aware that working class families preferred houses to apartments, but the Chief Housing Architect dismissed her idea that additional houses could be built if the high-rise elements were built higher still. In the light of subsequent housing trends it was a good suggestion, but it could not influence policy. Policy was predetermined, without discussion among the elected members.

Evidence began to materialise on tenant attitudes to high-rise housing. A senior architect in the LCC initiated a survey and it was reported after Joan Ash had left the Housing Committee. Families with children preferred houses. However, the survey indicated general "satisfaction" with the LCC apartments, and it was this aspect of the survey which was emphasised within the LCC. Meanwhile in the late 1950s new designs for the new systems built blocks were in preparation in the architects' sections of the LCC and in other local government authorities. The design process had ignored tenant opinion and no initiatives were taken to collect more detailed information in user feedback surveys. The housing for the 1960s was predetermined from the drawing boards of the late 1950s. Some new estates were to be enormous, with large concrete slabs, deck access to apartments, 'walkways' in the sky, and millions of pounds of cost. Joan Ash noticed that problems would become aggravated. Resident caretakers were removed from the estates and placed in central housing offices to reduce costs. This occurred at the same time as the social composition of housing estates was changing. In the early post-war years housing was in such short supply that public housing was allocated to a large range of social and income groups, including people in skilled occupations. As housing supplies increased generally in the British housing system, some better-off tenants transferred to home ownership in private housing. London's public housing was increasingly becoming housing for low-income and low skilled households. The new high-rise housing would be peopled with much less social mix than the older tenements.

To this stage in the high-rise housing history, suppression had been mild and in the background. Evidence was available that families preferred houses rather than apartments, and an occasional architect had shown that satisfactory densities could be achieved in low-rise and mixed form housing. But all of this was set aside in favour of the prevailing norms in housing projects and in the strong social cause of adding significantly to the volume of supply. Had supply been low, then social problems in housing would have been extensive, especially with a lack of access among low income households. As Joan Ash herself notes (1987, p. 4) the really disturbing feature to this stage was the nature of local government. Elected representatives were serving narrow party interests rather than broad welfare. Also, the elected representatives were dominated by senior professional and administrative officers whose knowledge of housing was more technical than social. It was an age when

social science had little influence in professional practice in housing and urbanisation. Social scientists awakened to relevance and critical analysis after the mid-1960s. This was a time when systems building was strong and established. This earlier period was also one which did not have much in the way of policy analysis and evaluation of programme performance, those things becoming more common in the 1970s. For Joan Ash, the role of a passive and uncritical elected representative was unacceptable. She took her talents in housing and social science to other parts of the housing process.

The Centre for Urban Studies, University College of London

The sociology of housing and urbanisation stood at a watershed in the late 1950s. Its history was mixed, and few universities had much in the way of teaching and research in the field. Studies of poverty had relevance to housing because housing absorbed a high proportion of household expenditure and the poor often lived in substandard slum conditions. Other studies in the 1930s reviewed some public housing estates in the suburbs, emphasising the problems of creating a 'community' in new areas, compared with the cohesive social networks in older parts of cities. But the main theoretical view of housing and urbanisation was closely tied to the theory of 'environmental determinism'. From the 1920s urban specialists had argued that bad housing was responsible for a 'culture' of poverty, for delinquency, crime, and other social problems. In short, their view was that if housing were to be improved, social problems could be reduced. This was inverted causation, and in the light of studies of economics and sociology in the 1960s we now know that it is low income and social structure which are the causal elements in slum living. At the end of the 1950s, urban sociology was poised to take two separate developments. One would look at urbanisation as a whole and the theories which guided it, leading to corrections to the theory of environmental determinism. This approach was established by Broady (1968) and Gans (1972). The other approach was to extend social survey work in housing. Ruth Glass at the Centre for Urban Studies was an earlier pioneer in the modern development of this work. Joan Ash joined her research team at the Centre for Urban Studies in 1958. The survey work was of public housing in the LCC Lansbury estate at Poplar and the Westminster City Council estate at Churchill Gardens.

The survey work was an elevating and insightful experience for Joan Ash. Her interests went far beyond those of developing a superior technical index to measure 'tenant satisfaction'. She was interested in the tenants themselves, their housing experience, the way estates were managed, and the social problems in evidence. This was not entirely the purpose which the Centre for Urban Studies had in mind. Its emphasis was upon the 'scientific' aspects of survey work, ways of reporting the results which would be impressive in the new housing literature, and building up wider academic confidence in the intellectual credentials of the work. It is, of course, possible to combine some rationalist science with human and social causes. But to achieve this there has to be some common interests among the researchers. For Joan Ash,

the experience showed her "how to obtain feedback from tenants and identify problems and unmet needs" (Ash 1987, p. 4). However, for Ruth Glass and her senior research officer, John Westergaard, the research was set to achieve other purposes, in the words of Joan Ash (1987, p. 5) :

"The CUS surveys showed, as usual at that time, that residents were generally satisfied. The questionnaires were not designed to probe problems, but problems with children were reported. Although Ruth Glass was one of the few urban sociologists in Britain at that time, and had some outstanding abilities, she was not particularly interested in the detailed needs of residents—she assumed architects would look after them. Nor did she realise the limitations of the index of satisfaction."

Joan Ash found what she was looking for, regardless of the narrow confines of the questionnaires. Churchill Gardens had a "superlatively well-organised .. tenants' movement." Her contacts with the tenants' association meant that she had a ready way to obtain information about the housing estates, writing up the history of the tenants' movement and comparing experiences on various housing estates in south London. What did Joan Ash find? High-density estates had gangs of youths who broke up youth clubs manned by volunteers; the gangs taunted and booted homosexuals in the area; and the housing authorities would not support the tenants' associations' representations for social planning in the estates. In social planning, attempts would be made to use leadership among tenants to develop neighbourhood activities and to provide clubrooms. Ruth Glass was not interested in these aspects of high-density living among working-class families, contending that "cities required a high density to realise their social, cultural, and economic potential" (Joan Ash's words 1987, p. 5).

Joan Ash worked on the 'scientific' side of the survey with John Westergaard. The results were written up by Westergaard without consulting Joan Ash. She thought the conclusions in the report were not based on the survey data, and asked for her name to be deleted from the authorship of the report. The result was that Joan Ash's research contract was not renewed. She had learned things about the world of academics and research. Very often, academics will appoint people who are sympathetic to their own views and remove those with opposing views. Sometimes academics will be less than 'objective', and 'scientific', even in research which is designed for technical excellence. However, Joan Ash had obtained research experience at the Centre for Urban Studies, and opportunities for sociological research would grow in the 1960s. She was able to continue her career at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government at the Department of the Environment, as Research Officer.

The Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Department of the Environment

Joan Ash was Research Officer in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government from 1961 to 1966. This was a time when systems building

housing expanded rapidly in Britain, reaching 50 per cent of the annual output of local government housing by 1965. Joan Ash worked in the sociological section of the Research and Development Group which had the purpose of bringing innovation and experiment to architectural design. Essentially, the sociologists were to conduct surveys of user needs and these social dimensions were to be used by architects to design new forms and features in housing. At the end of the process, the new designs would be subject to evaluation and feedback. In potential, the course was set for early modification or basic revision of systems built housing which was built over 15 storeys into the sky. The potential might not be realised, of course, because professional contentions, bureaucratic inertia, and passive politicians stood between the research and the policy ends of the housing process.

The surveys were organised as intensive reviews of households *in situ* in public housing, with sociologists and architects operating together. Innovations began to flow in the 'micro' detail of design in houses and apartments, but much less so in the larger issues of the estates as a whole. These larger issues revolved around the extent to which high-rise forms should be used at all in public housing, and the proportionate mixes of houses, low-rise, and high-rise blocks. At times the architects, who dominated the Research and Development Group, resisted criticism from user feedback studies. For example, significant condensation problems occurred in some dwellings, and the sociologists recognised this as a fault from design and construction. However, the architects blamed this on the way residents used their dwellings. The most significant surveys were in the new high-rise blocks. Joan Ash (1987, p. 7) presents graphic descriptions of the conditions :

"One of the three estates we studied on our high-rise survey was in Liverpool. Whatever type of dwelling they lived in, the tenants on this estate were much less satisfied than the tenants on the estates in London and Leeds which we also surveyed. I was shocked by the conditions on the Liverpool estate: the grounds and communal areas were in a very bad state and the estate was surrounded by derelict land covered with unhealthy and dangerous rubbish. It was on that estate that there was bad condensation in some blocks and in other blocks people were freezing because they could not afford the electric underfloor heating what had been installed. Whilst interviewing there, I was asked to sit on nappies to help to dry them and my breath condensed and hung in the air. It was not part of my duty but I went to see someone in the Liverpool Housing Department to find out why this estate was in such a bad way. I was told the tenants were a bunch of roughs and that it was no good doing repairs. Again, the victims were being blamed. We had interviewed a fair sample of tenants and their worst attribute appeared to be their debilitating poverty. The generally highly respectable tenants needed support from the council rather than neglect and lack of response to their reasonable requests."

This evaluation was one thing as an impression from a good researcher, but it was quite another if these sorts of things were published. In fact, the

survey work was being collected for a Ministry publication entitled "Families Living at High Density." Joan Ash had found plenty to be critical about, and her surveys revealed the unsuitability of high-rise housing for low-income families. One major problem was that mothers could not adequately supervise the play activities of children in the areas outside the apartments. However, this sociological research could not stop high-rise housing in its tracks. Architects selectively ignored what they chose to oppose. They went further. Some new visions of walkways and 'streets in the sky' became a new enthusiasm. These were justified as a means to facilitate neighbouring and children's play. Joan Ash pointed out their unsuitability, their generation of noise, and their potential for crime. It was all ignored. The research report 'Families Living at High Density' was ready for publication in 1963, but the administrators in the Department of the Environment delayed its publication until 1970. Bureaucracy had suppressed information which might have threatened its survival. The consequence was a continuation of diswelfare in some sections of public housing for up to a decade. Had Joan Ash's work been published in 1963, high-rise housing would have been challenged critically in the wider society.

Evaluation and Conclusion

High-rise systems built housing died in Britain by the mid-1970s. From within the Department of the Environment it was economic factors which turned the tide against high-density estates. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Circular 36/37 ('Housing Standards and Cost Subsidies', 1967 specified obligatory standards for local Government housing, and used a yardstick to keep costs within prescribed limits. The Circular pointed out the comparatively high cost of high-rise housing and it emphasised the economic merits of low-rise housing whenever this was possible. The Circular went on to say that local authorities must show very good reason for building at high densities, and the subsidy tables were framed in such a way as to support the views expressed. In fact, as mentioned earlier, Stone (1963) had discovered this in his research of housing developments built before systems building became so dominant. The systems built high-rise had subsidy incentives, all set in the subsidy tables of 1956. The effect of the 1967 Circular was to reduce the incentives for high-rise blocks. Joan Ash's research from within the Department of the Environment added sociological support for the case against mass high-rise housing. But the sociological, architectural, and economic research was not co-ordinated and set to achieve overall policy review. From outside the housing bureaucracies, Pearl Jephcott (1971) published a book revealing the sociological problems which were evident in high-rise housing.

The media played an important role in reversing policy and bringing the demise of high-rise housing by the mid-1970s. It found abundant examples of sensational issues to publicise. In 1968 a gas explosion took place in south London estate, unhinging one side of a tower block which collapsed. Injury and anxiety were publicised. In Birmingham a depressed housewife

leaped to her suicide holding her child in her arms. Further publicity revealed vandalism, gangs of intimidating youths on estates, appalling standards of construction, and the barren ugliness of some estates. In some cities action was taken to demolish high-rise blocks, and in others families were moved to houses on the ground. By 1974 the Ministry of Housing and Local Government was assisting local governments to improve conditions on problem estates.

Suppression had been socially and economically costly. What it was necessary to reform in 1974 might not have existed at all had the available evidence been used in a timely way. From within the public housing bureaucracies themselves the various relevant issues were known years in advance of their general public acceptance. In the late 1950s, architects in the LCC had revealed that satisfactory densities could be achieved in houses and low-rise forms. By 1963, Stone's economic studies indicated the very high cost of the higher densities which had been achieved at that time. After 1963, buildings became taller and consequently more expensive to build and to maintain. Also, in 1963, Joan Ash had her evidence in publishable form, indicating the bad sociology of high-rise for low-income families. For her, some twenty years of suppression and ignorance in local government, in academic research, and in a central government department of state had delayed the inevitable conclusion. High-rise housing could not be socially or economically justified for mass low-income housing. The suppression she experienced was the political pressure to remain silent, censorship and delay in her publishable work within both academic research and public housing institutions, and the nonrenewal of her contract in academic research. Essentially, she was opposed by professionals, academics, and bureaucrats whose interests were threatened by her research and enquiries.

Experience does not have to be like that which Joan Ash encountered. In 1970 I was studying low-income housing and urban redevelopment policies in Adelaide, South Australia. Social work and resident action groups were increasingly interested in these matters, bringing publicity and political action against bureaucratic opposition. I was invited to address social work groups on the economic and policy issues in low-income housing, and I acted as spokesperson for resident action groups on a high-rise redevelopment proposal for Hackney, an inner-urban area of Adelaide. I wrote to the Department of the Environment in Britain, seeking information on its experience with high-rise housing. The letter was passed to Joan Ash who replied giving me the full (uncensored) story of the British experience. The proposal for the Hackney project was in the constituency which elected the Premier of South Australia, Hon. D. A. Dunstan. I lived in that constituency, and I wrote to Dunstan, sending him copies of Joan Ash's correspondence. Meanwhile resident and social worker action grew in opposition to some housing policies in South Australia. In 1973 Dunstan scrapped the high-rise redevelopment proposal for Hackney and invited me to join the Board of the South Australian Housing Trust.

The proposal for the redevelopment of Hackney had originated in the State Planning Authority, not in the Trust. The Trust was a statutory authority with a Board of seven members who were not party political representatives. Since 1936 the Trust had developed a variety of rental and home ownership programmes; it built new towns; it financed and developed industry and commerce as well as housing; and it had an international reputation as an innovator in social housing. For many years, Alex Ramsay, General Manager, had known that families were averse to high-rise housing. He took his information from tenancy officers, not architects. As a Board member, I made regular visits to the Trust's new and old estates, discussing issues with tenants, officers, and architects. Along with other Board members, outside the boardroom I had meetings with managers; architects, accountants, and engineers to discuss the business of housing. The managers and professionals would concede where it was reasonable, and board members learned much in the executive aspects of housing. Occasionally a 'knotty' problem or some bureaucratic impediment would need stronger representations and some action. The Trust learned enthusiastically how to use tenant organisations and social groups to enhance its housing management. By the late 1970s the Trust had joint management responsibilities in housing for alcoholics, women's refuges, the mentally handicapped, and so on. The manager of the estates management section knew that success depended upon having good relations with tenants. Some of the housing which was built under great pressure in the 1950s was refurbished, and community facilities were added to the neighbourhood. These were all the sorts of things which Joan Ash wanted to see in British public housing.

Joan Ash's work had been useful and productive in South Australia. But she did not know any of that work until I met her in Amsterdam in 1985, and she later visited Adelaide for an International housing conference in 1986. Her research flourished well in Adelaide; whilst in Britain public housing authorities are still struggling with the problems of managing high-rise housing and finding a productive role for tenants. □

Acknowledgement

Joan Ash provided me with nine pages of well presented notes on her biography in housing work. It made fascinating reading on an important subject. Without those notes this piece of writing could not have been done. Suppression may have damaged Joan Ash's career, but not her knowledge in housing. She was ahead of her time and deserving of professional standing.

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