

Concept of utopian mass sociology essay

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The concept of utopian mass housing developments has been theorised and debated since the late 19th century when the housing act for the working classes was passed in London. However, it only truly took off in the decades following world war two whereby the world sought to rebuild what was lost, not only in the literal physical sense but also in their sense of identity and social evolution, thus the coming of tower and slab. In the east of Europe, Khrushchev was famed for asking the people of the Soviet Union if they preferred acceptable quality housing now or great quality housing in years to come, giving birth to the modular ubiquitous five story concrete prefabs that litters the now fragmented former soviet states. In Western Europe, Britain sought to embrace the future and ceased the opportunities presented by the modernist movement in an attempt to realise the utopian visions of a new era. Elsewhere in Europe and indeed the world, people sought for economical and evolutionary solutions to an ever growing populous as found in Berlin, Paris and most major UK cities. The situation has not always been so transparent however, for there are several areas in the world whereby people have neither the income nor the social security that could provide a home and community in the conventional sense. South America is littered with favela slum housing, and this is also found abundantly throughout India and southern Asia. It occasionally gets slightly more complicated, for instance - Hong Kong. For a couple of hundred years stood a diplomatic oddity known as the Kowloon walled city, which provided anonymity during two conflicts and once the PRC was set up - it became an escape for refugees of the regime. With no electricity and water supply the inhabitants carved out an existence under the law of the triads until the 1990's when the 15 storey slum city was pulled down. Despite the fact that we have now

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sought to house the masses in such a way for sixty years, there still stands a great disparity between the success and failure of such developments and their implementation. Several key factors have an obvious influence upon the principles of such projects, chiefly those of economics and politics, for without these there is no bureaucratic semblance of plan or structure, but is this necessarily a bad thing? Coincidentally this is the flip side of the debate, can a diplomatically irregular, or semi-autonomous and self-governed development actually provide valuable insight into a fortuitous community? My comparison is this. Park Hill in Sheffield was designed in the 1950's by Ivor Smith and Jack Lynn as the epitome of utopian mass housing developments, with all the facilities provided to create a flourishing urban community. It ultimately failed once maintenance became absent and the council rehomed some of its more troublesome tenants there, but against strong opposition it was not only listed but has also begun regeneration. The Kowloon walled city was the product of political and diplomatic conflict that resulted in a self-sustaining and autonomous city within a city, which was illegitimate in every denotation of the word. Despite their obvious differences, their ultimate goals were identical, leaving much to be learnt from the specific successes and failures of each. My aim is to establish the definition of success and failure within the context of mass housing developments, whilst utilising a Post-Marxist perspective to investigate the reasoning behind the perceived views and actual outcomes in both examples.

Literature reviews.

Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing.

In tower and slab Florian Urban is investigating the complex interactions between city planning and social history. He uses seven cities as case studies: Paris, Berlin, Brasilia, Mumbai, Moscow and Shanghai. This provides valuable insight for me with regards the dramatic variations in social and cultural values between western and eastern, or presupposed third world settlements. His definition of tower and slab refers principally to the modernist vision of serial blocks and their interpretation by the relevant designers in each abovementioned city. (Urban, 2006) The crux of Urban's argument is that design alone is not to blame for mass housings mixed success thus far, and that success or failure (as outlined in each case study) relies on a complex formula of social composition, urban location, maintenance plan, cultural consideration, social obligation and political situation. (Urban, 2006) Urban also feels that the success and failure of a mass housing development cannot be simply measured by bureaucratic or quantifiable goals such as housing crises or the provision of a universally acceptable housing standard. Instead, by the changing significance of housing blocks in their relevant societies, together with their perceptions of architects, politicians and most importantly the inhabitants. The media is also outlined as a minor component in the perceptive outcome of mass housing, which is discussed in detail when referring to Moscow, with Khrushchev's K7 scheme and the mighty soviet propaganda machine along with Brasilia, and its strong lure to the utopian city environment built entirely from scratch. The arguments voiced and evidence displayed by Urban's

investigation will play a pivotal role in the formulation of my own discussion, chiefly because its composition of contrasting examples in modern societies parallels my own, especially with respect to the dramatic influence politics (both local and national) can have upon a housing scheme or proposition when coupled with a powerful or manipulative media.

Life of the British Home.

This publication aims to show us the changing trends in the design, layout and role of the house in British society. Along the way it occasionally broaches the topic of society or politics when related to the influential trends but otherwise it simply provides background knowledge, motivation or theory behind each branded epoch of design. The section which is of particular importance to me is that of the modern home, or more specifically the housing revolution of the early 20th century. For me it was important to learn that aside from modernist design influences, the main agenda for change was to address the ever expanding slum tenements that housed the densely packed working classes in a rather sub-standard manner, and all came about thanks to the housing of the working classes act 1890. This was first addressed en masse in the 1920s and 30s with the continued demolition of such areas and replacement with spacious, contemporary and most importantly hygienic apartments. It is ironic that what was once built to house the deemed lowest order of society is now sought after property for the bourgeoisie, such as the Millbank estate in London. It is interesting to also know that in the post war years which spawned the welfare state, the popular design ideal was that of egalitarianism - the concept of these modernist blocks being built in deliberately affluent areas in an attempt to

promote social integration, which was soon cut short when land began running out and such developments were forced to the urban margins in which we see them today. This is paramount in understanding the knock on effect towards success or failure, for developments such as the Barbican and adjoining arts centre were dead centre in the city of London. As such, it promoted the integration which was so highly sought after by providing the most extreme example yet of a self-contained 8000 strong community. The chapter continues in providing the theories behind many well-known and relevant developments such as Trellick Tower, The Golden Lane Estate, Alexandra Road, Robin Hood Gardens and most notably for me Park Hill. The majority view upon this era of design ethos is expressed aptly in the closing line: Despite every effort by many gifted architects, whose surnames read like a roll call of the most eminent practitioners of their generation - poor environments and abject management stigmatised these estates and led irrepressibly to their ruin, along with the modernist principles that shaped them. (Denison & Yu Ren, 2012)

City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age.

My reference to this book was made in order to gain an understanding of the larger scale involved with housing, that is to understand the evolution of the city and the urban environment as a separate entity. This book covers a broad spectrum, detailing the earliest examples of civilisation right through to predictions of mega cities in the imminent future. Within an early chapter on the ideal city there is a fantastic quote: In the course of human history, our desires, our fears, our dreams and our nightmares have all been given urban form. (Smith, 2012) Though arbitrary in some respects this does ally

itself with earlier suggestions in tower and slab that the power struggle between designer and dweller ultimately dictates the success or failure of the development. The chapter proceeds to detail layouts from Roman, to Renaissance to American grid format, and how the expansions and integrations of new urban environments are carried out, ultimately command our relationship with them. It also highlights another interesting factor to consider when judging the success or failure of an urban development: the motor car. It uses Brasilia as an example akin to tower and slab when referring to the failings of the brand new modernist Utopias, for it also was ultimately planned around motorways and infrastructure links, leaving the actual inhabitants as an afterthought, in another series of modernist block creations. (Smith, 2012) A few chapters onwards the book presents the topic of walls and urban isolation, conveniently using the Kowloon walled city as a case study. It explains its origins as a traditionally planned Chinese walled garrison that became such an infamous anomaly due to its diplomatic and political loopholes. It is again brought to our attention that despite its drastically unconventional governing and haphazard maintenance, it's principles of a self-sustaining, semi-autonomous and closely integrated city environment actually worked. (If we are able to see past the obvious downside to a triad rule that infested the city with drugs and prostitution, and did little to solve the fact that the majority of its inhabitants were substantially below the poverty line in horrendously cramped conditions) It rings true with an interesting analogy by council Architect Tim Tinker who designed the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle during the 1970's. To all intents and purposes they had provided more than adequate hardware as evidenced by the opinions of early inhabitants, but the software (in this case <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-utopian-mass-sociology-essay/>

the maintenance and identity of the estate) was flawed, due to neglect and poor regard for the residents. (Another unfortunate factor was the economic downturn that has occurred twice in the last 40 years) This gives me interesting evidence to support a discussion surrounding the degree of influence if not control that the designers, politicians and inhabitants should each respectively have when proposing designs and housing schemes, contrasting the hierarchies that were present in both Kowloon and Park Hill. A later chapter outlines some interesting evidence relating to the large Asian slums of Mumbai and Cairo, in relation to the general urban growth that the civilised world has witnessed. In 1900 around 1 in 10 lived in a city, but now over half of the world population are urbanites. As with all urban centres, they usually form and grow from the migration of people from other areas, whether it is down to economic, political or geographical reasons. These areas soon gain interest from those in similar situation, and thus the area expands at a rate that is sometimes verging on exponential. In an already poverty stricken area like Mumbai the situation just multiplies the negatives such as poor construction, hygiene, open space and the opportunity for work and education. However, it is once again taken into the hands of the inhabitants to procure solution to the endemic problems, allowing minor improvements to life where possible and feasible. This again gives substance to the interpretation of a more open and user orientated approach to urban problem solving in an increasingly tighter urban environment.

Estates: An Intimate History.

My next source of discursive material is based on the views, studies and opinions of a woman who grew up and incidentally left one of Europe's

largest sprawling council estates: Chelmsley Wood. This topophobia inducing urban was built in the 1950's as a housing solution on the outskirts of Birmingham. The book is essentially her private investigation into the myths, stigma and reality of life in a council estate. Along the way she incorporates several key components, all of which require an understanding in order to make an informed judgement today. The picture is painted quite early on that the author has empathy with those born and raised in council estates, whether it is a tower block in Peckham or a sprawling labyrinth in the Midlands. It is detailed with an obvious amount of bias through her experiences as a child, in education and then revisiting her parents whom still live there. In parallel to this the author gives a brief overview of the political, economic and socio-local situation at each given period in the book, helping to give context to some of her more controversial assessments. One thing becomes clear however, around a third of the way in, that despite her relation to the often difficult lives the inhabitants have to lead, everyone has choices and options in life. No matter how subliminal they may appear, they can become a powerful catalyst when coupled with the isolation and victimisation that estates bestow. (Hanley, 2012) There are several parallels with the literature that has already been discussed, chiefly being the lack of influence that the inhabitants have on decisions that concern their own lives, never mind bureaucratic decisions regarding the actual design and maintenance of the urban environment. An interesting point that is made concerning the construction of the estate is that surrounding the one area of her estate that was reserved for self-builders, people with money, and the perceived arch enemy of the welfare assisted working class: The middle class. Though the majority of the houses on the estate were council tenants

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(aside from a section that was for mortgage purchase) an entire area was constructed by what we now refer to as a Residents Association. This selection of tradesmen and craftsmen put all of their skills to shared use allowing them and their families to construct houses that were in effect tailor made, despite their limited plot sizes and material palettes. In terms of critical perception, the author holds the government, the welfare state and public investment responsible (in a rather post Marxist fashion), for the now pejorative term 'tower block' was once aspired to and was intended to narrow the gap between rich and poor, when ultimately all it has done is established a firm and visible wall between them. (Hanley, 2012) It does however raise the argument that much of the negative connotation held by terms such as that and 'council estate' are detrimental to their own cause, for no amount of clever wording can undo 40 years of social prejudice. (Hanley, 2012) The general consensus is that everything these estates and developments were designed to stop - ended up promoting in an ironic manner. Certain economic factors have been unavoidable in the past decades such as the deindustrialization of the north and the rapid progression of the south, but generally these estates all display the same symptoms of isolation, unemployment, anti-social behaviour and poorly maintained.

Triumph of the City.

My next literary source offers a rather contrasting view of the city and urban environments as a singular entity. Glaeser has a very positive and almost celebratory tone to many of his arguments, despite his initially naïve approach to judging the 'outcome' of a city. In this respect, Glaeser

occasionally neglects the intimacy with people that is offered by my previous sources. The chapter of interest for me discusses Rio de Janeiro, with its sumptuous mountains and breath-taking beaches yet plighting the side of the city is a 1 million strong slum area, or Favela as it is known in Portuguese. (Glaeser, 2012) The author makes a very clever assessment of the city, that is, that cities do not make poor people as they grow larger like here, Mexico or Mumbai; they attract poor people with the prospect of an improved lifestyle. In a sense, to improve the general percentage of poverty stricken inhabitants, these slum areas must be better connected to the economic heart of a city, therefore attracting the rural poor, as supposed to condemning migrants to a life of isolated agricultural poverty. (Glaeser, 2012) This does indeed share some truth with the theory discussed earlier regarding the success or failure of estate being inextricably linked to their proximity to the economic, cultural and social 'heart' of a city. Take Manchester in the 19th century for example, it was associated with mass poverty when it was not; it was simply the process of wealth less rural workers migrating to the economic heart that could provide them with wealth - the cotton mills. The same can be said for New York with its ghetto districts, for these were simply African Americans fleeing the less accepting southern fields to seek a sustainable source of work in the thriving city. (Glaeser, 2012) The author calls this the poverty paradox. When a city improves itself in every sense as to reduce the amount of poor, it will in fact, attract more poor people. Economics is simply a game of incentives, and the larger the incentive in a given area then the denser the area is likely to become with people seeking similar reward. (Glaeser, 2012) The same story of Rio and its relative poverty in urban and rural scenarios applies to many

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other global examples, with Lagos in Nigeria being another, whereby its extreme rate of poverty in the city (which is still below the international standard) is considerably higher than a standard wage in rural Lagos. His point about connection is an undeniably strong one, backed by the forecasts of growth in areas which we consider today to be horrendous in terms of life quality. There are countless stories from Rio's favelas that tell of entrepreneurs coining an idea, stimulating it, and then consequently reimbursing the wealth by employing fellow inhabitants. (Glaeser, 2012) Not all examples are quite as literal as this, but the message is effective nonetheless.

Crack in the Wall.

My final source comes from a Christian missionary who dedicated herself to helping drug addicted inhabitants of the Kowloon Walled City, that was, until its condemnation by the British and Chinese governments in 1994. Though this sacrifices the greater context of the urban environment in relation to the city, what it does showcase in intimacy is the thoughts, feelings and literal roles of a selection of inhabitants in the Walled City. The author's interests are not in global politics or large scale economics, her interest and compassion lies with the real people who carved out this existence, embraced its isolated, anonymous nature, and called it home with no legal obligations, no conventional governing body, and no tangible way of leaving. An early and coincidentally ironic observation that the author makes whilst briefly explaining the formation of the walled city is that of what attracted people to it. At the turn of the century the walled garrison was a glimpse of the traditional rural China that was a forbidden sight to Western tourists,

which was only a short trip from central Hong Kong. Shortly before its demise people still travelled to the Walled City for forbidden reasons, this time however it was the lure of under aged prostitutes and opium dens. What becomes apparent after reading just several pages is that the Kowloon Walled City was a place like no other. It had no government, no legal or judicial system, no sewer system, and no conventional infrastructure to speak of. It was rife with criminal activity and the majority of its inhabitants were those who had fled the sweep of communism after World War Two. Its fate was destined to be that of poor quality life with its sub-standard construction, horrendous overcrowding, and a distinct lack of natural light in much of the block. Yet somehow, the people bore wells, (seven in fact - over 300ft deep). They tapped into a stable electrical supply from the main city and they even had peripheral markets that allowed trade with central Hong Kong. To paraphrase Tim Tinker, the downside again lay in the software. The slum occupants had already managed to craft what could be termed as working hardware, but the software caused a raft of conflicting issues, in this case the Triads. It would appear by all accounts that if you were not with them you were against them, and to be with them meant a financial expense on your behalf. Though a rather abstract link, this does bear some resemblance to the social modus operandi of aforementioned council estates. You either operated as the bureaucrats intended or you were a communal outcast. The few published successes of the Kowloon Walled City are solely down to the inhabitants, their persistence and their resilience to the temptation of vice and crime. This is a tangible example of occupants curating their own environment, and therefore provides a basis of investigation for this paper.

Critical perspective.

As discussed previously, there are several fundamental components which ultimately dictate the success or failure of mass housing developments.

These are politics, economics, culture and class. These four also happen to parallel the divisions of post-Marxism, alongside that of sex, race and

ethnicity. As a critical perspective, Post-Marxism aims to elaborate and revise the theories of figures like Michel Foucault into the hierarchies of institutions, for post-Marxism understands that the power struggle is not simply about class warfare and isolated or oppressed groups in society.

(Goldstein, 2004) Within the critical perspective there are then six divisible groups, each of which are represented by various noted theorists of the 20th century. There is the economic theory with Althusser, the historical

methodology (Michel Foucault, specifically in *Discipline and Punish*) the political theories of Laclau & Mouffe, the feminist approach of Judith Butler, the materialist philosophy, and the cultural studies of Bennett and Frow.

(Goldstein, 2004) Through each of these areas of study, the post-Marxist ideology seeks to reinforce several key theories from Marxism, chief of which is the international fight against capitalist bureaucracy. I feel this critical

perspective will benefit my discourse and literary approach in that its principles of power permeating from the bottom up (Foucault) alongside the new identities of race, sex and earning power replace the outdated politics of class struggle. (Goldstein, 2004) Another key exponent of the post-Marxist

theory is that of the separation of power in economics and culture, along with the transition from commodity to consumption. (From the exploited worker to mass production) This has direct correlation with my study of a

capitalist welfare-state housing scheme, where the power is situated in a top

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heavy distribution, in contrast to that of a unsanctioned free state housing development, where the power distribution progressed from lower to upper as time progressed. Post-Marxism also outlines the limits of a welfare state, due to its lack of coherence and unification in policy. For instance, policies such as higher education facilitate capitalist accumulation and amelioration of the classes, whereas policies such as public housing and social assistance usually undermine the coercive force of labour. (Barrow, 1993), This could prove useful in understanding the failure of many mass housing schemes in the UK such as Park Hill as supposed to the more racial and political disregard that was present in the Kowloon Walled City. In order to gain a better understanding of the power ideology, I feel that the reading of Foucault's work would be beneficial in formulating my discussion further, for it would allow greater discourse analysis of the structures present in each example. In turn, this could obtain stronger definitions of success and failure when compared to other notable mass housing developments, conjuring a formula of sorts by which to judge the allocation and balance of power within a housed community.