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How poor maintenance of London's social housing created the conditions for its demolition

By [Charlie Clemoes](#)

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NewStatesman



Residents at south London's Cressingham Gardens estate protest its proposed demolition. Image: Charlie Clemoes.

In housing, maintenance is more important than design: if this were more often acknowledged, then the lifespan of many social houses could be drastically extended.

But instead, their inadequacy and rapid dilapidation is typically blamed on poor design – either due to modernist architecture's excessive social engineering, or due to the overreach of post-war local and national governments, racing to build more houses at an ever decreasing cost. To this way of thinking, post-war social housing was an unmitigated mistake and given the chance it should be replaced with something better.

The importance of maintenance could not be clearer in the case of a pair of estates in South London, both built in the 1970s under the oversight of Lambeth council's chief architect, the late [Ted Hollamby](#) were both highly praised upon their completion,

particularly for the Scandinavian-influenced humanist architecture prevalent in the design. In the past few years, both have been under threat of demolition.

On its website, Lambeth council makes the reasonable claim that the estates need to be regenerated because the houses are in such a state of disrepair. But this raises the question of how these housing developments fall so rapidly into this state in the first place.



A view of the Central Hill estate. Image: Charlie Clemoes.

It could be that those originally praising the estates were wrong and they were not built to last. But it could also be due to poor maintenance, which created the conditions for the demolition threat.

More than enough has been said to support the former argument: the narrative of the utopian modernist block turned sink estate is seared into popular imagination to the point where evidence is no longer required to prove it. But to support the opposing argument, there is also plenty of evidence that the estates were indeed well designed. There is evidence, too, that they have not been properly maintained.

To build both estates, Hollamby drew upon a wide array of building expertise. Notwithstanding the array of architectural talent working on both projects, he also assembled a highly skilled construction team. The structural engineer, Ted Happold, later went on to work on the Sydney Opera House and set up a firm which worked on the Pompidou Centre. Meanwhile, Cressingham Gardens' beautiful curved brickwork

required the services of a master bricklayer, who was also employed in the construction of the staircase in Hampton Court Palace.

But it doesn't take an architectural historian to notice the high design standards Hollamby kept to: you only need to walk around the estates.

With the benefit of a bright, early-autumn weekend, it was difficult to avoid marvelling at such a thoughtful design. Both estates demonstrate a style of building that hardly features in London any more. The overall feel is more countryside than city: there is space, conspicuous quiet, and numerous passageways are completely denied to the car, so that residents are able to traverse each estate free of the impatient demands of the motorist.

There is also an intimate engagement with local topography. In Central Hill, the hillside is used to shield the estate from the noise of the road above, and both estates are barely perceptible from a distance, being so well ensconced in the landscape.

In Cressingham Gardens, front doors face each other, kitchens face the passageways and the flats are in close proximity, all the better for neighbours to talk to one another and feel more connected to the wider estate.

Despite the high density, flats are also very spacious and both estates still manage to host bountiful green space. Most of these trees are older than the estates themselves – the homes were built around them. And the estates also leverage the surrounding parks to great effect: Central Hill falls within a green corridor stretching from Dulwich Common to Norwood Park via Crystal Palace, Cressingham Gardens opens out onto Brockwell Park.

This concern for greenery has proved to be one of the major areas of antagonism in Central Hill. Originally ivy grew out of raised beds planted along every passageway covering many of the estate's walls, offering a cheap way of greening otherwise plain light-grey buildings. Several years ago the council approached the residents asking to cut this ivy back, on the assumption that it risked damaging the building's structural integrity. Not wishing to create unnecessary conflict, the residents obliged, unaware that the ivy would be entirely removed. Any ivy that remains has had to be fought for.



Central Hill again. Image: Charlie Clemoes.

It is hard not to see this as a wilful erosion of Central Hill's aesthetic value. And this feels all the more apparent in the case of waste disposal on the estate, which had gotten so bad when I visited that there was a massive pile of rubbish right at the estate's entrance. It's not the kind of thing that you associate with an inner London borough.

But this is only the most evident problem among a catalogue of minor maintenance problems with both of the estates. Paving stones are in need of replacement and visibly unsafe, especially for older residents. None of the outside detailing looks like it has been replaced since the estates were finished. The zinc roofs of Cressingham Gardens are leaking in various places and the guttering needs to be replaced. An independent report has also noted the effect of poor tree maintenance on many non-structural and drainage problems. Together these oversights amount to a basic neglect.

So why have the estates not been properly maintained? There is an argument that their innovative design makes maintenance more difficult, requiring specialist skills and unusual materials. But this doesn't take into account the litany of common, solvable issues mentioned above.

In fact, the reasons are much more complicated and long-term, and they reveal how political the issue of maintenance can be.



Protesters at Cressingham Gardens. Image: Charlie Clemoes.

Estate under-maintenance is intimately linked to wider disinvestment of inner city areas throughout the 1970s and '80s and the creeping return of development from the 1990s onwards. Throughout this time, those who remained in inner city social housing were first forgotten and then, as investment increased, deemed to be an obstacle. In the first case councils had no money to maintain their social housing stock; in the second, they had no desire to. Adding further fuel to the decline of London's social housing was the relative economic hardship of its occupants, who have often had neither the means nor the time to take maintenance into their own hands.

But hope remains when residents can collectively organise to redress the balance. While the fight to save these two estates is ongoing, recent news has emerged that Cressingham Gardens may be saved from demolition due to a High Court ruling that the council acted unlawfully in the consultation process. At the centre of this was the removal of three options available to residents which offered the possibility of refurbishment, leaving only the options of full or part demolition remaining.

This ruling could not have been achieved without an organised residents' campaign, pursuing a collective legal case against demolition and accompanying this with a vocal public awareness campaign. At the centre of the argument was an appeal to the financial sense of refurbishment and maintenance – helped along by several revealing FOI requests on the risible sums spent on maintenance over the years.

All this offers hope that the equally energetic campaign to save Central Hill may be able to reverse Lambeth Council's seemingly single-minded desire for demolition.

Perhaps there's hope, too, that similar campaigns can also arrest social housing's all too rapid transition from construction to demolition by way of under-maintenance.

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The Right To Buy is now the biggest threat to the Right To Buy, argues LGA

By [Jonn Elledge](#)



Council houses in Lambeth, South London. Image: Getty.

Councils have good reason not to like the Right To Buy, the Thatcher-era policy which gives council tenants the right to buy their council homes. It was foisted upon them by national government. It forced them to sell assets that they owned and, in many cases, had built too, and to do so at a discount.

And most annoyingly of all, they didn't even get to keep the takings: for much of the scheme's history, those went straight to the Treasury (though they can now hang on to them if they get special permission from the government first). If someone forced you to sell your stuff for a fraction of its value and then ran off with the money, you wouldn't enjoy the experience either.

So it'd be no surprise if the Local Government Association (LGA), an umbrella group representing councils, might not be wild about Right To Buy either. But it's come up with a much more subtle strategy than merely hating on it. The problem with Right To Buy, a report published yesterday argues, is not that it's a poor deal for the taxpayer, or that it's mucked up the housing market. The problem with Right To Buy is that it's "threatening the future of Right To Buy".

A quote:

Tenants have received discounts of nearly £5bn to help purchase their council home under the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme since the size of the discount was increased in April 2012, new analysis by the Local Government Association reveals today.

While Right to Buy has helped many families get on the housing ladder, the LGA said the scheme faces an uncertain future unless councils are given the flexibility to set discounts locally and retain 100 per cent of sales receipts to fund the replacement of homes sold off under the scheme.

I completely and utterly love the sneakiness of this press release. It zooms past the shocking fact that the government has chucked nearly £5bn at a few lucky people as part of a policy that has always shamelessly been about turning Labour council tenants into Tory voting homeowners. (No such discounts are on offer for private tenants to buy out their landlords, you note.) It doesn't dwell on the fact the whole policy is frankly insulting to councils, treating them as lackeys for central government rather than democratic institutions in their own right. All that's in there, but we're left to infer that it's bad.

No: the real problem with Right to Buy is that it's just endangering Right To Buy. If we keep going like this, the argument runs, there won't be any properties left to sell under Right To Buy, and where will Right To Buy be then? Surely even this Tory government will be moved by Right To Buy's plight?

To be honest, I mainly wanted to comment on this campaign tactic (honestly, it's genius), but since we've come this far, let's look at the rest of the press release. The LGA's figures – that £4.9bn in discounts – were arrived at by adding up the discounts on the 79,119 homes sold under the schemes between 2012-13 and 2018-19.

Why start in April 2012? Because that's when the Cameron government amended the policy, to increase the available discount to £75,000 or 60 per cent of the value of a house/70 per cent of that of a flat, whichever is lower. That is a hell of a discount – so not unnaturally, a lot of tenants have gone for it, and a lot of councils have been left out of pocket.

There's more. As it stands, councils are only able to use a third of their receipts – already less than the value of a home – to build a replacement. Shockingly, by which I mean it's not actually remotely shocking in any way, this hasn't resulted in like to like replacements, and

...with councils only able to use a third of each retained RTB receipt to build a replacement home, they have only been able to replace around a quarter (21,720) of these homes sold in the same period.

The government has promised that homes build under Right To Buy would be replaced by new social homes built using the takings, but that obviously hasn't happened. Luckily, the government has a plan for this too: blame councils. From a consultation [document](#), dating from August 2018:

...local authorities have not been building enough Right to Buy replacements to match the pace of sales and the commitment that every additional home sold would be replaced on a one-for-one basis nationally is no longer being met. It is clear that local authorities need to increase their rate of delivery of new homes if they are to match the growth in sales.

To rectify all this, the LGA is calling on the government to do two things. One is to give councils more power to set discounts, to take greater account of local market conditions. The other is to allow them to keep 100 per cent of sales receipts to build new homes. Whether government will listen remains to be seen.

I do wonder, though, if the first part of the LGA's argument might just resonate. Right To Buy is totemic in Tory circles, a symbol of how the party helps the ambitious who want to get on blah blah blah. But it is hard to see how it can continue forever, simply because councils will eventually run out of homes to sell. The attempt to extend it to housing associations – forcing non-government bodies to sell assets that the government doesn't even own! – is a sign that the government is keen to keep it rolling in some form. One obvious next step would be to extend it to the Private Rental Sector – honestly, it's no sillier than the housing association thing – but every time anyone suggests that the Tories all start spluttering about property rights, as if housing associations and councils don't have property rights too.

So perhaps the LGA may have found a clever strategy to win a Tory government round to the cause of building council houses. “You want Right To Buy to continue?” its latest press release asks. “Then let us build more stuff to sell.” Worth a try.

Jonn Elledge was founding editor of CityMetric. He is on Twitter as [@jonnelledge](#) and on Facebook as [JonnElledgeWrites](#).

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