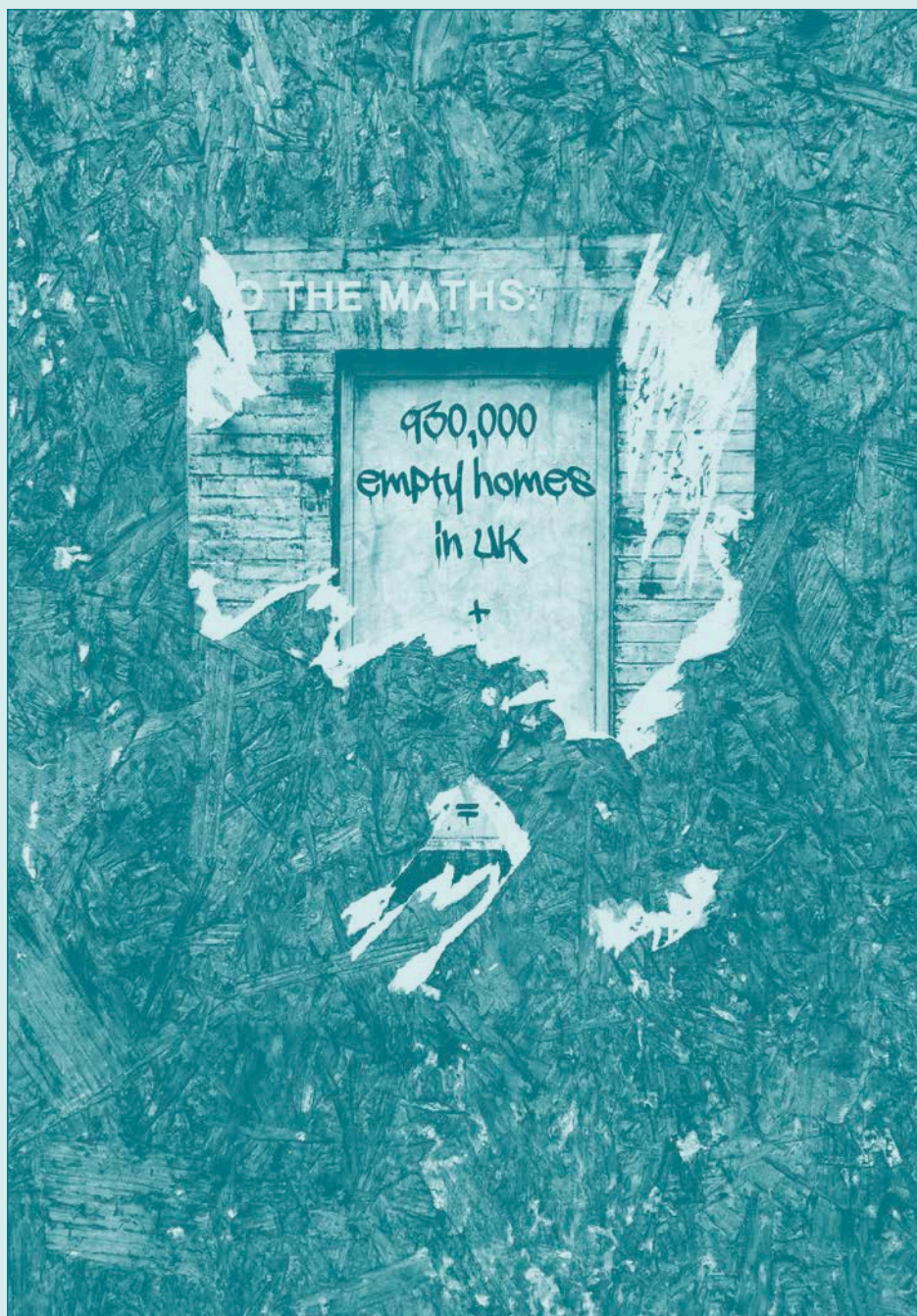


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Abundance



Conflicts of Interest

RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF HOUSING IN THE UK

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The global economic crisis which unfolded in 2008 brought to the fore a discussion about the future of housing in the UK. Since then, it has undoubtedly been an important subject in current urban discussions, partially because there are many voices with rather contradicting opinions and interests. It is hard, thus, for the various stakeholders of the city—developers, politicians, planners, architects and individuals—to agree on what can be done.

Neoliberalism freed the housing economy introducing market-led planning and profit-based trade. It contributed to the creation of the shortage in the first place, whilst producing greater inequalities amongst the stakeholders. These inequalities lie on the unbalanced powers conferred to them over the future of housing, and by extension, the future of our cities. For example, few private developers like Malaysia's SP Setia, which acquired Battersea Power Station, get richer by monopolising the market, while governments remain aloof in a philistine spirit.

Similarly, the National Planning Policy Framework in 2012 suggested that policy makers should stay 'positive' on benefitting laissez-faire plans. Then, architects dream of alternative utopias that are usually difficult to achieve or live in, while residents stay either passive or—at best—come together to form associations or protest groups, such as the recent Kill the Housing Bill.

In some ways, neoliberalism opened up the 'right to the city' to a plethora of stakeholders based on the universal principle that all rights are equal—at least theoretically. It tacitly trusted every stakeholder with the freedom to act according to his or her interests, and thus, to perform this power on the shaping of the domestic built environment. This is visible when one looks, on one hand, at the One Hyde Park development in Knightsbridge, and on the other, at the bottom-up small-scale adaptations of single-family houses in Croydon or holiday houses in Jaywick, Essex (which are built without planning permission). Even though in both cases the built

environment is shaped—so the power exists—, the result or the conditions under which this occurs differ substantially. The sudden realisation of this is that while the rights—and shaping of—the city are shared, they are not equal. As Karl Marx wrote, "between equal rights, force decides." If we follow Churchill's famous saying "we make the city and the city makes us", those that prevail in exercising their rights to the city have a greater saying on the (re)making of our cities and their future as well.

Numerical evidence does say so. At the moment, there are three parallel forces in the construction industry. The first force concerns an increasing housing shortage with a deficit of almost 1.45 million units and the UK government hopes to have an additional 8 million built by 2050. This would require a construction rate of 240–250,000 houses each year until 2031. However, currently, only 110–120,000 homes are being built, many of them not addressing the population in need. In fact, eight building firms account for 50% of the British market.

This building activity runs along with a high demolition rate, the second force at play. This affected approximately 20,000 homes in 2010. In London, 100 high-rise housing estates, such as Heygate and Aylesbury, have already been demolished, and Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute has argued that around 3 million demolitions are necessary by 2050 for energy reduction purposes. This suggests a fourfold increase in the current rate, a number that can be compared to the mass clearance era of the 1960s.

The third and last force concerns refurbishments. Since the 1970s, refurbishments represent the 22.5% of the total construction output within the UK. Each year a 2.5% of the building stock is subject to major refurbishment, whilst 96% rest with minor modifications.

However, stakeholders seem to have a problem agreeing on which future is best: demolition or refurbishment. Evidence has shown that the demolition of structurally robust housing and the relocation of its residents can be socially, environmentally and economically detrimental. Yet, it is a viable solution if no other actions are possible. On the other hand, 7.8 million households in England are under-occupied and 53% of housing plans is used less than 20% of the time—so why not work with what already exists? Studies have concluded that the refurbishment of housing can deliver significant improvements in environmental and health performance, leading to cost savings and improved living standards for residents. Still, the 2014 report of UCL's Urban Lab and Engineering Exchange found difficult to argue in favour of refurbishment. The main argument was that any local upgrading approach couldn't truly benefit the quality of life of the residents if other area-based interventions do not take place at the same time, better integrating the parts within the whole city.

The truth is that these different stakeholders cannot come to an agreement as their intentions differ according to their needs. And so does their image of citizenship. They advocate and know what the rest of the stakeholders want and expect from the city they work and live in, yet in reality they have little or no interest in finding a silver lining. What's worse is that what separates stakeholders' desires does not often constitute a solution for other social groups or the collective: developers are mainly interested in the amount of risk and profit involved in the investment (demolition), politicians in the political payoff (demolition), architects in the aesthetics of a building and architectural value (refurbishment) and activists in the resistance as if it's an end in itself (refurbishment). Then, users who know where and how they want to live are treated as they don't. The reason for this is the false perception that users lack sufficient knowledge to design their homes or make changes to them, and that giving them access to the decision-making process would defy the purpose of other stakeholders.

The above proves that not all stakeholders have equal rights to access and change in housing decisions, infrastructure and welfare. This can be understood by what John Turner—, a British architect famous for his theoretical stance on self-organised housing—wrote about the pattern of authority: who decides what and for whom? What complicates even more things nowadays is the expansion of social media and technology, which allows everyone with access to information to develop an opinion, and therefore, further increasing the number of stakeholders. In this sense, the future of housing is not under the jurisdiction of individual stakeholders, but stands in the hybrid intersection between individual ideologies, interests and shared realities.

In the end, with the multitude of stakeholders and their unequal rights comes a plethora of fragmentary

actions that lack commitment to a larger shared vision. I feel that the answer cannot be found in a single decision from uncooperative sides. Solutions may arise when stakeholders are willing to work not only against or despite each other but also together: when the individuals are encouraged to build or modify their own houses; when the state sets a holistic strategy to approach housing shortage providing public land, controlling purchase and rent prices, and distributing building (and profit) opportunities across stakeholders; when the developers set a framework for individuals and housing associations to have access to housing without being tied to the economic system. Aiming for a more balanced approach that combines bottom-up with top-down initiatives at different city scales and at different times is key. After all, it's not just about providing a solution to a problem. It's about finding a strategy to solve problems as and for a society. 🙏

