Estate Regeneration in London: Politics and Protest

Gerald Koessl

Gerald Koessl describes dilemmas facing social-housing providers in London, where social housing often serves as the only affordable housing in gentrifying, high-cost neighbourhoods, but is also increasingly in disrepair. He critically assesses the emphasis on densification as a solution, and describes recent resident-led protest movements. The situation has strong parallels with the HOPE VI program in the US, which we hope to explore in a future article.

The regeneration of social-housing estates in London has become controversial recently. While regeneration can refer to both the rebuilding and refurbishment of estates, it is mainly the demolition and rebuilding of large-scale housing estates that has sparked protests. Many of London's large-scale or high-rise social-housing estates, built in the decades after World War II, are today in significant disrepair, due both to years of underinvestment and the use of low-quality building materials and poor design. As a result, many social-housing providers must decide what to do with these estates. Many are located in areas of inner London where land values and house prices have increased dramatically in recent decades. Combined with the fact that hardly any public funding is available for new social rented housing, critics of demolition and replacement have posed a series of problems and questions about gentrification and displacement. Moreover, social-housing estates have been framed via a "sink estate" narrative, in which social housing is portrayed as being the root and not the solution to social and economic disadvantage.

Enclaves in gentrification territory: the geography of London's social-housing estates

Unlike Paris, for instance, where large-scale social housing has been predominantly built in the the *banlieues* on the city's periphery (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2014), in London such housing estates are often located in relatively central areas. Historically, inner London has housed the majority of London's working-class population. As a result of the clearance of Victorian slum and tenement houses, and destruction during World War II, inner London became the focus for the development of large-scale social-housing estates (Humphries and Taylor 1986). This is why, today, a third of all residents of inner London remain housed by the social rented sector (local authorities and housing associations), while only about half this proportion (16%) is in social housing in outer London boroughs (GLA 2016a).

In recent decades, London has changed rapidly. In the last 10 years, London's population has increased by around a million. Social-housing construction has significantly lagged behind these increases in populations, with many boroughs experiencing a decline in the number of social rented homes (Mayo and Koessl 2015). Importantly, inner London boroughs have not only seen an accelerated increase in their population but have also "re-urbanized" (Siebel 2015) and gentrified at an unprecedented scale. While in the past the well-to-do have predominantly sought to buy a home

in the less densely populated outer London boroughs, today well-paid professionals have moved back into inner London, especially in areas that are well connected to the City of London.[1]

This has meant that, in some areas, social-housing estates have become enclaves in high-value areas, providing affordable housing to those who would otherwise no longer be able to live there. As such, social housing serves as an important decelerator of gentrification. In fact, with a median house price of £525,000[2] in London as a whole and £713,000 in inner London (GLA 2016b), buying a home is now out of reach for the average Londoner. But renting from a private landlord, especially in many inner London boroughs, also has become difficult to afford for many households. With an average monthly rent of £1,727 in 2015/2016 (VOA 2016), a private renter pays three times the rent of a social renter, whose average rent is £576. It is in this kind of context that we must consider recent debates on the regeneration of social-housing estates. Many reports on the topic of estate regeneration have been published over the last couple of years (Belotti 2016; G15 2016; GLA 2015, 2016c; Hanna *et al.* 2016; JRF 2016). Unsurprisingly, in such a context, some of the key questions emerging from these debates are what the best use of available land is and, connected to that, how, in a context of high land values and no or low availability of grant funding, estate regeneration can work. The main solution that has been suggested is densification.

Figure 1. A developer announces the arrival of new housing – and seeks new land for development

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Land values: densification as the only way forward?

A number of recent reports by non-governmental and private think tanks and by the Greater London Authority (the upper-tier administrative body for the whole of London) have highlighted the potential for regenerating London's social-housing estates via densification (Savills 2016; G15

[1] The City of London (or simply "the City") is a small area (1.12 sq. mi./2.90 km²; resident population 8,000) at the historic core of the capital that is today the UK's main financial district. It is covered by two tiers of local government: at the lower tier, the City of London Corporation (a *sui generis* authority with wider-ranging powers than the 32 London boroughs); and, at the upper tier, the Greater London Authority.

[2] As of 31 January 2016, £1 (GBP) is worth approximately $1.25 (USD).

2016; IPPR 2015; GLA 2016c), either through complete new-builds or via housing infill. This model is meant to preserve the number of existing social-housing units by adding market rent and market sale units to cross-subsidise the replacement social housing built on new estates. The argument is that while social-housing estates are often high-rise, with six or more storeys, they do not make efficient use of space: they are, in many cases, surrounded by unused, low-quality public or communal spaces that could be better integrated with a new housing type. The number of units per hectare could be increased greatly by using low- to medium-rise housing types, making better use of the land these estates currently occupy.

However, as a recent evaluation of proposed estate-regeneration programmes by the Greater London Authority (GLA 2015) has shown, while the overall number of homes on new estates will be almost doubled, the number of social rented homes is likely to decrease. The report shows that all net additions on new estates will come from either market-rent or market-sale homes. This drive towards marketization is, of course, predominantly a reflection of the current funding context. Despite announcements in the UK's Autumn Statement in November 2016 (HM Treasury 2016, p. 27) towards the flexible use of public monies for housebuilding, the current government's focus on home-ownership (HCA 2016) means that, practically, grant funding is currently no longer available for social rented housing.

Moreover, the home-ownership offers and the affordable rented housing – a rent model which can be up to 80% of market rent – are not necessarily affordable for lower-income households and will hence be targeted to a different clientele, if compared to the majority of those living in traditional social rented housing. In terms of estate regeneration, this means that, aside from planning obligations when public land is used, the continuing provision of previously existing social rented housing is in fact only possible by generating funds from private market activity. Importantly, this makes the provision of social rented housing vulnerable to the vagaries of housing market activity and has severe potential social and economic consequences for the diversity and sustainability of many neighbourhoods of inner London (Lees 2014).

Protest movements: against displacement and the need for resident involvement

Most social tenants with secure tenancies will be offered a replacement home on new estates. But there are also those who are renting on fixed-term or other less-secure contracts, who have no guarantee of being offered a new home on a regenerated estate. This uncertainty around social-housing replacement has been at the core of a series of protest movements that have emerged in recent years. Most of these protest groups grew out of a reaction to estate demolition and are predominantly organised and led by residents from a particular estate.

Another key concern that has sparked a range of protests is the lack of appropriate resident involvement and consultation in decisions about the future shape of a redeveloped housing estate. The main issue for many leaseholders has to do with the compensation they are offered. Leaseholders on an estate, many of whom exercised the right to buy their home in the past, have realised that the compensation that they are offered for their property is not enough to buy a new home, neither on the new estate nor anywhere in the vicinity, as house prices in the surrounding areas have exploded and are nowhere near to being affordable for them. Hence, in addition to the already rapidly gentrifying boroughs of inner London, these changes in the provision of social housing will exacerbate processes of gentrification and displacement, making it near to impossible for lower-income households to find affordable accommodation in their locality.

Figure 2. A new (left) and an old (right) part of the Aylesbury estate in the London borough of Southwark

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Unsurprisingly, this situation has sparked a series of protests, most famously on the Aylesbury estate[3] and the Heygate estate (Lees and Ferreri 2016), both located in the inner borough of Southwark. The 35% Campaign group,[4] for example, specifically emerged as a result of the local council's failed commitment to have at least 35% affordable or social rented housing on the new Heygate estate. But these are just two out of many estates facing similar issues, with others including the West Hendon estate[5] in the outer borough of Barnet, where the protest group Our West Hendon has formed, demanding a higher proportion of social rented homes on the regenerated estate.

It is important to note that there are, of course, successful examples of estate regeneration too, where residents were made a good offer, where they have been involved from the beginning, and are now living in homes of considerably better quality than they did pre-regeneration. One such example is the Packington estate[6] in Islington, redeveloped by the housing association Hyde, which, through a combination of more generous grant funding (which is now no longer available) and cross-subsidies via private market sales, have managed to provide around 60% social homes on the redeveloped estate.

In some instances, such as with the Cressingham Gardens estate[7] in Lambeth, residents are actually opposing estate demolition and instead asking for the estate to be refurbished. Similar claims were made in recent studies by University College London (Crawford *et al.* 2014) and the London School of Economics (Belotti *et al.* 2016), both arguing for a more careful consideration of whether it would be better to extend the life cycle of buildings via refurbishment rather than going down the route of the environmentally more damaging demolition-and-rebuild process.

[3] See: www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/13/aylesbury-estate-south-london-social-housing.

[4] Website: www.35percent.org.

[5] See: www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/how-council-promises-have-fallen-away-leaving-west-hendon-estate-dire-straits.

[6] See: www.theguardian.com/society/2012/dec/04/london-homes-rich-poor-communities.

[7] See: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/davehillblog/2015/mar/08/a-time-for-trust-at-the-cressingham-gardens-estate.

There is no silver bullet to the question of how socially and environmentally sustainable regeneration of London's social-housing estates should look. However, there are some key determinants and principles to successful regeneration. These include a proper involvement of residents and the wider community throughout the regeneration process, including a fair and equal treatment of sitting residents and leaseholders that is built on a culture of trust. Unarguably, the key component in the given context is the availability of grant funding, which is the only way to ensure the continuous provision of truly affordable housing in inner London.

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