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Housing Studies (ISSN 0267-3037, eISSN 1466-1810)

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Citation Details

Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

SPICKER, P., 1987. Poverty and depressed estates: a critique of Utopia on trial. Available from <i>OpenAIR@RGU</i>. [online]. Available from: http://openair.rgu.ac.uk
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Citation for the publisher's version:

SPICKER, P., 1987. Poverty and depressed estates: a critique of Utopia on trial. <i>Housing Studies</i>, 2 (4), pp. 283-292.

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Poverty and depressed estates: a critique of Utopia on Trial

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Housing Studies, vol 2 no 4, 1987, pp 283-292.

Abstract. Alice Coleman's *Utopia on Trial* explains the incidence of social problems in council housing in terms of the design of the estates. This paper offers an alternative explanation. Many issues which appear to be problems of planning, design, maintenance or administration are directly attributable to the lack of resources of the tenants. Poor people are concentrated in specific locations through the process of urban development, the effect of social choices, and their own lack of power to find alternatives. Many problems with their housing, like inadequate heating or lack of maintenance, depend directly on what the tenants can afford. The incidence of poverty, and the problems which arise from it, add in turn to the undesirability of the estates.

Coleman's dismissal of the influence of poverty is based on an unsound method and an inadequate theoretical analysis. Her recommendations for policy are in consequence a diversion from the real needs and issues.

In *Utopia on Trial* (1985), Alice Coleman argues that some estates suffer from a concentration of social problems, and that these problems are mainly caused by bad design. The empirical evidence is drawn from a survey of nearly 4100 blocks containing over 106,000 dwellings. The estates identified as having the greatest social problems tend to be large, industrially built developments. The study finds that indicators of social malaise - litter, graffiti, urine and faeces, and the number of children taken into care - are associated with various design factors, including for example the number of dwellings in the block, the number of storeys and dwellings linked by overhead walkways, the number and position of access points and how many dwellings are served by each. Coleman's main conclusion is that changes in the physical environment can make a major contribution to improving the social conditions.

Coleman takes this analysis as a basis for an attack on the "Utopian ideal". She writes:

"The first half of the century was dominated by the age old system of natural selection, which left people free to secure the best accommodation they could. The second half has embraced the Utopian ideal of housing planned by a paternalistic authority, which offered hopes of improved standards but also ran the risk of trapping people in dwellings not of their own choosing." (p.6)

The idea of "Utopia" tends to treat the related but discrete issues of design, planning and the development of mass housing as if they were substantially equivalent. *Utopia on Trial* attacks, not simply certain types of design, but the provision of mass housing by the state. Coleman concludes with a call for a free market in housing which is largely unrelated to the substantive evidence she presents or the argument she makes.

In this paper, I propose to concentrate largely on the problems which the book centrally addresses - the concentration of social malaise in specific estates. The case against Coleman's arguments stems not so much from her methodology, though it does suffer from major

deficiencies, as from the weakness of her theoretical analysis. The aim of this paper is to present an alternative interpretation of the problems she identifies. Although Coleman explicitly denies the point, the root cause of the problems of depressed council estates is poverty, or the lack of material resources; and the effectiveness of any possible solutions is liable to be limited by the fact.

Depressed housing estates

Central to Coleman's work is an attempt to establish a link between the incidence of social problems on certain estates and their design. The main theoretical basis for this approach lies in the work of Oscar Newman (1973). Newman identifies a number of design factors, and argues that they serve to create the conditions in which problems arise. (This position is often referred to as architectural or environmental 'determinism', a term which Coleman, like Newman before her, has explicitly rejected: Coleman, 1985, p.83 and 1986. She argues only that these factors increase the probability of social problems arising.)

The importance of design factors in the analysis leads Coleman to an emphasis on the deficiencies of non-traditional, industrially built developments (1985, ch.4). These developments have been criticised on a number of grounds, including:

Structural defects. Industrially built housing has often suffered from major structural defects, like concrete cracking up or large blocks falling off buildings. Problems of construction in public housing are not of course confined to high-rise or deck access blocks, as occupants of 1930s 'tin houses' or the popular 1940s prefabs could testify. The main issue in industrial building has been the frequency of problems and the difficulty of large-scale maintenance.

Estate design. Coleman emphasises a number of factors, including for example the height of the building, the size of the development, the layout of walkways and exits, and the spatial layout of the estate.

Faults within dwellings. The design of windows in high-rise blocks has often meant noise from below and inadequate control of ventilation. Heating systems have often been inadequate to the purpose. Lifts are often dirty, vandalised or simply out of service.

Noise In high-rise blocks, noise between flats is not a widespread problem, though there may well be noise from plumbing and from rubbish shafts (Anderson et al., 1982). However, other high-density developments may suffer from noise. A person with a high-powered amplifier in a semi-detached house may have the power to annoy nine or ten immediate neighbours. The same person in a deck-access block - and proportionately, the larger the development, the more likely there is to be someone who has a noisy party - can annoy hundreds.

These are real issues. At the same time, it would be a mistake to suppose that non-traditional, industrially built housing is necessarily unsatisfactory. Anderson et al. point out that in Liverpool, for example, "80%-90% of all high-rise blocks are regarded by the City Council as not posing any pressing problems." (1984, p.29) Although people do complain about specific aspects of high-rise living, Littlewood and Tinker (1981) found that this is generally less important than other issues - the estate in general, neighbours, and the type of area that people live in.

These are problems which non-traditional designs have in common with other estates. There are poor environments and evidence of abuse in estates of many different types and style (Power 1984). Areas of depressed housing may occur even within estates of very similar design (see e.g. Taylor's study of Killingworth New Town, 1979). The factors

which contribute to the unpopularity of depressed estates are complex. Research for the Department of the Environment found, out of thirty difficult-to-let estates of different kinds, a range of problems.

Table 1: The problems of some difficult-to-let estates (D.o.E, 1980, p.4)

General factors		Management and maintenance	
Out of town location	5	Lack of caretaking	17
Poor environment	7	Lack of managers	20
Flats near houses	7	Poor repair service	19
Large size	14	Vandalism	20
		Physical neglect	20
Total	18	Total	29
Estate outside dwelling		Social factors	
Impersonal public spaces	20	No community spirit	23
Unattractive building	10	Problem families	24
Lack of play space	21	Overcrowding	6
No community facilities	14	Fear of crime	7
No shops	10	Isolated young mothers	11
Total	28	Total	29
Dwelling shortcomings			
Damp/condensation	15		
Other structural defects	10		
Noise	9		
Unpopular design	5		
Problems with heating	5		
Outdated fittings	13		
Total	23		

Some problems are those of families in inappropriate accommodation. Isolation, for example, is particularly liable to affect women looking after children in areas which do not have adequate community facilities. An architectural determinist might attribute feelings of isolation to the patterns of social contact which result from the layout of particular blocks (see Festinger, 1951), but isolation is a far more general phenomenon. A person rehoused in a new address, often at the perimeter of towns away from facilities, reliant on public transport and without access to local shops, is likely to be isolated. A single parent who has responsibility for child care is liable

to find substantial difficulties in maintaining social contact, in part because the process of becoming a single parent is one which disrupts previous social ties, but also because of the simple physical problem of getting out.

The lack of space equally reflects the patterns of use of council housing. Most councils have built mainly two and three bedroomed houses, which have largely been used for families with up to three children. In practice, this has created substantially lower standards of space than in the owner-occupied sector, where there are many larger houses; council tenants are more likely than owner-occupiers, not just to be overcrowded, but to lack the extra rooms that are increasingly the norm in private housing (for the evidence of this, see OPCS, 1985, p.82).

These examples do not demonstrate that Coleman's emphasis on design is wholly mistaken, but they do suggest that other factors besides design and layout need to be taken into account. The problems are not only the problems of design. They include issues of resources, management and social organisation.

How poverty creates slums

Many issues which appear on the face of it to be problems of planning, design, maintenance or administration have to be understood in the context of the lack of resources of the tenants. Families with more resources have some choice about where they live. They can afford rooms for each child, and spare bedrooms; children have the opportunity to play in the home. In the broadest terms, it costs money to participate in social activities, and richer people can afford to go out more. The problems which have been described above are not simply the problems of families; they are the problems of poor families. The following examples are illustrative.

Lack of community facilities. Shops and services tend to be limited because traders need to establish economic viability. This is particularly a problem on outlying estates, because

they are unable to draw on many of the services available to neighbouring areas.

Home maintenance. Home maintenance is not a simple matter of soap and hard work.

Repairs, decoration and gardening require equipment, which costs money. Internal decoration, which may be important to maintain the condition of woodwork and windows, is expensive and may not be done. For routine maintenance, householders usually build up a stock of basic tools and equipment, and borrow from their neighbours the things they do not have themselves. But many poor people do not have this equipment, and their neighbours are often no better off. Instead they are likely to rely on maintenance by housing management even for relatively simple tasks, like changing a tap washer or easing a door. The sums of money involved may seem small, but it is important to realise that many families have no money at all for such tasks. State benefits are desperately inadequate, and half the families on Supplementary Benefit run out of money most weeks (PSI, 1984, A3).

Heating and ventilation. Heating is, for most people on benefit, the major expense after rent and food, and the cost of attempting to maintain adequate heating adds to the financial problems of poor people. Ventilation has been inadequate - modern houses tend to be sealed against drafts, and unflued heating systems are widely used because they are cheap to install. The common result is a problem with condensation. Poor households cannot afford a level of heat which can avoid it.

Rubbish disposal. It may cost money to remove large items of rubbish. People in many areas now have to take rubbish to a tip themselves. For those without cars, they have to arrange for rubbish to be collected. Even if there is not a direct charge for the service, people need access to a telephone to contact the council, storage space to hold onto items while waiting, and time to wait in for the collection. It is unsurprising if many people tip rubbish illegally.

Garage areas. It is common to find garage areas that are derelict and vandalised. This might be attributed, by architectural determinists, to the lack of definition of territory. The explanation is simpler; the garages are often not used. Poor people are unlikely to have cars, and even if they have they are unlikely to pay out extra rent for a garage.

Noise. Buildings have often been designed on standard assumptions negated by poverty. In establishing an adequate degree of soundproofing between units, for example, an architect could usually assume fairly safely that there will be some furniture, carpets and curtains. In practice, a number of units in the poorest areas contain little or no furnishings at all.

Vandalism. A lack of play space in the home, lack of entertainments and lack of facilities outside it are likely to foster vandalism, much of which is simply destructive play.

Management and maintenance. Council housing management has been grossly underfunded, and it has often been impossible within financial constraints to respond to the problems which arise in specific locations. Depressed estates reflect, not only the poverty of tenants, but a legacy of cumulative neglect.

Coleman argues that a lack of resources does not in itself explain the incidence of social problems, and cites the example of pensioners. "If pensioner poverty is a cause of social breakdown, then the more pensioners there among the population, the more common we should expect each form of abuse to be. This expectation ... proves to be false." (pp 85-86). This is a distraction from the main issue. In the first place, the definition of problems which she defines as indicative of 'social breakdown' - like the numbers of children going into care - are not the problems of pensioners. If she had taken instead, for example, the numbers of people unable to return to their homes after hospitalisation as evidence of 'social breakdown', the picture might have been very different. Secondly, the financial circumstances of pensioners are not necessarily comparable with those of other people on low incomes. Pensioners are very likely to have low incomes and limited resources, but they are not necessarily the poorest tenants.

Nearly three-quarters of pensioner households have incomes above the Supplementary Benefit level, and the SB level is markedly higher for pensioners than it is for unemployed couples. The benefit rates for children are especially inadequate, being below any reasonable subsistence level for long-term dependency (Piachaud, 1980). Pensioners may have accumulated resources (like furniture and clothing) which young families may not. This (rather than incompetence in budgeting) is why families with children, rather than pensioners, are most likely to suffer financial hardship while on benefit. Thirdly, although Coleman does not consider the possible effect of local authority policies on the survey findings, pensioners and families are often treated differently in allocations and management. The dwellings which are allocated may be of different types and in different locations (as they were in the authority where I used to work). The context in which the problems are experienced is not necessarily the same as that of families.

Fourth, and most important, Coleman fails to consider the possibility of a relationship between poverty and design. Design has to be considered within its social context; and the adequacy of a building's design may be directly dependent on the resources available to its occupants. In areas occupied by wealthier people, many of the problems suffered in depressed estates could be simply overcome - and Anderson et al. cite evidence from the Netherlands and the US that high-rise is satisfactory for people in middle and upper income groups (1982, p.16). Buildings could be regularly cleaned and maintained; the tenants can afford to go out more. One of the obvious rejoinders to Utopia on Trial is to ask why high-rise flats in Bayswater or the Barbican are not slums. Many of the problems in council estates would not occur if the occupants were not poor people with children. Rich people without young children could afford the heating, pay for caretaking and maintenance, furnish to avoid noise, go out more. In central London, of course, they do.

The spatial concentration of deprivation

Coleman's arguments are principally concerned with the concentration of problems in certain locations. Poverty is not only found within limited districts: Barnes and Lucas (1975), in research on Educational Priority Areas, found not only that the majority of deprived children were not in EPAs, but the the majority of children in EPAs were not deprived. However, poverty tends to be concentrated in certain areas: that is, people who are poor are more likely to live in certain areas rather than others. There is, too, a strong tendency for certain social problems to be concentrated geographically. Research in Nottinghamshire, for example, finds high correlations between a range of social indicators in the enumeration districts used in the census.

Table 2: Correlations between indicators of disadvantage in Nottinghamshire (Notts Planning Dept., 1983, p.44)

No car

.813															Free school meals
.824	.923														Single parent families
.671	.652	.631													Dependent population
.840	.872	.899	.723												Adults unemployed
.782	.820	.821	.659	.894											Youths unemployed
.725	.596	.566	.450	.578	.526										Semi-skilled workers
.731	.714	.685	.627	.756	.672	.490									Unskilled workers
.728	.745	.705	.629	.789	.758	.654	.627								Over 1 person per room
.471	.342	.320	.463	.485	.486	.292	.344	.418							Lacking amenities
.815	.703	.685	.670	.719	.651	.637	.697	.638	.265						Permanently sick
.518	.518	.519	.338	.522	.487	.407	.327	.368	.297	.401					Low birthweight babies
.692	.759	.829	.613	.831	.734	.458	.648	.659	.344	.649	.355				Children's problems
.758	.708	.712	.585	.692	.668	.573	.656	.639	.286	.686	.385	.588			Youths in trouble

Many of these factors are clearly related to poverty. Unemployment, single parenthood and lack of skills are causes of poverty; low birthweight, lack of a car, poor housing amenities and receipt of school meals are consequences of it. At the same time, these factors are also indicators of the social characteristics of a particular district. There are some places in which cars are less necessary than in others, and some in which schools are more active in promoting the takeup of free school meals. Housing amenities, which are less strongly inter-correlated than many of the

other factors, tend to be inferior because they are in older parts of towns, which is also where the older industry, which has particularly suffered through the recession, tends to be. The distribution of unemployment, and of people in low skill occupations, tends to reflect the pattern of local industry.

The reasons for the concentration of deprivation are complex. The structure of towns is such as to lead to development which is differentiated between districts. Communities are established at different periods; the housing is built to the standards of the time, but standards tend to change according to the age and quality of the stock, and the level of investment devoted to maintenance and improvement. The pattern of employment, and so the resources available to the community, reflect commercial and industrial developments. Within specific areas, the age of the estate and the extent to which settled residence have been established are liable to be reflected in the structure of the community. Coleman attacks the unlikely supposition that older council estates are generally more likely to suffer social problems through obsolescent design (pp.82-83). This is the reverse of what might reasonably be expected in many cases. A new estate is likely to have many lettings to applicants from the waiting list, who are likely to be young families (because older families are more likely to have settled accommodation). As an estate becomes older, so do many of its long-term residents; and the income and accumulated resources of a household is liable to increase substantially as parents move from their twenties into their forties and fifties (see e.g. CSO, 1986, p.91). This implies that older estates might be generally less likely to suffer from problems - which is what Utopia on Trial found.

Another factor leading to spatial differentiation has been deliberate segregation by class. Council tenants are, to some extent, stigmatised overall, and the design of the estates has reflected the intention that they should house stigmatised tenants. The construction of some estates for the tenants of the slums meant that those estates carried, from their inception, a particular stigma. Local authority housing estates have been built with physical barriers to

communication and access, reinforcing social segregation. (See e.g. Collison, 1963, or Tucker, 1966; the practice has left an evident legacy.) The residualisation of council housing, as the better housing within the public sector is sold off and poorer people are concentrated in the remaining stock, exacerbates the general trend.

Within the council stock, some estates have a bad 'reputation'. Public housing managers have 'graded' tenants according to their standards of housekeeping and suitability as prospective tenants (see e.g. Duke, 1970; Simpson, 1981); the practice is commended by Macey and Baker, the principal text in housing management (Macey, 1984). Coleman, somewhat ingenuously, writes that "none of the local authorities in the study are will admit to having 'sink' estates for problem families" (p.89), as if this demonstrated that such segregation had not taken place. But grading does not apply only to the 'problem families' which Coleman mentions, but to families of all types, in an attempt to create settled housing estates. Secondly, grading has rarely been a matter of explicit policy, and has rather been exercised by housing officers as a matter of management practice. As one director commented to me, 'We don't have grading here. Of course, I can't be sure of everything my officers do.' Thirdly, although grading has fallen out of favour in recent years, it has left a legacy that is likely to continue for some time.

Deliberate segregation is not, I would argue, crucial to an understanding of the social divisions in housing. Although in the private sector landlords and estate agents may also make judgments about the personal suitability of prospective tenants and purchasers, the root of social disadvantage lies in the magic of the market; those people who are least able to exercise choice end up in the places least to be chosen. The same mechanism applies in the public sector. Research in Glasgow (Clapham, Kintrea 1986) shows that where applicants for council housing are allowed a choice, the people most able to exercise it are those who have the highest incomes and the best housing previously. They are the ones who can wait for a better offer. The worst

property has to be allocated to someone, and there is little point in offering it to people who will certainly reject it. The actions of public sector housing officers and estate agents in separating out types and classes are not so much a cause of spatial differentiation as a recognition of it.

These processes are reflected directly in the occupation of housing in particular estates. The effect of social and spatial segregation is that people who are poorest, most desperate and most vulnerable are substantially more likely to live in accommodation which other people wish to reject, for whatever reason. A bad reputation, graffiti, litter, environmental decline, and social problems are all reasons why people should choose to live elsewhere. Coleman considers the question of choice only briefly. "What," she asks, "created the bad reputation in the first place? Could it be design?" (p.90) It could; but it could also be a number of other things, including the inadequacies of the properties constructed for lower class tenants, the reputation the tenants bring with them, the management and maintenance of the estate, allocations policies, the incidence of poverty in the estate and the social problems which arise from it. The issue is many-sided. It is not only that people who are poor are likely to live in undesirable areas: the poverty of the tenants helps to make those areas undesirable. The result is a vicious circle through which the problems on particular estates are liable to accumulate. Coleman criticises the policy of mass housing for forcing some people into places where they did not choose to live. If the case I have made is correct, this is a process which is liable to happen anyway. The main criticism to be made of public housing policies is that they failed to prevent it.

Utopia on trial: the evidence

Coleman asserts that 'poverty should be ruled out as a cause of the abuses.' (1985, p.85)

However, her evidence for doing so is startlingly thin - perhaps because she did not consider the argument, in the light of her own theoretical perspective, strong enough to require a more rigorous rebuttal. Considering the question of estates where problems arise independently of bad design, Coleman states that a study was made of an estate established in 1957 (p.90-91).

One estate is scarcely sufficient to prove her case: the features of difficult to let estates identified in the DoE study (table 1, above) show fairly clearly that the types of problems experienced vary substantially between different estates, which does not mean that they are not widespread.

Coleman gives no details about the particular estate considered, which makes it difficult to evaluate her comments in context. Frances Reynolds, whose subsequently published study (1986) is the source of Coleman's comparison, makes it clear that the estate she is referring to is a very large one, that even within it there are social distinctions, and that it would not be true to describe the whole estate as suffering from serious problems of social malaise - which casts doubt on the legitimacy of Coleman's use of statistics about the estate as a whole.

Secondly, data are referred to - without being included in the study - which apparently show that there is no association between the indicators of malaise and low social class (p.85). It is difficult, because of the lack of information, to evaluate this comment, but several explanations are possible. The evidence comes from one specific area in Southwark, containing 90 blocks. The pattern may only reflect the structure of one particular district. There may be factors which make it dangerous to generalise - like low paid non-manual workers, pensioners or households headed by females which have low incomes. There may be, too, low sample sizes in particular categories. Perhaps most likely, there may well be some allocation of dwellings in

difficult to let estates to young people in upper social classes; this would be fully consistent with the finding indicators of malaise are positively correlated with the numbers of people in higher social classes.

The fullest information given is of a different kind. The following table is abstracted from Appendix 2 of the study.

Table 3: Design and socio-economic coefficients compared (from Coleman et al., p.207)

Data for 90 blocks in Southwark. Kendall's Tau C coefficients. Results over 0.17 are statistically significant.

	Litter	Graffiti	Damage	Faeces
DESIGN VARIABLES				
Disadvantagement score (combination of design factors)	0.269	0.395	0.172	0.074
Strongest individual variable	0.209	0.353	0.241	0.241
	(Inter-connecting exits)	(No. of	(Dwellings storeys) entrance)	(Dwellings per entrance)
SOCIO-ECONOMIC VARIABLES				
Unemployed as % of all economically active	0.241	0.205	-0.028	-0.019
Pensioners as % of population	-0.241	-0.362	-0.12	-0.013
% of under 15s in single parent families with female heads	0.174	0.28	0.219	-0.06

There are considerable grounds for caution here.

- Even if the associations of design factors with social problems were stronger than the socio-economic variables, this would not necessarily establish a causative relationship. As it is, the strongest individual design variables yield results in respect of three of the four indicators of abuse which are broadly comparable to the strongest socio-economic variables. There are no clear grounds on which it could be concluded that one type of factor is decisive.
- The socio-economic factors used, though the correlations are high enough to point to some issues of interest, are still fairly crude. For example, there is generally high unemployment among council tenants, and in order adequately to establish its influence it would be helpful to distinguish subcategories according to age, duration of unemployment and family structure (Murphy and O'Sullivan, 1986, show that differences between tenures are highly sensitive to this sort of categorisation). The number of single parent families is going to affect the number of economically active people and so the proportion of people who are unemployed, but there is no consideration of the interaction between them.
- There is no attempt to produce a composite index of socio-economic deprivation which can legitimately be compared with the 'disadvantage index' of design variables.
- The data all come from one district, which mean that there may be other factors (like urban conditions or allocation procedures) which influence the results but are not taken into account. This objection can be extended to the results as a whole. The selection of the sample blocks depends almost entirely on two inner London authorities, without any recognition of the effects of council policies on the distribution of problems. This affects not only allocations and management policy, but also the design and construction of

buildings.

- A number of of the 'design' factors which Coleman identifies as causing problems - like the number of units in a block, and the design of a block - are not genuinely independent of each other. This means that when in the appendices Coleman lists a large number of design factors, and shows them all to be associated with some social problems, it may be simply showing the same thing again and again. Even if one accepts that design is liable to cause social problems, it would be impossible to distinguish, in these circumstances, which factors should be changed as a matter of policy.
- As Hillier (1986) points out, the presentation of the results tends to emphasise statistical significance - the probability that a result would occur - as if it was meaningful in itself. Coleman refers to the statistical significance of some social factors as being low, on the basis of results from 90 blocks (p.88). Most of the other data in the survey are based on thousands of blocks (see e.g. p.98). When several thousand cases are under review, even very weak associations are likely to become statistically significant. Hillier argues that the correlation, which is a measure of the strength of the association between the two factors, is more important. Coleman's undoubtedly correct reply is that, for the purposes of policy, the slope of the regression curve, which shows the responsiveness of one factor to another (or, if the term helps, elasticity) is more relevant (Coleman, 1986).
Unfortunately, the research is not done in a form that would lend itself to this type of analysis.
- The design variables do not necessarily show what the authors of the study think they do. Hillier (1986) points out, for example, that the measure for 'litter' is based simply on the question of whether litter is present in the blocks.

'Coleman treats this "finding" as though it were evidence for the effect of design on social malaise,

when all it seems to show is that the more people there are around, the more likely it is that someone will drop litter.'

He argues that on the existing evidence the proportions of children and of pensioners in blocks are liable to be substantially more influential in explaining differences than most design factors.

- No attempt has been made in the research to control statistically for the influence of different factors. This could be an important contribution to the assessment of the relative importance of planning, design, management and social factors in the problems of depressed estates, and it may be a worthwhile starting point for further research.

Hillier, who considers the study "shoddy", has argued that the deficiencies of Utopia on Trial are so great as to invalidate the findings altogether. I do not, in general, share his view that the weaknesses in methodology make the evidence completely worthless; the effect of methodological criticisms is to advise caution about the reliability of the results and the validity of the analysis. There would be ample grounds for caution about the causal analysis even if the empirical findings were beyond dispute. It may well be that certain social problems - like litter, graffiti and children in care - are more likely to be found in certain types of development.

Where it happens, it is not because the development produces conditions in which these problems thrive, but because buildings which are most unsatisfactory and unpopular are used to house people who lack the material resources to overcome the problems, and whose poverty makes the conditions worse.

Implications for policy

Coleman makes three principal recommendations.

- " - No more flats should be built.
- House designers should renounce the unstabilising layouts of the last decade.
- Existing flats should be modified to remove their worst design features." (p.171)

The first of these is unsupported by her evidence. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the idea of an apartment block; the question is what it provides and who it provides it for. By the second point, I assume she means the high-rise and deck-access blocks mainly constructed over the last twenty-five years or so (though some of this construction dates from long before). There is clearly a case against these kinds of development, but there is also evidence that with different patterns of use, they can provide satisfactory accommodation. Anderson et al. write:

"It is apparent that housing associations and speculative developers are now building high-rise blocks which are proving very popular with certain types of householders, often those who are more affluent and can bear the full cost of services and management required, indicating that building 'High' per se is not a problem." (1984, p.30)

The third point is the one most solidly rooted in the findings of the study. Coleman argues that problems on estates can be substantially alleviated by a number of design modifications, like the removal of walkways, breaking down blocks into smaller units, improved entrances and streetscapes, and reducing the anonymity of developments. If the analysis in this paper is correct, this looks like an expensive and arguably inappropriate way to respond to the issues. Many of these measures are desirable in principle; they can help to change impersonal environments to a human scale. But this approach does not touch many of the problems

experienced because tenants are poor, vulnerable and lacking in choice, and the idea this is going to solve their problems is almost certainly a chimera.

More than this, it is a diversion from policies which are more likely to be productive. Anne Power's work with the Priority Estates Projects, which is (perhaps surprisingly) cited with approval in *Utopia on Trial*, emphasises other kinds of improvements through special management (Power, 1982; 1984). The PEP approach is not, to be frank, much better informed about causation than *Utopia on Trial*. The approach is eclectic, and mainly symptom-centred. The concentration on symptoms may have some undesirable effects: the creation of special lists for allocations, and the reaction against sending 'problem families' to certain places, is at best a mixed blessing, because it is liable simply to transfer problems somewhere else. But there are clear merits in relieving symptoms: for example, the organisation of rubbish collection, and the institution of community policing, help to address obvious problems. The effectiveness of this sort of response depends to a large degree on finding resources to provide a service. One of the most important and valuable innovations of the PEPs was the identification of a budget for expenditure on priority estates. Overall, the success or failure of this kind of project depends mainly on the extent to which it makes resources available. By the same token, if resources are not provided, special management projects are going to be extremely limited in their effects - a conclusion which should surprise no-one.

There is nothing wrong, and a great deal right, in trying to improve the conditions in which people live. However, the approach suggested in *Utopia on Trial* is as likely to lead to a waste of resources and diversion from real needs as it is to deal with the basic problems. I would argue that an emphasis on priority estates, for all its deficiencies, can offer a far more appropriate use of limited funds. Better still might be an approach which sought to distinguish the effects of planning, design, construction, allocation, management and the needs of tenants, and identified responses accordingly - though this would require an analysis of far greater subtlety than any

currently available. Attention to the root cause of the problems - the poverty of the tenants - and the commitment of major funding to that end might, in the end, be more effective than any of these approaches. However, it falls well beyond the capacity of housing policy to achieve it.

My thanks to Hugh Miller for comments on this paper.

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