London's Aylesbury Estate

An Oral History of the 'Concrete Jungle'

Michael Romyn

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Michael Romyn
Brighton, UK

For Katherine

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In late 2012 I began speaking to some of the former residents and last remaining residents of south London's Heygate Estate—a time when its demolition, in the name of 'regeneration', was already underway. My objectives were simple: to understand what it had been like to live on the Heygate, and to tell this story in the residents' own words. The resulting piece appeared in *History Workshop Journal* in 2016. A study of community life in a context of change, the piece, for me at least, raised as many questions as it answered—about the forces behind the decline of mass housing in inner-city London, and about the place of working-class residents within this often deracinating process.

This book—an examination of Heygate's sister estate, the Aylesbury—is an attempt to answer those questions; I hope, above all else, it does the experience of the Aylesbury's residents justice. Certainly, I owe an immense debt to a number of those residents and ex-residents, whose kindness and hospitality will always stay with me, and whose insights made the writing of this book possible. This sentiment extends to all the non-residents with whom I either spoke or corresponded.

The cast of people who have aided me does not end there: I am immeasurably grateful to Professor Jerry White, whose book, *Rothschild Buildings*, first set me on the path of oral history, and who guided me on the Heygate project, and then throughout this larger endeavour. His generosity, encouragement and advice have been truly invaluable.

The preparation of the manuscript was helped by the comments and criticisms of Dr Alana Harris and Professor Selina Todd, both of whom

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAAP	Aylesbury Area Action Plan
APCF	Aylesbury Plus Community Forum
ATLF	Aylesbury Tenants and Leaseholders First
CABE	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
DCH	Defend Council Housing
ERCF	Estates Renewal Challenge Fund
GLC	Greater London Council
HALAG	Heygate and Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
LBS	London Borough of Southwark
LCC	London County Council
LDDC	London Docklands Development Corporation
LSVT	Large-Scale Voluntary Transfer
NDC	New Deal for Communities
RSL	Registered Social Landlord
SCHC	Southwark Council Housing Committee
SCREC	Southwark Council Race Equality Committee
SCSC	Southwark Council Service Committees
SELKM	*South East London & Kentish Mercury*
SEU	Social Exclusion Unit
SLP	*South London Press*
SN	*Southwark News*
SS	*Southwark Sparrow*
ST	*Southwark Tenant*
UDC	Urban Development Corporation
WACAT	Walworth and Aylesbury Community Arts Trust
WATT	Working Against Tenant Transfer
WI	*Walworth Inprint*

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Introduction

On the afternoon of 7 September 1976, at the topping-out ceremony of the Aylesbury Estate—the largest of London's system-built estates—Southwark's then housing chief, Alderman Charles Sawyer, declared an end to developments of its kind in the borough. 'We have learnt from our mistakes,' he said.[1] The event saw glasses raised and smiles for the camera (see Fig. 1.1), but there was no disguising the cynical tenor. Covering the proceedings for the *South East London Mercury*, reporter Roy Cooper called the Aylesbury the 'greatest housing disaster in the country'; he went on to describe the estate as a 'nightmare,' an 'atrocity,' and a 'monstrous hell.'[2] This was nothing new. Nearly a decade in the making, the Aylesbury had been in the crosshairs almost from the start. 'Massive and dehumanizing,' stated *The Times* in 1970; 'It's almost as if creatures from another world had come down and built their own environment,' added architectural theorist, Oscar Newman, four years later.[3] Even amid the soft-pedalled festivities of the opening ceremony in October 1970, the naysayers found voice. Conservative councillor for Dulwich, Ian Andrews, reportedly 'walked out … in disgust.' The 'showpiece estate' was, he said, a 'concrete jungle not fit for people to live in.'[4] A reputation is usually earned; in the Aylesbury's case it was born.

Alderman Sawyer stayed true to his word. Following the completion of the Aylesbury, and other concurrent, large-scale developments in Peckham and Elephant and Castle, the borough drew a line under the prefabricated construction of council housing. Southwark was not alone in this. By the

Fig. 1.1 Councillors, planners and building professionals at the topping-out ceremony of the Aylesbury Estate, 1976. Alderman Charles Sawyer stands third from the left. *South East London and Kentish Mercury*, 9 September 1976. (Courtesy of the *South London Press.*)

mid-1960s, the trend to build high and fast was falling from favour; by the early 1970s the 'systems building boom' was theoretically dead.[5] Marred by the partial collapse of Ronan Point, a 22-storey system-built block in east London, in 1968, and by accusations of environmental determinism, the belief that mass, flatted housing was inherently flawed became normative. Once viewed optimistically as a modern, expedient and transformative solution to the post-war housing problem, large municipal estates had come to symbolise the mistakes of the budding welfare state. As design flaws emerged, and as maintenance programmes were hobbled by a lack of financial planning, and by central government parsimoniousness, the critics' catcalls only grew more raucous.[6]

The Aylesbury and estates like it would be labelled forevermore with crude slogans and hoary adjectives: inhuman, monolithic, totalitarian, labyrinthine. These were the new slums, the 'Slums of the Seventies,' the 'concrete jungles,' the 'High Rise Horrors.'[7] It was a language that organised a distorting impression, generated hellish meaning, and, for those looking in from the outside, rendered the council block mythic. Conspicuously missing from these narratives were the voices and opinions

of residents themselves. Like the faceless figures of the architects' maquette, council tenants were drawn one and the same; an undifferentiated mass—mute, hapless, or stamped with cheap social stereotypes, such as Thomas L. Blair's 'welfstate' man.[8] As Patrick Wright pointed out, the bevy of architectural pundits and post-war conservationists appeared 'remarkably unconcerned about the people for whom mass housing was designed.'[9] Much of this writing was bound up in a kind of sophistic nostalgia for the shoddy tenements and crumbling terraces that the residents' new homes replaced. Simon Jenkins, for one, lamented the loss of 'acre upon acre' of clearance housing, and, singling out Aylesbury's 'towering cliffs and harsh concrete passages,' looked forward to a time when the towers and slab blocks were consigned to the rubble heap of history: 'One day we will have the courage and the resources to pull them down and start again.'[10] And this in 1975, when Aylesbury's builders were still raising them up.

Jenkins would eventually see his wish. Serving as visual grist for the ideological abandonment of municipal housing in Britain after 1979, large-scale, down-at-heel estates were increasingly razed, many under private sector-led renewal schemes, and especially in millennial London.[11] Paralleled by a growing portrayal and perception of council housing as an unwholesome tenure of last resort, the act and spectacle of demolition often contained a 'festive' dimension, in the words of Ruth Glass.[12] It was as though the piece-by-piece dismantling of the welfare state was cause for celebration, both publicly and politically. Under the guise of regeneration, the Aylesbury is itself creeping along a timeline of its own demise. By 2020, several of its blocks had been torn down; the final phase of demolition is scheduled to begin in 2023.

This book attempts to make sense of the Aylesbury's fleeting trajectory, which, at first glance, appears wholly dismal. From the contested exigency of its existence, to its inauspicious beginnings, to the marginalisation and steady spiral towards dereliction that outwardly characterised its lifespan, the estate has been pointed up as an example of failed planning, and as an emblem of urban decay. It is the sort of narrative that elides the complexities and diversities of life in a local place, and thrusts working-class districts into conceptual exile. Tony Parker's brilliant *The People of Providence*—a collection of oral history interviews with the residents of south London's Brandon Estate, compiled in the 1980s—demonstrated the fatuousness of general depictions and definitions by showing the reader just how varied, complex and, ultimately, human, estate-life can be.[13] It reinforced the importance of viewing estates like the Aylesbury as sites of diversity, where

people lead different lives, have different stories to tell, experience different degrees of success, happiness and hardship, and have different ways of coping. Council estates are just homes after all. For most residents, they are not media props or architectural crimes or political rationales, but places of family, tradition, ritual and refuge, possessing a social value that—now more than ever—dwarfs the price of the land they are sited on. While necessary to understand the many ways in which the Aylesbury has been presented and perceived by external actors (for these are its histories, too—histories that interacted with one another, and had influence over the estate's direction), ultimately it is up to those who really knew the estate to have the final say.

Community life on the Aylesbury is the main arena of this study. Whether forged through a commonality of interests, or rooted in shared hardships and interdependences, community on the estate has taken on various forms and iterations since the first flats were occupied in 1969. Even when the population could be broadly characterised by homogeneity and accord, the estate's size, sprawl and structure fitted it out with a fragmentary dimension; an inbuilt tendency toward separation and difference. Conversely, at its lowest ebb, when the deprivation indicators flashed red, and when certain cultural trenches had been dug, the substance of community life was still present. In order to make sense of this often knotty communal morphology, the estate must be viewed within a context of change. As Jerry White noted, understanding change over time 'helps illuminate the dynamics—and thus the very nature—of communities.'[14] Behind each shift, each realignment, each twist of Aylesbury's social kaleidoscope, there were forces at work, internal pressures and paroxysms, as well as outside decisions and transformative trends. This book seeks to identify these forces, delineate them, and chart their impact upon the estate and its residents. Within the community, change could be sited numerously. In participation, for instance, or in the face of social disorder. Or in more inaudible processes, such as the gradual leaking away of original tenants. In certain cases, these sites of change—whether rooted in cooperation or conflict—were symbiotic, with each informing, driving or expediting the other. The same can also be said of those direct and metamorphic forces that buffeted the estate from the outside, such as management practices, housing policies, and successive waves of regeneration. Indeed, the not insignificant fallout of externally made decisions and representations was received with more than just sufferance. As we shall see, inequity could provide a cynosure for tenant discourse; a polestar that

engendered communicative processes, social participation and, at the very least, varying degrees of commonality founded on a single shared cause.

Behind this tightly focussed portrait of change and its immediate drivers lies broader and multifarious contexts in which the estate must be situated. The shifting sands of Southwark's—and indeed London's—political, economic, and demographic landscape from the 1960s onwards produced a ripple-effect, a series of long-term and far-reaching consequences that fed down to its tenants and housing estates. To take one example, the steady erosion of Southwark's traditional manufacturing and riverside industries after 1965 saw a steep decline in jobs and, subsequently, a haemorrhaging of skilled and semi-skilled (and predominantly white) manual workers from the borough. Exacerbated by the Thatcher government's championing of home ownership—which served to grease the wheels of this inner-city exodus—Southwark's estates were increasingly peopled by the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the working class. This, on the Aylesbury at least, poked enough holes in its social fabric to render a once familiar world strange. The rituals and traditions of local life that were deeply connected to the industrial workplace disappeared alongside it, leaving a void that, with successive waves of immigration, was progressively filled with a new and at times disorientating cultural collage.[15]

In limiting the scale of observation to a single estate, we can explore a specific unity of place and action over time, while eschewing the generalities and reductions common to many broader housing histories. And yet the trajectory of the Aylesbury will, of course, share parallels with other large inner-city estates, and thus should be viewed—like all good microhistories—as a single unit reflecting a greater whole, or as a microcosm through which we can trace larger trends and developments in the provision of state housing.[16] Exploring the ground-level impact of Right to Buy and Southwark's lettings strategy, for example, helps us sketch out the association between housing policies and patterns of social residualisation. Similarly, by investigating the lead-up to the estate's demise, we can better parse the political abandonment of public provision after 1979, and the zeal with which the privatisation of council housing has been adopted. The fatal fire at Grenfell Tower in North Kensington in June 2017 did much to expose the disdain with which council housing and its tenants have been treated. Citing the violent effects of disinvestment, cost-cutting, stigmatisation, 'regeneration,' and urban inequality more broadly, the community and anti-gentrification collective Southwark Notes Archive

Group (SNAG), which has long campaigned side-by-side with tenants and residents of the Aylesbury, called Grenfell the 'final potent symbol of all that has been brought down on our heads in the last 30+ years.'[17] Like Grenfell, the Aylesbury was beset by numerous challenges, failures, and injustices that were bound up with, and reflective of, the fate of many municipal housing estates from the mid-twentieth century onwards. This book charts when and why these difficulties arose and, consequently, serves as a corrective to the lazy broadsides and sideswipes aimed at public housing generally, and to cataclysmic portrayals of large-scale urban estates in particular.

While the Aylesbury's constructional principles were firmly grounded in cost and efficiency—a technocratic vision that left little room for styling—its size and sprawl suggested a degree of architectural hubris. Arresting, often imposing, and unabashedly urban, the estate, then, lifted easily into monolithic axioms of the 'dangerous' inner city, and quickly became a staple of sensationalist media narratives, and a warning cum rationale for various political projects. Like its younger—but shorter-lived—sister estate, the Heygate, it was also used as a recurring backdrop in film and television, invariably depicting fictions of violence, drugs and depravity.[18] Ultimately, the crafting of external representations loosed a double impact on the estate: first, it robbed it of its historicity. By casting a veil on historical processes, and by refashioning complex social conditions into quasi-eternal natural laws, the propagation of simplistic and hyperbolic depictions belied the realities of life specific to the Aylesbury. Latterly they possessed no memory of how the estate was made or how it changed over time—they did away with 'any going back beyond what is immediately visible,' in the words of Roland Barthes.[19] Second, it gave rise to myths and clichés of urban deprivation, which consistently painted the estate as a fearful place, sinister and slab-sided, a relentless incubator of poverty and crime. The Aylesbury was no outlier in this regard. Over time, a narrative of hopelessness, violence and blight seeped into the political and popular discourse surrounding council housing until it hardened into orthodoxy. As Suzanne Hall argued, public housing and its tenants have been reduced to stereotypes and caricatures, and have become barnacled with an 'estate stigma' that has proved difficult to alter. When, in 1997, Tony Blair used the Aylesbury as a backdrop (and visual aid) to announce Labour's pledge to relinquish the nation's 'forgotten' people from a stranglehold of poverty, not only did it reinforce the social differentiation that confined and relegated the estate's inhabitants, it also, through

broadcasting the 'broken' Aylesbury narrative to a wider audience, served to perpetuate its native reputation.[20]

Community and Its Uses

Critics of post-war urban renewal often framed comprehensive redevelopment as an irreparable rupture in the fabric of 'traditional' working-class communities. Slum clearance, they argued, was an act of cultural vandalism, disrupting time-honoured patterns of social life, and extinguishing any sense of community spirit.[21] Perhaps most famously, Michael Young and Peter Willmott's classic sociological study, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), argued that mass relocations shrank the social reach of the old neighbourhood network to the bounds of the family unit. They wrote of the prevalence of loneliness and malaise on the new estates, particularly among women, who, in many cases, relied upon husbands and, far too often, the television, to spell their isolation.[22] As both Lise Butler and Jon Lawrence have shown, however, the field of post-war 'community studies' often presented an idealised portrait of 'traditional' communal relations; a political project first and foremost, Young and Willmott's mythologised account of old, working-class districts 'provided a devastating critique of urban planners' indifference to the lived environments that their policies promised to obliterate.'[23] For those opposed to the 'brutal' imposition of mass housing, such theorising over the existence or non-existence of 'community' in working-class districts—theorising that would never happen in relation to middle-class lives—would remain a preoccupation.[24]

With sights set squarely and uncompromisingly on the high-rises, slab-blocks and elevated walkways of the Modernist estate, Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space*, a study of high-rise public housing in New York in the 1970s, argued that a trinity of design factors—'anonymity,' 'lack of surveillance' and prevalence of 'alternative escape routes'—seen as common in much mass housing, conjured criminality and delinquency among residents, and positively attracted intruders, addicts and other unwanted outsiders.[25] In 1974, Newman lent his assured voice and knowing mien to a BBC documentary on large-scale Modernist housing, in which the Aylesbury featured heavily. The overall impression he conveys of the estate is one of menace and imminent danger. Set against a backdrop of children at play on an unidentified English estate, Newman's closing remarks, spoken as a lament, imply in no uncertain terms that architecture has the capacity to undermine the processes of socialisation:

It's very difficult to believe that children who grow up here will grow up feeling any sense of responsibility, any sense of a role in society, any sense of a contribution they can make … one wonders, will these children grow up to become the criminals that we seem to have so much of in America, in such abundance.[26]

With the publication of her 1985 survey, *Utopia on Trial*, Alice Coleman emerged as the UK's standard-bearer for Newman's provocative cause. While her central focus was on 'forms of social malaise'—vandalism, graffiti, litter, excrement—rather than crime, Coleman maintained that there was a strong correlation between mass housing estates ('human disasters,' in her language), criminal activity, and the diminishment—or strangulation—of community spirit.[27] Thanks to the lubricant of inner-city regeneration—which was swiftly gathering momentum at the time—Coleman's thesis soon found a political home: in 1986, Margaret Thatcher made her an advisor to the Department of the Environment, and in 1991, a five-year, £50 m project, DICE (Design Improvement Controlled Experiment), was implemented to test the ideas she put forth.[28] Even now, more than 30 years after its release, *Utopia on Trial's* influence abides; a 2013 report by the Conservative Party think tank, *Policy Exchange*, which proposed the wide-scale razing of high rise social housing in London, leaned heavily on Coleman's findings. Its authors, in a masterly flaying of today's multistorey estates, imported her graying statistics as if they were shiny and new.[29]

Like the Conservative government before it, New Labour's approach to urban regeneration bore the spectre of the 'failed' estate and the shibboleth of 'strong communities.' Neo-utopias of 'mixed' and 'sustainable' communities, developed through schemes of tenant 'inclusion' and 'participation,' such as the 1998-launched 'New Deal for Communities,' would—by attracting better-off residents (i.e. the middle-classes) to improving neighbourhoods—supposedly raise the economic base of an area and interrupt patterns of 'social exclusion': looking specifically at NDC partnerships in London, Bennington et al. stated that local authorities and NDC officers saw the creation of a greater social mix as an explicit objective of the programme.[30] Such efforts at 'socially mixed' regeneration (usually encompassing at least an element of rebuild) were invariably carried along by a moral rationale and economic logic for the diversification of tenure. But as Watt and others have noted, the creation of 'mixed' communities has often precipitated the displacement of working-class tenants, particularly on estates coveted for their exorbitant land values.[31]

Whether framed by the myopic determinism of Newman or Coleman—which emphasised form at the expense of far more telling variables, such as deindustrialisation and unemployment—or by the moralistic rationale of New Labour—which problematised council tenants as feckless and lacking in aspiration—representations of mass housing estates have routinely neglected the perspectives of working-class residents. Reflecting this marginal treatment experienced at the hands of 'experts' and higher-ups, it is rare that the voices of council residents resound from the housing literature. This, as Alison Ravetz pointed out, is especially true of working-class mothers and grandmothers, whose catalytic role on estates was 'too frequent to be overlooked.'[32] At least part of this vacuum has been filled in recent years by the strain of research centred on what is broadly termed the 'tenants' movement,' that is, the collective action of tenants in the state housing sector.[33] Even so, tenant mobilisation is a tight focus, concerned with specific issues and a specific group of actors, and, like many studies of housing policy, can only tell us so much—a point underscored by Ravetz in her 2001 study, *Council Housing and Culture*, in which she appealed for a broad and historically nuanced treatment of council housing. Ravetz' own analysis marries an account of domestic culture and working-class life at the tenant level with that of policy and decision-making at the municipal level, and examines the many tensions and contradictions contained therein. Detailing the myriad political, economic, and social circumstances of state housing's rise and slide, Ravetz, like John Boughton's excellent *Municipal Dreams* (2018) more latterly, provides a multifaceted history and reference point for further housing research.[34] The application of a roaming lens to such expansive subject matter will, however, lead to inevitable blurs and distortions, and a shortfall in fine-grain detail. Ravetz' single sentence summary of the Aylesbury—an 'instant failure'[35]—for example, is at odds with her prescribed approach of 'seeing the past through ever shifting perspectives.'[36]

It is here, then, that the study of a single estate or community is of use. Works by Lynn Abrams and Linda Fleming, Ben Jones, Mark Clapson, Seán Damer, and Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, among others, have utilised oral history to describe working-class communities shaped by changes beyond their control, but which, upon closer inspection, were a far cry from the desperate reputations ascribed to them.[37] Alongside Lisa McKenzie's *Getting By*, an ethnography of community life in St Ann's, a post-war estate in Nottingham, these studies provide useful points of comparison when considering the way in which housing policies and changes

in employment were experienced by residents of council estates of different ages, forms, and locations, whether in London or the provinces.[38] They also emphasise the importance of understanding 'community' as variously diverse, changeable, resilient, fluid, and adaptive to the structural and material forces that shape both places themselves and people's understanding of them. It is in this sense that residents of the Aylesbury found ways to articulate collective experiences, give voice to personal identities, overcome an absence of recognition, and raise political consciousness within the context of an increasingly insecure and socially fragmented world, and regardless of the 'broken,' 'corrupting' or 'failing' labels reflexively assigned to large-scale estates from the 1960s onwards.

Method, Voice and Memory

This book is steeped in the voices of those who either lived or worked on the Aylesbury, or who had a hand in its trajectory. It is based on the interviews and correspondence of residents and former residents, but also youth and community workers, borough councillors, officials, police officers, and architects. Most respondents knew the Aylesbury intimately and, for the largest part, had a stake in the community at some point in its history. The resident respondents encompass a somewhat characteristic sample of the Aylesbury's historic population: factors of age, gender and ethnicity were all considered when searching for respondents, as was striking a proportional balance between well-established members of the community and those who were more marginal. Participants were sourced in various ways, including an advert in a magazine, through a contact at a local newspaper, through Creation Trust,[39] a trawl of Facebook groups, word of mouth and some door-knocking.[40] Newspapers, local history archives, housing committee records, police statistics, census data, and literature produced by community groups were all explored alongside the oral testimony, so as to substantiate it, build social context, and to investigate the processes that shaped changes on the estate. Community generated websites such as SNAG, the Elephant Amenity Network, and 35percent.org, were a similarly valuable trove of information. When evaluated together, the oral and documentary sources presented fresh lines of questioning to ask of the other—a synergy that proved especially useful when comparing media treatments with residents' perceptions of the estate.

By giving predominantly working-class residents free rein to tell their own story, in their own words—an ideal at the heart of the politics and

practice of oral history—we are able to inject traditionally myopic accounts of council estate life with a more democratic view, and thus facilitate a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past.[41] While a critical reading of both the spoken testimony and autobiographical material was necessary to stay vigilant of potential narrative pitfalls (such as exaggeration or overly twinkling remembrances), this is not to imply that the subjectivities inherent to the testimony in this book are misleading– this would be disingenuous to the respondents whose memories are very real, and whose memories, for the largest part, provide a reliable account of the estate over the period in question. (Here, we do well to remember Anna Green's call for oral historians to 're-assert the value of individual remembering, and the capacity of the conscious self to contest and critique cultural scripts or discourses.')[42] But looking beyond face value, the interviews also suggest how tenants came to interpret the past, and how the past was often utilised to make sense of the world around them. The invoking of nostalgic narratives, for example, might 'be seen as a critique of contemporary stigmatising representations of working-class people, cultures and communities as deficient,' in the words of Ben Jones.[43] Moreover, the interviews reveal some of the human consequences of certain structural and economic shifts (processes that passed through the estate like a current: quiet, often unobserved, but ultimately transformative)—as well as more overt cultural changes—by helping join up individual experience with the broader social context. Demonstrating how policy decisions, collective forces and economic pressures interacted at an individual level—a decision to leave the estate, perhaps, or to exercise one's right to buy—may help illuminate the way in which people understood their situation and bestowed meaning upon their actions.[44]

Space, Place and the Urban Landscape

Examinations of space and spatiality can highlight the impact of culture, capital, and power structures on the built environment.[45] An analysis of space—as the medium in which we live—can also help us understand more about social injustice, and the ways in which urban exclusion and inclusion are materially expressed. In his 1974 work, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre, like Edward Soja after him, established a tripartite conception of space in order to advance the notion that space is socially produced (and to disabuse the idea that space is absolute): first, material spatial practices—the everyday routines and physical interactions that occur in and

across space within a particular society. Second, representations of space—which include the symbols, codifications and signs that allow material spatial practices to be acknowledged and understood. And third, spaces of representation—the counter spaces and symbolic structures that imagine new possibilities for spatial practices, or that challenge or subvert dominant spatial practices.[46]

This threefold definition of space is useful when thinking about the ways in which urban environments are constructed, experienced and represented, and how, in some cases, these spaces have come to be used as symbols. The Aylesbury, for example—a place of material spatial practices, social rhythms and collective patterns of movement—was overwhelmingly depicted in media and official discourses as a space of danger, wickedness, and social relegation. As this went on, however, residents organised and took part in various community projects and campaigns, and, at the same time still, the estate became a cynosure for problematic regeneration projects. David Harvey made clear that the spatial dimensions of experience, perception and imagination are, in quite complex ways, related internally and dialectically.[47] On the Aylesbury, this interplay between spatial representation (perception) and resistance (imagination) was evident in a televisual representation of the estate, and the response it elicited among tenants: until 2016, a short logo film—or 'ident'—regularly shown on Channel 4 as an upcoming broadcast was introduced, depicted a scenographically begrimed stretch of walkway on the Aylesbury.[48] This one-shot slalom through some of the clichéd toxicities of estate life, including heaped bin bags, discarded shopping trolleys, strewn litter, graffiti bedizened walls, and lines of tatty washing strung between blocks and balconies—all embellishments added in post-production—unsurprisingly proved unpopular with residents, aware as they were, as one tenant explained, of the impression it created:

> Have you seen that advert on Channel 4? It does make it look bad, it does make it look bad, and I think that was a terrible advert, a really bad advert, and it didn't do us any favours at all.[49]

Following an unsuccessful community campaign for Channel 4 to discontinue the film, a group of estate residents, along with the Creation Trust and filmmaker, Nick Street, produced an alternative, 'home-made' version of the ident.[50] Embellished all the same with an improbably high number of residents happily rubbing shoulders on the walkway, it was,

nevertheless, a more representative depiction of the space. With sustained pressure, Channel 4 agreed to showcase the resident-produced film—albeit once. The original ident aired for more than ten years.

Here, then, we see a space at once produced and reproduced, represented and opposed. We see an everyday space, normally occupied by individuals and homes, now dominated by those in a position of power, embedded with drama and ideology and overheated tropes, and, lastly, proliferated widely through mass communication. And then we see a new imagining, a space appropriated (or re-appropriated) with an alternative imagery, a symbolic construction designed to resist and oppose. Played out on film, this is a neat example of how a space is constituted and contested, and how it is given meaning through human endeavour.

While interesting to view space in this way, and particularly in a context of urban regeneration, 'spatial trialectics' (Lefebvre's words) reveal little about the lived experience, as historian Katrina Navickas argued. 'There's still something of the simulacra about the spatial turn,' she wrote. 'Spatial practices and representational spaces feel a little too 2-D.'[51] This is where the concept of 'place' fits in. A particular form of space, place emerges through acts of naming; by providing a geographical locus for belonging and identity. Whereas space helps explain the links and frictions between physical and symbolic environments and historical actors, place puts meat on these analytical bones, adding history and meaning, feelings and experiences. The 1970s saw humanistic geographers such as Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan begin to examine the experiential properties of place in this way.[52] Rejecting regional and quantitative definitions of place (a gathering of people in a single bounded locale), they felt place should be defined according to emotional dimensions: places mean different things for different people, and are associated with specific fears, attachments and desires. Place, Tuan stated, is a 'reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning.'[53]

With this in mind, the book seeks to understand what the Aylesbury meant to different people, how they experienced it as a physical place, and how these feelings and experiences altered with the passage of time. When carrying out interviews, it was quickly apparent that the mental maps respondents created within themselves differed from person to person. Indeed, the way in which they saw and interacted with the estate was dependent on a gallimaufry of factors—the block they lived in, the neighbours they had, the period they lived on the estate, their age, and so on. (More so than others, elderly residents could be guided by 'cartographies

of aversion'[54]—where not to walk, when not to go out, etc. On the other hand, those who grew up on the Aylesbury—especially in its early days—remembered a looser and wider-ranging relationship with the estate, governed as they were at that time by play, friends and adventure.) For those who had not seen or set foot on the estate in years, these mental maps were perhaps faded or missing large pieces. But there was always, in Tuan's terminology, a 'sense of place'—a feeling or a quality—that the Aylesbury continued to evoke.[55]

The size of the estate was a significant experiential factor, and a crucial determinant in a resident's sense of place. Borrowing from Tuan once more, all-encompassing labels given by planners to residential areas (such as 'neighbourhoods' or 'estates') did not always mean much to the people who inhabited them: 'The parts with which they identify may be much smaller, for instance, a single street or an intersection.'[56] Certainly, on an estate the size of the Aylesbury, trisected by two main throughways and fragmented by various other spatial delineations, it is easy to understand how it was experienced in different ways and imparted with different meanings. Loss of place, or the threat of loss of place, however, did much to fortify the estate's sharply drawn boundaries: in the face of regeneration, residents often developed a wider sense of place (the estate as a whole), and a more acute sense of collective identity, knowing as they did that any strength they had resided in numbers.

STRUCTURE

The book continues in Chap. 2 by exploring the landscape out of which the Aylesbury arose. From the end of the Second World War up until the beginnings of the estate's construction, we look at the scale of the 'housing problem' in Southwark, and the steps that were taken to solve it. Following the implementation of the 1963 London Government Act, the newly formed borough of Southwark (1965) embarked on an aggressive site-acquisition programme and production drive, which put the overlapping efforts of the old metropolitan borough and London County Council (LCC) to shame by comparison. We examine, under this new and resolute steerage, the advent of mass building in Southwark and the creation of the Aylesbury.

Advancing chronologically, Chap. 3 offers a portrait of life on the estate up until the beginning of the Thatcher regime, and encompassing the enactment of the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, which, by

shifting the provision for homelessness away from welfare and towards housing, significantly extended the liabilities of local authority housing departments—a pivotal moment in the trajectory of state housing. Before this point, the early Aylesbury community can be broadly characterised by its whiteness, its homogeneity, and its links to the local labour movement. Insular and 'tribe'-like in some respects—as demonstrated by the somewhat closed-wall tenant bodies—its sociological construction was in lock step with a housing department that was paternalistic by creed. We investigate how residents 'bedded in' during the Aylesbury's first decade, how the community built up and sustained itself, and how tenants adapted to the challenges presented by the estate's design. We also examine how ongoing demographic and economic shifts—the exodus of manufacturing, for one—impacted residents lives and transformed their local environment.

Chapter 4 traces these shifts as they wended their way through the estate's middle years. It details how, over time, various factors, including spending cuts, changing welfare arrangements, the rise in private consumption, and the outward migration of tenants, radically altered the composition of the estate. Dogged and fierce, these processes chewed through many of the social bonds established in the Aylesbury's formative stages, but also gave rise to new, more tenuous, less well-defined expressions of community. We look at the intensifying problems of homelessness, crime, and unemployment in the area, how these served to widen any interstitial social cracks, and how they were paralleled by a rise in need, and thus a growing demand for social provision. This chapter also explores how a decline in the estate's physical environment quickly took hold. Hampered by poor management, a limited budget, and a burgeoning housing stock (Southwark acquired 20,000 additional council properties with the abolition of the Greater London Council—GLC), the borough became increasingly dilatory over repairs and improvements. Housing management itself managed to shed many of its outdated practices, rigid customs and overbearing personalities over the course of this period, while also helping to establish a number of tenant-based participation schemes.

The urge toward neoliberal solutions to the problems of urban blight—whether real or imaginary—could be witnessed in Southwark well before 1997. But as Chap. 5 demonstrates, the coordinates of Aylesbury's so-called 'regeneration' were most accurately plotted by New Labour. Beginning with the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme in 1998 (a £56 m cash injection intended to revitalise the estate's fortunes

over a ten-year span), and including a push for stock transfer, the zeal for urban renewal continued, having been inherited by successive governments. Here we explore the impact of the NDC on the Aylesbury and its residents, and on regeneration developments in its wake. Further, we delineate the twists and turns of the stock transfer proposal—an agitated and uncertain period for the estate, in which the council was pitted against a vociferous tenant-led campaign.

Woven throughout the book is an examination of how the estate has been depicted publicly, and how, if at all, we reconcile these representations with tenants' own accounts. As we shall see, press-peddled images and invidious fictional gloss belied the realities of community life specific to the Aylesbury, and long perpetuated the message that the residents themselves were somehow different, lesser. We examine how this anathematising dimension masked the unpalatable realities of economic restructuring and political neglect, and how stereotypes and sensationalism dovetailed neatly with Southwark's scheme of regeneration.

Notes

1. Roy Cooper, 'Top of the flops', *South East London and Kentish Mercury,* 9 September 1976.
2. Cooper, 'flops'.
3. Tony Aldous, *The Times*, 3 November, 1970; Oscar Newman, *The Listener*, 7 March 1974.
4. *South London Press*, 10 January 1975.
5. Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 5.
6. See for example: Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972); Simon Jenkins, *Landlords to London: The story of a Capital and its growth*, (London: Constable and Company, 1975).
7. *Time Out*, 7–13 June 1974.
8. Thomas L. Blair, *The Poverty of Planning: Crisis in the Urban Environment*, (London: Macdonald, 1973), 86.
9. Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Way We Live Now*, (London: Radius, 1991), 91.
10. Jenkins, *Landlords*, 264–5.
11. In 1979, council houses and flats accounted for nearly a third of Britain's total housing stock. Now, less than a fifth of all homes are council owned,

largely as a result of the Right to Buy. See Peter Malpass, *Housing and the Welfare State: The Development of Housing Policy in Britain*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

12. Ruth Glass, *Clichés of Urban Doom*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), x.
13. Tony Parker, *The People of Providence: A Housing Estate and Some of Its Inhabitants*, (London, Hutchinson, 1983).
14. Jerry White, *Campbell Bunk: The Worst Street in North London Between the Wars*, (London: Pimlico, 2003), 6.
15. Suzanne Hall, *City, Street and Citizen: The measure of the ordinary*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 132–33; David N. Thomas, *Organising for Social Change: A Study in the Theory and Practice of Community Work*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), 37–43; Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People*, (London: Vintage, 2008), 73.
16. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 149.
17. *Southwark Notes*, (19 June 2017), https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/2017/06/19/the-luxury-of-not-being-burned-to-death/, accessed 5 May 2020.
18. Roughly half a mile north of the Aylesbury, the Heygate was opened in 1974 and demolished by 2014. Smaller at 1194 units compared to the Aylesbury's 2700, more organised in its arrangement, and in some ways more successful, the story of the Heygate nevertheless shares a great deal in common with that of the Aylesbury. See: Michael Romyn, 'The Heygate: Community Life in an Inner-City Estate, 1974–2011', *History Workshop Journal,* vol. 81 (2016).
19. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (London: Vintage, 2000), 143.
20. Quoted in Donald Macintyre, 'Poverty's the problem, work is the solution', *The Independent*, 3 June 1997.
21. Chris Waters, 'Representations of Everyday Life: L. S. Lowry and the Landscape of Memory in Postwar Britain', *Representations*, no. 65 (1999), 134–37.
22. Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 149.
23. Lise Butler, 'Michael Young, the Institute of Community Studies and the politics of kinship', *Twentieth-Century British History*, vol. 26 (2015); Jon Lawrence, 'Inventing the "Traditional Working Class": A Re-Analysis of Interview Notes from Young and Willmott's Family and Kinship in East London,' *Historical Journal*, vol. 59, (2016), 592.
24. Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, *Moving Histories of Class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in Contemporary England*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 21.

25. *Defensible Space* was in many ways a muscular advance on Jane Jacobs' 1961 work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which lamented the hollowing out of many ageing, inner-city cores. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Random House, 1961).

26. John M. Mansfield (dir.), *Horizon: The Writing on the Wall*, (BBC, 1974).

27. Alice Coleman, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing*, (London: Hilary Shipman, 1985).

28. See Graham Towers, *Shelter is Not Enough: Transforming Multi-Storey Housing*, (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2000), 115–17.

29. Nicholas Boys Smith and Andrew Morton, *Create Streets: Not Just Multi-Storey Estates*, (London: Policy Exchange, 2013), 33–35.

30. Jude Bennington, Tim Fordham and David Robinson, *Housing in London NDCs: Situations Challenges and Opportunities*, Research Report No. 59, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University, (2004), 29.

31. Paul Watt, 'Social Housing and Regeneration in London', in Rob Imrie, Loretta Lees and Mike Raco (eds.), *Regenerating London: Governance, Sustainability and Community in a Global City*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 232; Hall, *City*, 48–49.

32. Ravetz, *Council Housing*, 6.

33. See, for example, Peter Somerville, 'Resident and Neighbourhood Movements', in *International Encyclopaedia of Housing and Home*, (London: Elsevier Press, 2012); John Grayson, 'Campaigning Tenants: A Pre-History of Tenant Involvement to 1979', in Charlie Cooper and Murray Hawtin (eds.), *Housing, Community and Conflict: Understanding Resident Involvement*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997); Quintin Bradley, *The Tenants' Movement: Resident Involvement, Community Action and the Contentious Politics of Housing*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

34. John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing*, (London: Verso, 2018).

35. Ravetz, *Council Housing*, 186.

36. Ravetz, *Council Housing*, 3.

37. Lynn Abrams and Linda Fleming, *Long Term Experiences of Tenants in Social Housing in East Kilbride: An Oral History Study*, (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Project Report, 2011); Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid-Twentieth-Century England: Community, Identity, and Social Memory*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Mark Clapson, *Working-Class Suburb: Social Change on an English Council Estate, 1930–2010*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Seán Damer, *Scheming: A Social History of Glasgow Council Housing, 1919–1956*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Rogaly and Taylor, *Moving Histories*.