

How 'place-making is tearing apart social housing communities'

27th December 2018

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/27/london-placemaking-social-housing-communities-tenants>

Joyce (not her real name) was in east London long before the Cereal Killer cafe, moving from East Ham to the Carpenters estate in Newham months before her son was born in 1972. She doesn't describe a life of luxury: "We had young children, we had three bedrooms, [but] it was warm." Nor was the community on the estate devoid of problems, but she made friends among her neighbours and was able to put down roots with the kind of security that is becoming increasingly rare.

She says her flat was in "perfect condition" apart from some ceiling damp, the result of a forgetful neighbour with a quick-running bath. So when she received a letter from Newham council in 2010 advising that the whole estate was going to be decanted for "refurbishment", it came as a surprise. Her fears were quelled when the council confirmed that once the refurbishment was over, residents who wanted to return would be more than welcome to do so (subject to availability). But seven years on, Joyce has not returned, and more than 400 properties on the estate sit empty. With the glistening Olympic stadium looming over it, the fate of the Carpenters estate represents an all-too-familiar story for social housing tenants across the capital.

Joyce moved to a nearby housing association property in 2011, avoiding the anxiety of having to negotiate a whole new area. Yet when I ask if she would move back into the Carpenters estate, her "yes" is unequivocal. She recently returned to visit her old flat with a member of the Focus E15 housing campaign group, and declared with a big smile that "I felt like I came back home."

Between 2012 and 2017, Newham council rehoused more than 3,000 homeless families outside of the borough. Meanwhile, some London councils are shipping households as far away as Newcastle. So why are so many homes sitting empty when demand is grossly outweighing supply? Joyce doesn't mince her words: "I think it's because of the area and the potential in the area and they just want to make more money."

Newham argue that it consulted the residents repeatedly between 2004 and 2009 but "every option was too expensive to be feasible as the costs outweighed the value of the leaseholders' properties and council-owned flats".

Instead it tried to sell the properties to University College London. UCL was interested but ultimately withdrew from the estate following protests from its staff and students, as well as local residents. Selling to a university doesn't scream of greed like signing it all away to an offshore company. But it would have generated "cultural capital", which is a key component of "placemaking", a vital stepping stone in attracting much more affluent people to an area.

Yet those enjoying the personal touches of the tower are now doing so at sky-high London rents. Poplar HARCA, the housing association that manages the homes, started "decanting" residents from the property in 2008 saying that they would "possibly but not probably" have a "right of return" once the refurbishment was complete. Not a single one did. This decision to let all the flats at market rates coincided neatly with Poplar HARCA's plans to regenerate the nearby Chrissie Street market to "create a thriving town centre".

Elsewhere in London, Southwark's council's decision to demolish the Elephant and Castle shopping centre and surrounding homes to make way for a new university campus will likely result in a loss of social housing and significantly decreased space for local businesses. In all these cases, the social tenants were treated like cattle, herded elsewhere with minimal consultation about their wishes.

Yet Joyce talks about the Carpenters estate more like a lost sweetheart than a collection of bricks and mortar. "It's like losing someone. You had made plans with that person, you were going to spend the rest of your life with that person. Then suddenly they change their mind. Obviously, it puts a dent in your everyday."

The new Newham mayor, Rokhsana Fiaz, has changed tack from the previous council regime, promising that the fate of the estate will be decided by local residents and recommending that people whom the council displaced should be allowed back. Let's hope this a genuine promise rather than empty words. "Placemaking" wrenches social housing communities away from their homes because they don't fit in with the developer's dream. It's heart-breaking.