

Homes and Places: A History of Nottingham's Council Houses

Chris Matthews (Editorial Support by Dan Lucas)

Nottingham, Nottingham City Homes/Russell Press, 2015, 111pp., £9.99 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-9934093-0-1

The government's Housing and Planning Bill (HL Bill 87 of 2015–16), currently at committee stage, has intensified the debate about the role and future of social housing. The government argue for the need to build our way out of the housing crisis and transform "generation rent into generation buy". Critics argue that, if passed, the bill will reduce the amount of affordable housing and lead to a significant loss in the number of council homes.

Chris Matthew's concise and accessible history of Nottingham's council houses is a timely reminder of the importance of social housing on a personal, social and political level. Whilst his book will be of particular interest to readers with a connection to Nottingham, it will hold a broader appeal for anyone with an interest in the politics of housing, social mobility and urban planning. Matthew's passionate conviction in the value and purpose of social housing shines through the entire work ("council housing marked the biggest collective leap in living standards in British history" p.9). He discusses the shift in housing tenure over time: at the turn of the twentieth century 90% of the British population lived in private rented accommodation, by the 1970s 29% were living in council property but this figure dropped to just 7.6% by 2013. His observations on the impact of the global financial crisis will help to inform the debate about the extent to which social housing should contribute to the overall housing provision in times of austerity. The inclusion of over 120 illustrations and photographs makes this a valuable visual document, providing a vivid portrait of the uniqueness of English council housing. The author is a designer as well as an academic and this is clear from the aesthetics of the book.

The seven chapters of this book chronologically detail the development of Nottingham's council housing (and simultaneously provide a valuable social history of this East Midlands city). The inequalities, overcrowding and slums of the nineteenth century led to the introduction of the first council housing as far back as 1876 (one of the first local authorities to provide accommodation for its citizens). The inter-war years of 1919-1939 saw a rapid expansion in the number of council houses built (over 17,000) and was accompanied by a rise in the standard of living for many tenants (hot water, flushing toilets, electricity). The post Second World War rebuilding led to clearance, high-rise and then low-rise in the 1960s and 1970s.

The final chapters of the book, exploring developments from 1980 to the present, are the most significant in terms of increasing our understanding of reasons behind the reduction of council housing. Matthews describes the privatisation of public services, the 'Right to Buy' discount scheme and reshaping of local government, leading to a massive reduction in the council house building programme. The housing landscape that he describes in 1980 is so far removed from that which currently exists, it is easy to forget that these monumental changes in state delivered services have taken place over a relatively short period of time. Given the determination of the current government to increase home ownership and the continuing growth of the private rented sector, it is interesting to note that Matthews strongly argues that council housing remains popular in

Nottingham, and that Nottingham City Council is embarking on its biggest building programme for a generation.

Some of the strongest parts of this book are the stories of the tenants themselves. As the title indicates, housing is about more than bricks and mortar. Interviewees recount their sense of bewildered excitement at seeing brand new houses for the first time in the inter-war period, the rush for homes after the Second World War, the initial optimism of living in 1960s high-rise, and the opportunities (“People couldn’t believe it. I know my parents couldn’t. My Dad were an ex-miner. They went ‘How much! Hold on, let me just get me redundancy” p.83) and challenges (“But a lot of people I’ve spoken to wished they hadn’t bought their house...there are that many jobs need doing”p.83) presented by the “Right to Buy” discount following the Housing Act 1980. The politicians currently deliberating the future of housing in the UK would do well to read and consider these accounts.

This book was commissioned by Nottingham City Homes (an arms’ length management organisation working on behalf of Nottingham City Council) and one could speculate on the impact that this may have had on the content and critics may find elements of the writing to be nostalgic. However, this should not detract from the value of this book which complements the more rigorous research on social rented housing conducted by organisations such as The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York. It would make a useful addition to reading lists for undergraduate housing related and social policy courses and benefit readers who are seeking a general introduction to the history and role of social housing in the UK.

For Nottingham, at least, this book points to a hopeful future for council housing. The new programme of council house building currently being undertaken will lead to over 400 energy efficient homes being built by 2017, and add a new chapter to the important history that Matthews has documented.

Richard Machin

Social Welfare Law, Policy and Advice Practice, School of Social Work, Allied and Public Health

Staffordshire University, UK

Richard.machin@staffs.ac.uk