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Tony Manzi

School of Architecture and the Built Environment

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Tony Manzi

University of Westminster
School of the Built Environment
35 Marylebone Road
London NW1 5LS
Tel: +44 (0)20 7911 5000 ext. 3164
email: manzit@wmin.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT. *As much of our conceptual framework is informed by the experience of the imagination, there is much to be learnt from a study of various creative forms. Narrative fiction can be one such form, allowing us to gain a useful insight into complex features of social life. The purpose of this article is to investigate the treatment of housing issues in contemporary literature in order to gain insights into attitudes, experiences and interpretations from the perspective of a broad cultural milieu. Discussions of professionalism, housing tenure and homelessness have tended to be conducted within a narrow framework and adopted orthodox modes of evaluation. Consequently, the neglect of housing within a wider cultural context has reinforced the isolation of housing issues. The article argues that although discussions of housing and housing policy have been seriously limited within the contemporary novel, there are a number of key insights that can be gained from a discussion of issues within a fictional setting.*

Introduction

Reflecting on his experience as a judge of the Samuel Johnson literary prize in 2001, the BBC's political editor Andrew Marr reached the conclusion that the contemporary novel was in a process of terminal decline. Creativity was now more likely to be found in non-fiction, which was 'stylistically better, more ambitious, more interesting, more dangerous' than fictional writing. Marr claimed that historians and biographers were producing more effective books in the contemporary era (*The Observer*, 27/5/01). This debate has considerable resonance in an age that has regularly celebrated the death of the novel. The problem with such an argument is that it creates a false

dichotomy, of choice between two mutually exclusive alternatives. In contrast, this article argues that the novel continues to exert a powerful hold upon our understanding of contemporary experiences, both describing and shaping those experiences. The aesthetic process, allowing us to shape a narrative of events, which may appear random and haphazard, plays a significant part in constituting our idea of reality. As a creative activity, the hold of the imagination constitutes an important (although neglected) element of social science research process. The article stresses the value of engaging with a fictional world that can demonstrate important insights into different areas of the human experience. In particular, it considers an area which has largely ignored fictional representations, that of contemporary housing policy.

The experience of the imagination constitutes a large element of our conceptual framework and thus there is much to be learnt from a study of various creative forms in order to capture the richness and complexity of the contemporary urban experience (Pike, 1981). It is therefore useful to look at society through the prism of the arts in order to introduce a wider cultural dimension to current issues in housing and social policy. Whilst King (2004) has looked at the example of housing issues in film, the construction of literary narratives can also allow a useful insight into complex features of social life, which may not be so easily discernible within an orthodox academic framework. However, King's (2005) call for the use of 'fictions' to assist in understanding the subjective aspects of meaning of the meaning of 'home' can be interpreted as a call for the use of narrative devices that can engage with the consumption of housing.

Consequently, this article examines the treatment of housing issues in contemporary literature. Viewing the representation of housing policy from a literary context will enable us to gain a number of insights into attitudes, experiences and interpretations of housing issues from the perspective of a broader cultural milieu than is traditional. Discussions of professionalism, housing tenure and homelessness have tended to be conducted within a narrow framework. The article argues that the neglect of housing within a wider cultural context has reinforced the isolation of housing from mainstream

political debate. The article considers the wider implication of this neglect and outlines how a theoretically informed housing imagination can benefit from consideration of examples from narrative fiction.

The marginalisation of housing studies has been exacerbated by a lack of imaginative attention to the centrality of housing in people's lives. A narrow and limited approach to housing policy has failed to arrest the wider neglect of housing within cultural discussion. Additionally, seeing the research process as a creative activity, a 'linguistic turn' (Hastings, 1998; Collins, 2000) can highlight important insights into housing processes. The ability of the novel to focus on particular circumstances rather than general universal classification helps to illustrate the human experience. Literary representations can ultimately assist in creating an imaginative world, which over time becomes an accepted feature of our social reality. An example of the power of the novel to create a convincing imaginative world is found in Orwell's writing. In his essay entitled 'How the Poor Die' (1939), Orwell writes of his experience in a hospital in Paris and his sense of recollection on entering the hospital. It is only later that he realises that his 'memory' of 'reeking, pain filled hospitals' emanates from a 19th Century poem by Tennyson. It is thus that the literary experience allows us to enter a world, and a skilful writer will convey to us a sense of recognition as if we had had these experiences for ourselves.

The article begins by considering some general questions about the value of literary texts and asks what we can learn about housing from novels. It examines housing issues within the contemporary novel by a discussion of three contemporary writers: Andrew O'Hagan on the tower block; Esther Freud on homelessness and Ben Richards on housing management. The final section considers what these examples can tell us about wider attitudes towards housing policy in a contemporary context.

Literature and Housing Policy

Orthodox approaches to studying the development of housing policy have tended to adopt a limited and unimaginative focus. Thus, an analysis of

housing policy will often proceed in chronological terms, through a study of legislation about the impact of public health interventions, before analysing the growth of municipal housing and more up to date accounts of the renewal of the voluntary housing sector. In a general sense, a narrow, technical and disembodied discussion is found within most textbooks. The limitations of such discussions hinder the 'capacity to provide practitioners with a framework capable of analysing and understanding the richness, complexity and ambiguity of a world that is riven by competing and contradictory interpretations of meaning' (Knights and Wilmott, 1999, p.14). In some circumstances the analysis will adopt a comparative dimension. The result can often result in a worthy but dull exposition of the significance of housing policy within the welfare state, presented as an atheoretical chronicle of events.

What such accounts commonly ignore is the 'lived experience' (Knights and Wilmott, p.1) of different housing conditions. For example, discussions of housing management will commonly describe the main functions such as rent arrears, voids and neighbour nuisance (Macey and Baker, 1973). However they will rarely capture the mixture of mundane procedure and frenetic activity that characterises the experience of a housing manager. Some accounts may utilise qualitative analysis in the form of interviews to try to capture some of the frustrations of the job, but these will only represent a fraction of the experience of working in a housing office. Such accounts fail to reflect what the 'reality' of working in housing management may mean for individuals within those environments.

In contrast, the experiences of working within office environments, of dealing with homeless applicants, of experiencing homelessness, of life in an environment dominated by anti-social behaviour, can effectively be represented through an imaginative process. By harnessing their powers of imagination and identification, through character, plot and situation, novelists are able to formulate dramatic events through a narrative of mundane encounters. The literary devices deployed enable us to grasp a number of insights, which are obscured from textbooks concerned with organisational

process and too often abstracted from their context.

Most crucially, literature offers the experience of the *imagination*. Literature can crystallise issues, which may not be transparent in other ways. The power of the imagination can be expressed as follows:

> We read to gain new information about life. And we do this by imagining ourselves into situations we haven't been present at, or which have never taken place at all, and by imagining ourselves to be people other than ourselves, real or fictional. It makes very little difference to us, I believe, whether we're concerned with real or fictional situations and people: the value lies in the imaginative process (Mitchell, 1973, p.10).

As a further example, when writing of Dickens, George Orwell (1939) commended the 'unnecessary detail' in his writing, namely his ability through providing a mass of descriptive information to say something original, interesting and profound about the human condition. As Orwell wrote of Dickens: 'his imagination overwhelms everything like a kind of weed' (p.130). It is noticeable that much of our understanding of 19th Century housing conditions emanates from fictional depictions of writers such as Dickens. Although the descriptions were fictional, these had a major impact on public opinion which far outweighed any empirical studies of poverty or slum dwelling.

Nevertheless, there remains a widespread suspicion about the value of literary recreations in the research process. Traditional academic research tends to underplay creative process as something to be distrusted and as unscientific. Literary works are of necessity partial, selective and biased towards the viewpoint of a narrator (Eagleton, 1983). Modernist novels are more problematic still as they often make use of the concept of the unreliable narrator. However, this weakness is also the source of its creative energy. Novelists are not trying to formulate rules in the way that scientists do, but rather to tell stories in interesting and engaging ways. Novels can therefore complement rather than substitute for rigorous academic enquiry.

Linked to this distrust of the imagination is a reluctance to view academic

research as a creative activity. Hence, Atkinson (1990, p.10) has commented on the reluctance of sociologists to engage with the notion of the aesthetic and ambivalence about the idea of creativity. Similarly, Minkin (1997) has argued that 'whilst methods of investigation are endlessly explored, individual creativity and the thinking which contributes to it are relatively neglected' (p.xv). Advocating a creative research imagination, fuelled by 'heuristic' thinking social research 'involves precepts, reasoning, challenges, tactics and techniques oriented towards stimulating the creative process and taking creative opportunities in research' (Minkin, 1997, p.12). The nature of creative scholarship 'requires a degree of isolation and mental space but it also needs perpetual nourishment from a tradition and community of scholarship' (p.xvii). Seeing the research process as a creative act acknowledged the importance of reflexivity and 'metacognition' in developing research strategies. The monitoring of and reflection about thought processes can be utilised to encourage the researcher's self-awareness and self-observation (p.14).

These ideas about the creativity of social science find an echo in C. Wright Mills' notion of 'intellectual craftsmanship' in sociology (Mills, 1975) where research is seen to proceed in unexpected ways using an eclectic range of methods and techniques. In the field of philosophy there is also a strong tradition of using literary examples to highlight philosophical dilemmas and issues, most noticeably in the work of Stanley Cavell (1999).

It is noticeable than in other areas of urban studies there has been an attempt to utilise more creative and imaginative sources to understand urban processes. In particular the use of cinematic examples has been applied to explain urban form and architecture. Thus, for example, Shonfield (2000) assesses the impact of wider cultural mores on architectural forms and vice versa. Other works dealing with film and the city include Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2001; 2003), Lamster (2000), Bruno (2002) and Barber (2002). There is also a body of work dealing with city themes and literature; for example, Caws (1991) and Lehan (1998). What is noticeable is that such approaches have not to date been used by those interested in social housing. Nevertheless, there is a sense that other writers are now engaging with a wider range of

sources in order to understand the experience of the home. Peter King's (2005) study represents an important departure in acknowledging a wider diversity of cultural reference points in the understanding of housing policy and practice.

What then can literature offer to housing research that is not available through other mainstream resources? The use of a creative research imagination can be most clearly seen though the use of fiction in underpinning other, more orthodox academic frameworks. Novels offer a number of advantages through this imaginative experience. First, literature has value through the play of *metaphor and analogy*. In describing imaginative experiences in different terms to those ordinarily deployed through symbols and allegories (Shonfield, 2000) new insights can be brought to bear on familiar topics. For example, Morgan (1986) has shown how metaphors can be applied to an organisational context, seeing organisations in a number of different ways enabling us for example to appreciate ideas about organisational culture. Within a housing context, Gurney (1999) has analysed the use of metaphor in the 'normalisation' of the home ownership ideology. Developing the use of imagination, Knights and Wilmott (1999) illustrate how a study of literary texts can illuminate some central conceptual questions about power, identity, insecurity and inequality in the workplace.

Secondly, literature can help to clarify situations through analysing *examples*, which through an imaginative and creative process may either not have occurred to us before or are presented in a stimulating and striking form. As will be shown, examples of the subjective experience of housing can be found in constructing different narratives about housing design, homelessness or housing management. For example within housing management, the dilemmas of balancing different demands on one's time and the frustration of failing to achieve improvements, of dealing with unmitigated hostility. These examples can tell us something important by means of their style of writing, alerting us to alternative readings and possibilities not previously entertained.

Third, literature helps to come to terms with an understanding of complexity in

housing policy. Novels cannot be reduced to simplistic messages. As D. H. Lawrence once commented: 'if you try to nail anything down in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail' (Lawrence, 1955, quoted in Phillips, 1982, p.1). Within the multifaceted and contested environment of housing policy, literary examples can bring useful insights, demonstrating the ambivalence we express towards urban environments.

The use of *paradox and irony* can also help to understand the way in which seemingly contradictory statements can be applicable to the experience of housing policy. For example, the contradiction between the social welfare and social control demands of housing management could be usefully expressed in a fictional setting (as will be shown). Literature functions by creating a *narrative* to make sense of remote, disconnected events. It can thus assist in creating what Shonfield (2000, p.160) terms a 'structural pattern' upon what otherwise may appear to be chaotic and random events. The use of humour, irony and other narrative devices enables new perspectives to gain attention.

Finally, the study of literature can have an important *pedagogical value* in allowing an accessible and entertaining treatment of housing issues. The use of narrative devices creates an impulse to learn, to discover new forms of expression and serves to stimulate interest amongst readers. However, this is not to argue that literature should itself be pedagogic, which would reduce the novel to the status of a training manual. Rather, its value lies in the fact that novels are written with different purposes and thus can serve as useful illustrations of particular concepts. Thus, within organisational theory, many case studies are presented in a narrative form and a number of writers advocate the use of literary examples to illustrate contemporary dilemmas and relationships (see Czaniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Montoux, 1994; Cohen, 1998). Literature can assist us to engage with contemporary experiences in ways that are not amenable to orthodox academic discourse, with its emphasis on objectivity, evidence and rigour.

Housing and Popular Culture

There is undoubtedly a striking absence of contemporary literary treatments of housing policy. This absence may suggest that housing is not an important issue of human condition. However, this neglect is unusual given that the domestic life plays such an important part in popular cultural representations (see for example the popularity of cookery and DIY television programmes). Moreover, such assumptions ignore the historical importance of housing as a subject for literary treatment.

In the early days of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, discussions of housing played a central role in considering the poverty and squalor of urban life at the turn of the century. Literature therefore played an important role in developing a reform movement in Britain (Baumgartern and Daleski, 1999). In particular the 19th Century witnessed an important trend in considering housing conditions, pointing out the inadequacies of welfare provision and encouraging an agenda for social change. This period saw a large number of attempts to portray problems of poverty and squalor in narrative form. The literature confronting the problems of slum housing produced a number of remarkable novels. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) and *Mary Barton* (1855) produced memorable depictions of housing conditions in the North of England. As Raymond Williams (1973) has pointed out, much of our understanding of Victorian inner city conditions comes from the writing of Dickens. For example, *Hard Times* produced a devastating satire on utilitarian philosophy as well as a dramatic description of the evils of the new urban landscape. Thus, as Orwell has written: 'every institution will always bear upon it some lingering memory of its past....it is difficult to enter a workhouse without being reminded of *Oliver Twist*' (Orwell, 1939, p.43).

Additionally, the late 19th Century saw a proliferation of factual descriptions of working -class housing conditions in order to provide an important incentive to the reform movement in the wake of industrialisation. Examples of the new interest in housing and sanitary conditions include: Chadwick (1842); Engels (1844); Mearns (1883); Booth (1889) and Rowntree (1901). Underpinned by empirical studies of poverty, by fictional representations of working class

experiences and by narrative descriptions and surveys this flourishing interest helped to create the conditions for housing reform and enabled the introduction of sanitary legislation and ultimately housing reform (Gauldie, 1974; Thane, 1982; Burnett, 1986). Thus, our idea of Victorian housing conditions was in large part shaped by our reading and interpretation of narrative fiction of the period. By creating such vivid and memorable impressions of poverty, squalour and deprivation, the skill of these novelists was in creating an unforgettable image of the iniquities of working-class life and creating an inexorable force for change (Stedman Jones, 1971). The power of narrative literature helped to formulate our understanding of the urban experience within popular culture.

Twentieth century social reform was also highly influenced by narrative authors and playwrights. Writers such as Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells had a remarkable impact in shaping the thinking of the Fabian movement (Barker, 1978). A further period of literary endeavour was during the depression in the 1930s when a number of novels attempted to portray the despair and misery of unemployment and the iniquities of welfare systems. In particular the writing of George Orwell helped to shape a movement for welfare reform, In the mid 20th Century, novels attempted to convey the stigma of unemployment, the means test and the experience of the dole queue (for example Walter Greenwood's (1934) *Love on the Dole*). Other discussions helped to shape the collectivism of the inter-war period (such as J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934) and R. H. Tawney's (1931) *Equality*). Indeed, Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls* (1948) is a classic discussion of the injustice of the pre-war British welfare system. The culmination of this activity was the Beveridge Report (1942) and the 1946 National Assistance Act, ushering in the post-war welfare state (Addison, 1977). These narrative descriptions, fictional representations and scientific studies all contributed to an atmosphere for radical welfare reform.

Literature and Contemporary Housing Policy

Influenced by an ironic and detached style of writing, late 20th Century

literature has adopted a fashionable, 'postmodern' cynicism about social change. Although within contemporary literature there is very little discussion of housing *per se*. Notwithstanding this lacuna, three examples can be identified in order to develop the idea that we can learn from fictional representation of housing policy.

Novels to High Rise

As a symbol of the failure of municipal dreams, high-rise housing is a natural source for a literary disquisition on the collapse of hopes and a loss of innocence. A novel that illustrates many of these themes very effectively is Andrew O'Hagan's (1999) *Our Fathers.* The novel comprises a lament for the end of ideology and the failure of a Utopian sensibility. The protagonist has a father who has become a remote and drunken failure. In his absence his grandfather functions as a strong and heroic paternalist figure. The grandfather (Hugh) is also representative of high-rise housing boom in Glasgow. The failure of slum clearance and mass housing policy represents a failure in his lifetime work. The innocence of the high-rise era has been replaced by a new age of brutality, crime and vandalism - resonant themes in popular cultural descriptions of housing estates:

> Hugh was a famous Housing man. His whole life rang with the question of better housing. He was known as the man who had pushed the tower blocks. He believed they answered to people's needs. He believed in these blocks to the end of his life. And he always said he could live in one himself. And as sure as his word he came one day. He joined the disgruntled people in the air (p.31).

He thus remains a heroic figure of integrity and honesty in the face of the great cynicism of contemporary professionals. Architecture is a key motif within the novel and the impact of the urban environment is stressed throughout: 'We shape our buildings, afterwards they shape us' (p.69).

Hugh's objectives are seen as pure and authentic. He is genuinely committed to progress and modernism. The tower blocks represent progress, reason and hope and Hugh is described as a man of vision who is able to transform

mundane decisions, bringing a passion to his work: 'They knew a thing about leverage and bolts, but Hugh gave them philosophy. He gave them reason' (p.119). The hopes of a new age are epitomised in the new housing developments: 'Skyscrapers. Even the word made you feel part of a bigger universe' (p.119).

The extent to which meaning resides in domestic environments, the loss of a vision and the melancholy of the demolition programme, which is reinforced by the fact that the hero is literally destroying the dreams of his grandfather is expressed in elegiac terms in the following passage:

> The sadness you feel when a house comes down. You feel for the people who lived there. All those sitting rooms and painted walls, gone in an instant, as if the hours that passed inside meant nothing much, as if they never happened. The shape of those rooms will always remain in the minds of those who lived there. People will grow up with a memory of their high view over Glasgow; they'll remember the sound of the elevators, the lights down below; the cupboards, the bathroom, the smell of the carpets. They'll know that they once lived high in the Gorbals. The thought of the rooms will bring back conversations, the theme tunes of television shows; they'll remind them of parties and arguments and pain. And above all that they will bring back innocence: a memory of the day-to-day; a time when rooms felt modern and good, when no one imagined their obliteration. The people went into those towers with hope: life will always be like this, they thought. But what they thought came down with the rubble too. They lived in those rooms, but will never see them again. They are gone (p.194).

Although the novel ends in disgrace, as the grandfather is under investigation for corruption, we are left with a sense of sympathy for Hugh as his methods were undertaken with good intentions. We are told that the corners cut were in order to complete work, to alleviate suffering and to provide a better life for working-class families. There is no doubt that the end of this era heralds a loss of very important qualities of hope, integrity and passion. The dashing of these dreams is a potent and highly destructive force. The book represents a lament for a lost era of hope. O' Hagan himself expressed his ambivalence about the tower blocks in an article explaining his motivation for writing the novel: 'the thing I hate most is the defeat of the things that I love: I hate the way the British tower blocks took so well and so quickly to the sad business of

their own repudiation' (*The Guardian*, 13/3/99). The passion expressed in such a comment perfectly encapsulates the tragedy of the high-rise experience in a way that dry, objective, academic textbook discussions rarely attain. The fact that the comments are written in the first person to express a subjective perception helps to understand the sadness and frustration, which pervades the mass-housing experiment. This sense of ambivalence captures not only the well-documented failures of the mass housing experiment but also the aspirations and idealism of the age. These ideas gain their strength from a written style that allows us to imagine the contemporaneous experience.

Housing and Homelessness

The most celebrated discussion of the experience of homelessness is found in George Orwell's (1933) *Down and Out in Paris and London*, based upon his experience 'tramping' in the two capitals. Although, written as a factual account, the book clearly benefits from being written with a novelists' eye for detail, character and plot. Although base on true experience, the book clearly was written with an imaginative intention (for example by creating composites of characters) (Crick, 1980). Orwell drew his inspiration from earlier work by Jack London, particularly the *People of the Abyss* (1903), a powerful and polemical work that also deals with the experience of homelessness.

The classic dramatic contemporary portrayal of homelessness was Jeremy Sandford's (1967) play *Cathy Come Home*. This was subsequently written as a novel and provides a useful illustration of the effectiveness of representing social issues in a dramatised form. The power of the narrative came precisely from fact that it represented a human situation in dramatic form. The fact that the experience of homelessness led to the loss of the main character's children was a shocking and dramatic representation of the implications of legislation, which had not been brought home to a mass audience. The force came from the fact that it was shown as a television play, but the novel retains a dramatic intensity. The dramatic intensity of the play came from the sense of injustice and powerless in the face of the bureaucratic determination to take

Cathy's children into care as a consequence of her homeless ness. As has been often documented the play had a significant impact in creating a changed set of conditions to impose a statutory duty on local authorities to provide housing in the 1977 Housing (Homeless Person's) Act (Somerville, 1994: Jacobs *et. al* 1999). A later play, *Edna the Inebriate Woman* (Sandford, 1976) although possessing similar dramatic intensity did not make the same social impact, illustrating either that the level of public interest in the issue had dissipated or that the main character (an elderly 'vagrant') was less worthy of concern than a young mother.

A novel that illustrates some of the contemporary experience of becoming homeless is an early novel by Esther Freud (1992) entitled *Peerless Flats.* Seen mainly through the eyes of an adolescent, the novel represents a young family's experiences of homelessness and temporary accommodation. Incidents are sometimes presented in humorous form.

> When they arrived home, Marguerite was waiting impatiently for them. 'They've given us a flat. They tried to put us into bed and breakfast, but then at the last minute they came up with a flat, a temporary flat until they house us'.
> 'Bed and breakfast...' Lisa murmured mournfully. 'That could have been lovely'. Lisa had always longed to spend the night in a hotel, but to live in one, like a Parisian intellectual...
> 'You don't understand', Marguerite said, 'it wouldn't be like that' (Esther Freud, 1992, p.6).

The novel's lightness of tone avoids many of the stereotypical representations of drug-dealing and criminal behaviour commonly associated with issues of homelessness. Although the characters are placed in difficult circumstances, they maintain their humour. In offering a sense of hope the novel functions as a useful description of the experience of homelessness without over-dramatisation or resort to stereotypes and clichéd behaviour. Despite the presentation of the family largely powerless to control their situation, they manage to retain a dignity in the face of adversity.

The family of three is given temporary accommodation and is astonished to be offered bedsit accommodation: 'Where are the bedrooms?' the mother asks.

The reply outlines the council's policy: 'In council terms this is a one-bedroom flat [...] but I must ask you to remember, this is temporary accommodation and you will be rehoused in the shortest possible period of time' (p.8). This reply is interpreted literally and their naive optimism is soon rudely dispelled:

> it won't be for long. They're going to rehouse us as soon as they can'.
>   The woman smiled encouragingly, 'That's true all right. There's few that is here longer than three years'.
> 'Three years', Lisa gasped 'We were thinking more of three weeks'.

Esther Freud's novel conveys the experience of a housing applicant effectively without resorting to melodrama and cultural stereotypes. It brings an unexpected dimension to contemporary discussions of homelessness. Whilst not attempting to portray their experience as positive, the characters nevertheless confront their circumstances with resilience and good humour in the main. Paradoxically, the dispassionate descriptions of the main characters, increases the power of the narrative, allowing an empathy with the characters, that would have less force if they were presented merely as symbols of powerless individuals at the mercy of state bureaucracies. The novel therefore provides an explanation of homelessness, perceived from the applicant's viewpoint as a mixture of boredom and humour alongside occasional despair.

The Front-line Housing Worker

Public service professionals are therefore commonly portrayed as gatekeepers, inflexible, lacking in understanding and human sympathy. It is therefore highly unusual to see a public service worker as a heroic figure and there are very few sympathetic descriptions of their role and function.

A rare example of a literary depiction of a housing professional as the main protagonist is the first novel by Ben Richards entitled *Throwing the House out of the Window.* Based on the author's own experiences in housing management, this largely sympathetic portrayal tells the story of a housing officer for Newham council. It captures well the frustration and monotony,

boredom and occasional excitement in the work. The character experiences a number of frustrations, which compound each other.

The first source of dissatisfaction is an inevitable *demoralisation* associated with working for a council bureaucracy. The main character expresses concern at the detrimental impact of working in an environment where low morale is endemic: 'Have I stopped caring any more? Have I become routinized into indifference? Do I just see all tenants now as people to be feared, laughed at or ignored?' (p.55).

Another character expresses her delight escaping front-line housing work by finding work in a housing research centre. As she explains: 'the main thing is to get away from all of this, you know. I can't handle much more, I'm burning out. I'm tired Jamie. I've started to hate people' (p.33). It is clear that most of the colleagues in the housing office share a sense of frustration that they are worthy of better things.

Second, a deep sense of *anxiety* permeates the workplace environment. The housing workers suffer from high levels of stress, they are generally poorly paid and unappreciated. A generalised apprehension often characterises work in mundane occupations. 'Everything gets mixed up: the small complaints with the big ones, the genuine problems and the petty moaning. I certainly worry about work at home. But this usually involves tenants who might get violent if their hot water is not restored half an hour after it has broken down. Or it is just a general sense of worry which diminishes somewhat on Fridays and then crescendoes throughout Sunday evening' (pp. 53-54). This feeling is recognisable amongst those who have experienced the demands of working in a busy, and under-resourced housing office.

Additionally, the narrator expresses a deep frustration at the *futility* of many of the policies staff are required to undertake. Council procedures are described as 'well known and much-abused' (p.225). An example of this sense of futility is given when the protagonist has to deal with a racial harassment case involving the son of a tenant. Jamie threatens the tenant with possession

proceedings:

> 'I can feel the uselessness of my words, the hollow formality of the threat, and I know that she knew about all of this anyway, does not care and is completely unmoved by the possible sanctions against her. She glances at her son and grins at him.
> 'Got witnesses, have you?...' (p.132).

Richards captures the boredom and frustration of a front-line housing worker. He describes an environment where 'Most people who live on the estate are trying to leave it' (p.25). The same applies to the workers in the housing office; a sense that life is passing them by. People join with high aspirations and an ethos of public service, but are often demoralised by their work. Nevertheless, in speaking of his own experiences, Richards commends the comradeship and humour that is used as a coping strategy by housing managers as long as this does not deteriorate in 'misanthropy' and a 'siege mentality' (quotes from *The Guardian*, 8/1/01). What this discussion shows is that an imaginative treatment of housing issues, based on individual experience can shed light on an area of work that is often neglected. Again the imaginative process, the subjective treatment and the range of rhetorical prose allows us to come to a new understanding of what the work of a front-line housing officer may involve. No amount of studies of rent arrears figures, voids statistics, management performance can substitute for these depictions.

The Place of Housing within Popular Culture

In the current era, no sustained movement for reform has appeared in the way that the 19th Century saw such a remarkable cultural renaissance. As social housing has become a service for the poor, the undermining of the municipal sector has continued unfalteringly. The marginalisation of the sector can be traced to the slum clearance of the 1930s but gained force in the 1960s and 1970s following the dissatisfaction with the mass housing era and the high-rise housing boom (Malpass, 1990). As housing policy was progressively polarised, the social housing sector increasingly comprised vulnerable groups. These groups were marginal also in terms of their visibility to commentators and novelists. Where they have been noticed they are frequently portrayed in

satirical terms (for example in the novels of Martin Amis, where they function as grotesque caricatures of an urban underclass). The contemporary portrayal of council house tenants has therefore either been as representative of criminal stereotypes (Keith Talent in *London Fields*), drug addicts and dealers (the Edinburgh housing schemes in Irving Welsh's *Trainspotting*) or passive and helpless victims of state bureaucracy (Jeremy Sandford's *Cathy Come Home*). This literature has attempted to capture the dislocation and alienation experienced by a new urban underclass. However the images are overwhelmingly negative and are used to symbolise poverty, inequality, social exclusion and criminality, thus contributing directly to the further stigmatisation of social housing.

A number of novels published at the beginning of the twenty-first century, began to explore the experiences of immigrant communities. For example, Andrea Levy's (2004) *Small Island* depicted the housing experiences of immigrants from the Caribbean after the Second World War. The experiences of second and third generation minority ethnic groups were also strongly characterised in Zadie Smith's (2001) *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's (2004) *Brick Lane*, both novels providing depictions of the experience of Asian communities living in London council estates.

The contemporary novels considered in the previous illustrations show how such negative representations can be presented in more positive and informative terms. Thus, attitudes towards the tower block possess a strong ambivalence, which is not effectively captured in much of the academic literature. Thus Dunleavy's (1981) seminal study of the mass housing era can be supplemented by a more elegiac discussion of the same period found in O'Hagan's novel. The attempts to maintain dignity in the face of homelessness illustrated in Esther Freud's novel, conveying the experience through matter-of-fact description contrasts with the more polemical approach of much contemporary action research (for example, Kennett and Marsh, 1999), ironically increasing the power of its message. Finally, Richards novel illustrates the tensions and anxiety inherent in much housing management practice in a way that is not clearly identified in more prosaic, detached

discussions (for example, Pearl, 1997).

Other texts have been utilised to present imaginative discussions of housing issues, albeit not normally in fictional form. For example, thoughtful contributions on housing policy can be found within contemporary journalism (Harrison, 1985; Davies, 1998); aesthetics (Sinclair, 1997); reportage (Parker, 1985; Cohn, 2000; Danziger, 1994) and cultural politics (Wright, 1991). These examples can produce useful insights into contemporary issues within housing policy. Whilst the novel is a neglected area, other forms of writing have seen some powerful criticisms of the State (see Campbell, 1984, 1993). The journalistic descriptions have had considerable power, but their impact is limited in dramatic intensity, unless augmented by 'poetic licence', often a euphemism for fabrication of material.

It is therefore not only fictional examples that can allow a different understanding of issues such as homelessness. Masters (2005) biography of a homeless person: *Stuart: a Life Backwards* provides a powerful exposition of the experience of homelessness which combines humour and pathos. Unlike a conventional biography, the story is told in a novelistic form, with an unorthodox chronology (a life 'backwards') and the narrator appears as a character in the story. The conflicted attitudes of the narrator (veering between pity, disgust and affection at different points in time) reflect wider insights about attitudes towards homeless individuals. It is because the story is told without sentimentality, with anger, that it has a resonance that stretches beyond more detached and objective academic accounts. The crucial point about such treatments is not whether they are events that may or may not have happened (the distinction between fact and fiction), but that they carry an authenticity, based upon the distinctive voice of the author.

Conclusions

It is difficult to draw too many generalisations about novels as the strength of literature lies in its ability to show rather than explicitly state key themes. Literary texts carry power through their specificity and uniqueness. There is

also a danger of over-simplification and ignoring a whole body of literary theory, such as structuralism and post-structuralism. However, if housing is to occupy a more prominent place within popular culture, it needs to reassert its importance through an acknowledgement that housing plays a central role in determining social status.

The success of the reform movement in the nineteenth century, and to a lesser extent the mid twentieth century was premised upon a foundation of empirical and social science research alongside a powerful narrative strand developed in the contemporary novel. These narrative descriptions helped to construct an influential depiction of social inequality and to stimulate government intervention. These depictions are largely absent in today's literary culture.

In order to engage the attention of students and to bring the subject to life, an imaginative approach is required which can explain how different methods can contribute to a creative academic culture. These methods can usefully incorporate literary sources. It should not need stating that it is not suggested that the academic rigour of traditional scholarly research is abandoned. Rather, in seeing research as a creative activity, an orthodox analysis can usefully be supplemented by an imaginative approach in order to capture a more 'authentic' flavour of various experiences of housing. Thus the aim is not to replace academic texts, but to encourage the use of a wider range of source material and to supplement other forms of ethnographic study. The use of creative skills can help to captivate new students, and bring a renewed an enthusiasm to the sometimes prosaic subject of housing studies.

A literary 'truth' is not something that necessarily encapsulates experience; rather it is an account that skillfully creates an impression of authenticity. The neglect of a literary culture dealing with contemporary housing issues indicates the way in which housing has become progressively marginalised in current political discourse. The response to this marginalisation necessitates new ways of thinking, describing and analysing the experience of social housing, enabling new avenues for discussions of housing management and

design. Of course, literature is not an objective medium. Its bias and partiality is the source of its energy. The importance of literature lies, not in the presentation of facts, but because it offers the freedom to adopt a stance that is not viable within the confines of more detached and abstract theorising. The insights it brings to academic discourse offer an important commentary of contemporary social life, enabling us to engage more effectively with present-day experience. A new housing imagination can be utilised to bring the discussion of housing issues back into the mainstream of public policy debate. This imaginative approach requires a less judgmental and more creative approach that is willing to engage with wider aesthetic ideas about the management, provision, production and consumption of housing.

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