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Reconstructing public housing: Liverpool's hidden history of collective alternatives

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Matthew Thompson, *Reconstructing Public Housing: Liverpool's hidden history of collective alternatives*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020; 408 pp.; ISBN: 978-1-78962-108-2, £25.95 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Dr Mara Ferreri, Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

Any book title about the 'hidden history' of a city promises to reveal unknown dimensions of the non-linear lives of urban phenomena. Matthew Thompson's *Reconstructing Public Housing: Liverpool's hidden history of collective alternatives* both fulfils and exceeds this promise. The book is, first and foremost, a history of urban change, public housing and collective organising in Liverpool. The city is presented as a significant – and in many ways exceptional - place from which to understand broader questions around urban migration, deindustrialization, urban regeneration policies and housing reform. But the book is about much more than collective housing alternatives in the city where the first municipal (council) housing was built after WWI. Through the lens of Liverpool, Thompson discusses the important and mostly forgotten hidden history of public housing itself: its ideological underpinnings, divergent models and collective experiments, and their implication for neighbourhood and city life.

Throughout the 20th Century, governmental interventions in the housing market have shaped urban spaces in multiple ways. Building public housing has been a

key policy tool to mitigate poverty and territorial exclusion, and to institute pockets of partial housing de commodification that to this day provide respite from cycles of speculative real estate investment and displacement. The political roots and the processes through which public housing models emerged, however, are much more diverse, contradictory, and plural than often captured in urban scholarship. Importantly, the extent to which public housing responds to low-income urban dweller's needs and desires are rarely addressed. Thompson's book addresses this issue by revisiting the origins and evolution of public housing in the UK, and 'reconstructing' the intersecting political visions at its core. Through a wealth of historical and contemporary examples, he argues that there are significant and often overlooked convergences between state-led interventions for affordability and security of tenure, and 'collective alternatives' such as co-ops, mutual ownership societies and Community Land Trusts; and, moreover, that these should form the basis of a renewed housing and urban politics.

As stated in the introduction, the book is animated by a concern with the housing injustices caused by the hegemony of private property and market dynamics in cities. While informed by a Marxian critique, it expands orthodox readings of 'the housing question' by incorporating traditions of "utopian socialism, libertarian communism and democratic socialism (as opposed to social democracy) that share many of the same overall goals of state-socialism and public ownership – that is, providing a collective alternative to private property and the individualism of the market" (p.10). In this vein, collective housing alternatives as potential 'commons' are examined and discussed in all their layered political, social and economic complexity, including their relationship with the municipal and central

states. Throughout the chapters, empirically detailed discussions combine close readings of planning practice, original interviews, contemporaneous accounts, and other secondary sources, and in-depth case studies.

The core of the book is organised thematically in three sections: The Housing Question, The Neighbourhood Question and The Urban Question. Each captures a scale of the proposal to 'reconstruct public housing' by presenting a possible scale of analysis and builds chronologically on the previous one to reveal infrastructural, political and material continuities and divergences between the different phases of Liverpool collective housing alternatives' hidden history. The chapters that compose 'The Housing Question' focus on the first and second wave of housing co-operativism, both rehabilitation cooperatives and new-build cooperatives, the latter epitomised by the famous mutual housing co-op *Weller Way* which emerged in a residents-led campaign against the planned dispersal of a neighbourhood through a planned 'slum' clearance. The chapters show, with detail and nuance, the polarisation of political positions around the role of housing cooperatives within broader public housing policy, as well as the different scales of operation of central, Liberal party-led municipal government, and networks of secondary organisations. Questions of urban design, layout, maintenance, and governance, as well as forms and lived experiences of housing activism, are critically discussed in terms of individual projects and in relation to specific neighbourhoods.

Of particular interest to urban scholars are the second and third parts of the book, which bring these debates and histories more squarely into the realm of urban

processes and politics. 'The Neighbourhood Question' delves into a new build cooperative project at a neighbourhood scale, *the Eldonians*. The project started in the early 1980s and was organised around the shared purpose of regenerating an inner-city area of contaminated industrial land through a community development trust model, based on mutual ownership of land and assets, and the recycling of surpluses for community benefit. At the time, housing and urban developments were dominated by '[p]roperty-led approaches to the housing question' (p.172) and the Militant Tendency in the Labour party had led Liverpool Council's ambitious £350 million programme for council housing building and comprehensive renewal approaches. The rather exceptional success of *the Eldonians* occurred in the context of a political debate that pitted state-socialist and public ownership provision against collective-led design and governance models, seen as exclusive and bourgeois; a polarity which still to this day overshadows debates about solutions to housing crises within the Left.

The third part, titled 'The Urban Question' brings these historical debates into contemporary urban issues and collective responses. Chapter ten positions the historical struggle over land and property in rural and urban politics as precursors of the collective ownership form of Community Land Trust (CLT) and its tripartite governance structure. The CLT model is here presented as a collective response not just to the housing question, but, significantly, to the late 20th and 21st century urban question as 'the contradictions of capital are displaced into the secondary circuit' of buildings, fixed infrastructure and land' (p.187). Liverpool's CLTs have emerged from place-based organising against neighbourhood demolition and resident displacement, and Thompson discusses two successful examples of

neighbourhood renewal which emerged from such campaigning: Granby Four Streets and Homebaked CLTs. The latter, a project comprising affordable housing, a co-operative bakery and food and cultural activities, is discussed with interesting critical nuance through a first-person account by the author, who was a participant-observer in the process.

The concluding sections raise a reflexive, critical yet hopeful vision which reiterates the overarching issue of '*democratic control* over land and assets' (p.251, original emphasis) in contemporary urban politics. While the author recognises that collective housing alternatives such as cooperatives and CLTs are limited by structural issues as well as by exogenous political processes, they nonetheless are shown to provide not only a localised solution to housing crises but also 'a defence against urban decline, which, if sufficiently scaled up and supported by the state, might constitute an answer to today's urban question' (p.277). Beyond Liverpool, this ambitious and rich book argues for the importance of grounding our understanding of urban housing alternatives as a process - 'as a verb' – within webs of power relations. The role of the state, the power of institutionalisation and the pitfalls of technocratic bureaucracy are discussed at the intersection of urban and housing commons, cultural myth making, language and the recent promise of progressive municipalism in Europe and North America. Overall, and for the reasons above, *Reconstructing Public Housing* will be of interest to urban and housing scholars keen to understand the histories, mechanisms and power dynamics at the root of decommodified collective alternatives to housing and neighbourhood transformations.