

Soft Selling Gentrification?

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This paper explores the rhetoric and reality of regeneration. It uses a case study in Dundee to explore wider issues through a mixture of participant action research and a critical analysis of government documents and of previous policy-related research. These are combined to show how public debate is being dominated by a political spin that allows gentrifying policies to be portrayed as logical and progressive development.

Gentrification, as we know, comes in many forms and scales, from the wholesale redevelopments that accompany the Olympics, through the middle-class colonisation of our urban riversides, to the piecemeal changes wrought by individual private investors. But it is taking place everywhere, and is actively promoted by town and city authorities under the name of ‘regeneration’.

The negative social impacts of gentrification have, of course, long been discussed by ‘critical’ academics,¹ as well as featuring on the odd piece of enlightened broadcasting between the programmes on property investment.² But none of this criticism is reflected in the policies emerging from our parliaments and town halls. The purpose of this paper is to examine how their authors convince themselves as well as others that such policies promote some sort of common good, through a process that includes the (mis)use of popular consultation, the selective adoption of academic arguments, and the promotion of policy-driven research.

I will focus on plans for the demolition of two multi storey blocks in Derby Street, at the top of the Hilltown in central Dundee, and for the subsequent redevelopment of the site. Dundee has little to offer the big league gentrifiers who are drawn to central London, but it competes with every other city to attract the globalised middle class, and it is these new citizens and their local counterparts, rather than the old ex-industrial working class, that are seen as the city’s future. The 21st century Dundonian is seen as an aspirational home-owner, and current policies for regeneration in the city involve the demolition of thousands of council houses. Over 11 1/2 thousand homes have already gone since 1990,³ and there are plans to remove a further 2,000 in the next few years, including multistories in the Hilltown and in Menzieshill in the west end.⁴ This is not, of course, promoted as gentrification, however, working with tenants and housing activists, I have found no evidence to back up the official reasons that have been given for demolition. I

¹ Slater (2006) argues that critical research in this area, though once common, is in decline.

² Such as the evocative (if academically flawed) depiction of the transformation of a Deptford council block into luxury city homes in the BBC Documentary *The Tower* (2007), and investigations into demolitions of Northern terraces on *Tonight* with Trevor McDonald (2005)

³ <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/01/15950/15144>> gives a figure of 6,615 demolitions between 1990 and 2,000. An examination of the quarterly housing trends given in the Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletin shows the total number of council houses in Dundee fell from 21,361 on 30/9/99 to 14,711 on 30/9/06. I have assumed that around 1800 of these 6650 homes were sold under right to buy, using an average figure, calculated from the 2002-2006 statistics, of 257 sales a year, and that the other 4,850 were demolished. In addition, the last Ardler multi (298 homes) has been demolished since these figures.

⁴ 1,898 homes were declared ‘At Risk’ – the first step in the demolition process – by the council’s housing committee on the 21st June 2004. These included 440 flats in 4 multistories in Alexander Street, 372 flats in 2 multistories in Derby Street and 131 other Hilltown flats (final decision to demolish taken 18th October 2004), and 420 flats in 5 multistories in Menzieshill (final decision to demolish taken 18th April 2005).

have also found strong support for the argument that demolition is a damaging policy in both the short and long term.

These conclusions make use of detailed surveys carried out by tenants in the affected multis, and an analysis of council documents. A crucial source of information was the report by DTZ Piedad that was used by the council as the basis for its housing strategy.⁵ The tenants were initially denied access to this report, and were only allowed to see it after an appeal to the Scottish Information Commissioner under the Freedom of Information Act. The grounds for the council's refusal were that the methodology used by the consultants was commercially valuable, so its disclosure would harm their commercial interests:⁶ an argument that shows a worrying attitude to the idea of objective research, as well as to concepts of consultation, democracy and accountability.

Although we have had some coverage in the local press of our criticisms of what is happening, debate is always curtailed by an official response that, rather than engaging with the arguments, repeats the same discredited interpretation. Here is the official version of what is happening as set out in a letter to a tenant by the director of housing as recently as May 2007:

The continuation of population decline and changes in the housing market continue to generate a surplus of houses in the city, and there is strong, independent evidence that this will continue. Consequently, the Council has houses for which there is no expressed demand, which are blighting neighbourhoods and impacting on community social structures. Additionally there are houses with high investment needs which are unaffordable and uneconomic to retain... This provides the city with the opportunity not only to remove poor quality stock, but to enhance the range and quality of housing opportunities in the city...⁷

In other words, and regardless of any evidence that may be produced to the contrary, the problems are said to be 'surplus' council housing, council housing for which there is no demand, and high maintenance and improvement costs. These are the ostensible reasons for what is happening, but none of these claims bears much scrutiny.

With growing homelessness and housing problems dominating MPs' surgeries,⁸ it is hard to believe that the city has surplus council housing; and although the DTZ Piedad report makes this claim, it gives no supporting data. Dundee has seen a fall in population, but the report predicts only a negligible fall in the number of households. In a city with low wages and an aging population, council housing is likely to become more needed rather than less, but this is not discussed. The report states that only half the people who apply for a council house are allotted one (others, especially younger tenants, won't even bother to apply) and it acknowledges that the Council is finding difficulty emptying the buildings that have been scheduled for demolition because of lack of alternative accommodation.⁹

It is at this point that we can see how policy-driven research is brought into play. When the Scottish Executive commissioned researchers at Heriott Watt University to devise a mathematical model that could be used to predict 'social housing' need, it was no doubt clear that

⁵ DTZ Piedad (2005)

⁶ Letter from the council's legal manager 15th February 2005

⁷ Letter from Elaine Zwirlein to Tom Black 3rd May 07

⁸ Meeting with Shona Robison MSP and Stuart Hosie MP (both Dundee East) 6th October 2006

⁹ DTZ Piedad (2005) paras 2.16-2.20, 2.12-2.13 and 3.49

what the Exec was interested in were minimum figures.¹⁰ In fact the concept of ‘need’ in this context already implies that. The academics responded to the challenge. The document they produced has enough tables and equations to impress any politician and discourage them from looking beyond the headline figures. But the problem lies not in the mathematics. It is already built into the two basic assumptions that underlie all the figures, and which should raise the alarm for anyone who is hoping to be allotted ‘social housing’ (council or housing association). The first is the assumption that ‘social housing’ should only be made available as a last resort, with everyone else forced to rely on the market even if it leaves them just above benefit levels. The second is the completely arbitrary decision that councils should only have to meet 1/10 of the backlog of housing need each year. So, taking the example of Dundee, although the report acknowledges that the city has a backlog need for 6061 social rented homes – almost half due to overcrowding and sharing – this is translated into a backlog quota of 605 homes a year, which – with the restrictions on social housing eligibility – can be more than met by current turnover. That allows the report to conclude that Dundee has a net surplus of ‘social housing’ relets of 700 homes a year.¹¹

The council claims that, not only are the houses not needed, they are not wanted. There is no demand for so much council housing, and low demand for these particular homes. Academic theories about ‘low demand’ were developed to explain the decline and deterioration of areas of housing - especially of ‘failed’ housing estates - and ‘low demand’ housing has come to be seen not just as a symptom of area decline, but as a cause. One of the main proponents of these theories is Glen Bramley, who is also one of the authors of the housing need model. Research in this field remains a relatively speculative attempt to make sense of a wide range of interconnecting variables, but it has been invested with an unwarranted authority by councils anxious to divest themselves of the costs of public housing, and to promote developments that will attract a new wealthier class of people. Bramley and Pawson appear to disregard their own observation that ‘demand projections for more than about five years ahead are difficult and would not carry great credibility’.¹² They argue that a logical conclusion of this research is the diversion of investment away from some of the worst areas, which are seen as fit only for demolition, enabling councils to reduce their housing stock,¹³ and DTZ Pineda had already highlighted the reduction of social housing as a reason for demolition in a report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in England.¹⁴ Theories of low demand may themselves contribute to neglect and spiralling decline, and architectural determinism can be used to gloss over more fundamental social problems; however these theories continue to be regarded as the pragmatic approach, while more critical academic assessments are ignored.

In Dundee, even after decades of under investment in council stock, there are, as we’ve seen, still twice as many people applying for council houses as are allotted them, and there are clearly many more people who could benefit from them. Some houses and areas are, of course, more popular than others, but, as with any other product, demand is not a fixed number waiting to be discovered: it will increase if the housing is improved or otherwise made more desirable. Graphic evidence of this is provided by two groups of medium-rise flats in Lochee in West

¹⁰ Bramley et al 2006. This is an update of a model first produced in 2003

¹¹ Bramley et al (2006) pp 87, 89, 117, 11 and 8

¹² Bramley and Pawson (2002) p413 This article also puts a question mark over Bramley’s own estimates of annual surplus made just 4 years earlier (p 400)

¹³ Bramley and Pawson (2002) p 412

¹⁴ DTZ Pineda (2000) p 5

Dundee, which were built to identical plans. One group is very run down, and few residents object to being moved out to allow its proposed demolition. The other received an injection of money and a make-over when it was taken over by a housing association some years back, and the flats are much sought after.¹⁵

In order to demonstrate the unpopularity of the specific homes proposed for demolition – and also their commitment to consultation – Dundee Council carried out surveys of the affected tenants. These were done very rapidly and with minimal supporting information: the buildings were described (ambiguously) as ‘at risk’, and the £1500 relocation payment was emphasised.¹⁶ The surveys produced the desired results – 57% in favour of demolition in the case of Derby Street - and the councillors speedily and unanimously supported the demolition proposals.¹⁷

As unease and anger grew among the tenants, I worked alongside housing activists and tenant campaigners to produce an alternative independent survey. This was able to give a more realistic assessment of tenants’ views after anti-demolition campaigns had generated discussion of the issues in the local media and in the blocks concerned, and there had been time for people to understand what was involved and the lack of other options available.

The picture that emerged was very different from that portrayed by the council – and I think that the tenants involved in carrying out the survey were themselves surprised at the extent of the opposition to demolition. Our survey shows that in the two Derby Street mults 71% of people wanted to remain in the buildings. Only 18% wanted to leave - and several of those told us that they needed to find somewhere without stairs for medical reasons, or somewhere cheaper. Only 9% supported the idea of demolition. (We also found that 30% of the households said they had not received the council ballot paper on demolition.)¹⁸

The council argues that demolition makes economic sense, freeing up money for essential investments in its ‘core stock’. The crucial DTZ Pidea report for Dundee is strictly a ‘Financial Viability Study’. However, the figures given in that report show that demolition is, in fact, a hugely more expensive option than repair and improvement. Demolition does make economic sense for the council, but only because they would expect to receive vast amounts of subsidy in various forms from the Scottish Executive, or as it is now called, the Scottish Government. DTZ Pidea have calculated the public subsidies that would be needed to balance the books, and ensure all housing is brought up to the new Scottish Standards, under different scenarios. Their baseline

¹⁵ Foggyley Gardens is being emptied for demolition, while nearby Dryburgh Gardens provides popular flats. The difference is due not to the nature of the ownership but investment in the buildings.

¹⁶ Tenants were asked to vote in a postal survey for or against demolition shortly after the possibility of demolition was announced. They were given no background information about the reasons for the proposal, or any realistic idea what they would be offered instead. The sparsely attended public meeting was held during normal working hours (with notices about the relocation payment on every chair).

¹⁷ The decision was taken by the council’s Housing Committee on the 18th October 2004 on the basis of a 4 page report by the Director of Housing that included the consultation feedback.

¹⁸ The full survey, and also another for the Menzieshill Multis, can be accessed through <<http://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/homes/sglynn>>. The Derby Street survey was carried out between 23rd March and 18th April 2005. At that time 76 of the 374 flats were empty. 153 questionnaires were completed, representing 142 homes, or 48% of the occupied flats, distributed fairly evenly over the two mults. A large proportion of the empty flats can be explained by normal turn-over. People have always moved out and in, but now those moving out are not being replaced. It cannot be assumed that everyone who had moved wanted to leave the buildings: some people have felt that if they are going to have to move they would rather move sooner than later. The results given are based on the completed questionnaires.

figure, with no demolition, is £89M. If the council were to demolish 4,630 homes this would rise to £121M, and on top of that there would be another £60M of grant subsidy for 1,350 new housing association homes subsidised at 60% of construction costs – giving a staggering total of £181M (and a net loss of 3,280 social rented houses). If demolitions were increased to 7,390 homes, the costs rise to £128M, with a £185M grant for 4,100 new homes, or a grand total of £313M.¹⁹ What is presented as a saving for the council is in reality a massive extra cost for the Scottish Government. Can we assume that this has been calculated as a price worth paying to get rid of a large amount of social housing, boost private developers, and woo middle-class incomers?

A further abuse of economic logic is found in the arguments about which buildings to demolish. The DTZ Pidea report for Dundee makes clear that, despite all the talk about popularity, when it came to choosing targets for demolition, they were largely influenced by maintenance costs. Although the multistories are in good condition, with a likely minimum life of 30 years, they have higher electrical and mechanical costs, including lift replacement.²⁰ But what are never mentioned are the many savings associated with vertical living in matters such as road maintenance, public transport and street lighting. Tenants have also been told that one reason for demolitions is that the buildings do not comply with new insulation standards,²¹ but this is a problem easily solved by over-cladding. A serious environmental policy would not advocate highly wasteful demolition, and would also welcome the multistories' compact planning with minimal travel distances.

After we had finally managed to get access to the DTZ Pidea report, some of these criticisms were covered in the local paper. They were followed by the usual response from the council's housing convenor, who told their reporter,

We make no apology for taking away the type of housing people no longer want in a bid to regenerate communities and to saving hard-earned rentpayers' money on property that incurs needless costs.²²

Three years after demolition was announced and re-lets were stopped, the Derby Street multistories are half empty, or still half full, depending on how you look at it. It is taking longer to empty the buildings than planned because of the lack of alternative housing.

Many people are being put through high levels of stress. Moving is always stressful, and a sense of powerlessness and the inability to control events only increases stress. It is known that taking older people away from the places with which they are familiar can have serious effects on their psychological – and consequently physical – health. There are disproportionate numbers of older people in all the buildings scheduled for demolition, and some have been made ill with worry.

As buildings empty out people are finding themselves alone on empty landings with a diminished concierge service and growing risks and fears of vandalism.²³ The four Alexander

¹⁹ DTZ Pidea (2005) para 4.27. The Scottish Executive's housing agency, Communities Scotland, has already awarded £3.4 million to finance the current round of demolitions (*The Courier* 11th January 2007)

²⁰ DTZ Pidea (2005) paras 2.23 and 2.25

²¹ Letter from the Head of Housing to Tom Black, 28th November 2005

²² *The Courier* 28th April 2006

²³ Fear of fire in empty flats was raised in my discussion with the MP and MSP

Street multis, lower down the hill, used to be entered through two concierge stations. Now only one is functioning.

The standard £1500 relocation payment (which has not gone up for many years) takes no account of the investment many people have put into their homes, including hours of their own labour, so people are being left seriously out of pocket.

Many tenants will end up in homes with higher rents and service charges in the private sector or run by housing associations. All new social housing is built by housing associations rather than the council, so although the council has said it will respect the consultation that showed Dundee tenants did not want stock transfer of council housing to housing associations,²⁴ it is carrying out policies that result in transfer by the back door. The Executive tried to rebrand stock transfer as 'community ownership', but there is widespread understanding that transferred housing is less democratic, as well as more expensive to run.²⁵

What is happening affects not only tenants in the buildings scheduled for demolition, but many other existing and would be tenants, as the number of houses available decreases. At the same time as good flats are being sealed up, homelessness is rising and homeless households are spending longer in temporary housing.²⁶ Level entry flats in Menziesshill are being left empty, while people with limited mobility are stuck in upper floor tenements.²⁷ With so many flats unused, the council is receiving fewer rents, forcing it to impose a substantial rent increase on remaining council tenants.²⁸

And what of plans for the site? A draft consultation paper for the regeneration of the Hilltown was published in Autumn 2006. It is a somewhat contradictory document. It talks about creating a 'place where people would wish to live' and building communities, but the plans are founded on displacing many people who wish to remain there, and distributing Hilltown households to other parts of Dundee; a scenario that also makes the promises to 'consult with the community groups' sound a little hollow. Where the document is unambiguous is that the demolition 'creates the opportunity for new build housing to further increase the proportion of private housing in the Hilltown'. Any new development will be of much lower density than the current buildings, and if much of it is to be private housing that will further reduce the amount of social rented housing available in the area. The two Hilltown areas facing demolition contain between them around 1,000 flats. It is proposed that less than ¼ of the 420 homes proposed for the Hilltown sites will be social housing, with additional developments creating a grand total of 250 social rented homes across the Hilltown by 2034.²⁹ Clearly, only a fraction of tenants having to leave their homes will be able to be accommodated in the area. Is this what the director of housing meant by 'enhanc[ing] the range and quality of housing opportunities'?

²⁴ This consultation, carried out in 2004, produced a 2 to 1 majority against proceeding to a full scale transfer vote.

²⁵ Glynn (2007)

²⁶ Meeting with Shona Robison MSP and Stuart Hosie MP 6th October 2006, and interview with director of the council's Homeless Unit, 31st October 2006

²⁷ Sometimes conditions for those stuck in upper tenements have become so bad that their story has been covered in the local paper, but examples such as Gladys Storrier (*The Courier* 9th July 2005 etc.) and wounded soldier Sandy Gibson (*The Courier* 2nd October 2007) will be only the tip of an iceberg.

²⁸ Rents were raised by around 4% in 2006 and 2007, and on each occasion the Housing Director commented on the fall in rental income due to council house sales and demolitions. (*The Courier* 17th January 2006 and 2007)

²⁹ Dundee City Council (2006b) pp 7, 12 and 8

An internal council discussion document on ‘affordable housing’, leaked to housing activists in the summer of 2006, presents the development of private housing on the demolition sites as improving the quality and choice of *private* housing in the city, and as bringing ‘regeneration benefits through encouraging more balanced communities with more diversity of tenure’.³⁰ Here we see another example of the selective use of academic research. Tenure mix – and implied social mix – is being promoted simply as an unquestioned good. This idea comes out of the arguments for area effects (that is that it is worse to be poor in a poor area than poor in an area of mixed prosperity) – but there is a lack of empirical evidence for this view and a growing body of evidence against tenure mix.³¹

The council cannot, however, claim to be unaware of some of the knock on consequences of its policies. The leaked document also notes that registered social landlords (generally housing associations) are ‘reporting difficulties in competing with private developers to acquire land... for new housing development’ and that ‘[t]here is a danger that RSLs are only able to secure land in locations that are least attractive to the private sector’.³² The demolitions, as we’ve seen, will mean a substantial reduction in low-cost rented housing in the centre of the city and in the west end, and new housing association homes are being forced out to cheaper land on the margins. The result will be an increasingly geographically divided city. Many new and existing tenants will also be forced to rely on the expensive and insecure private sector, and the leaked document also notes that ‘there is evidence of increasing levels of buy to let activity which may be fuelling house price increases at the lower end of the private housing market.’³³

Despite these internal acknowledgements, the effect of the way housing policy is currently being presented – of which Dundee provides just one example – is to shift public debate away from fundamental questions. Major changes become accepted as somehow inevitable, and debate is restricted to the mechanics of implementation. Look at how easily the focus of debate was moved from ‘council housing’ to ‘social housing’, which deliberately blurred the distinction between council and housing association ownership, and was then shifted again to ‘affordable housing’, which seems to cover almost everything and gives no indication of tenure.

An added twist to all this spin, is the portrayal of the demolitions as resulting from informed debate by elected representatives. While the policies were clearly in line with Westminster and Holyrood objectives, the driving force locally was provided by unelected bureaucrats, who put together the case for demolition. This was brought home to tenants when one of the councillors came to meet them, and confessed to never having seen the crucial DTZ Piedad report; at which point they felt like helping him unceremoniously out of the multi window.³⁴ I doubt if most other councillors had seen the report either, yet they all voted for demolition with hardly a question asked.

If fundamental issues are not being debated in the public arena of media or government, that doesn’t, however, mean that the people most affected don’t understand what is happening. As one of the concierges in the Derby Street multis said to me:

³⁰ Dundee City Council (2006a) p 4

³¹ Atkinson and Kintrea (2004) and Manley et al (2007)

³² Dundee City Council (2006a) p 4

³³ Dundee City Council (2006a) p 1

³⁴ This meeting took place in the summer of 2005, before the report had been released to us

It's well known it's a government policy isn't it, doing away with council houses...
It's like they just put a line through the whole lot... It was introduced from the Tories
initially, I think, and Labour just carried it on, didn't they?³⁵

But no-one listens to the people who actually live and work in the buildings.

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³⁵ Interviewed 18th August 2006