

Housing: A Racial Equality Issue

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Preface

My BA Architectural Studies dissertation, 'London in 2050: The future of the city's social housing, property price and gentrification,' interrogates contemporary issues in the UK's housing sector. Using contemporary society's current trajectory to forecast a view of the city in the future, this projection serves as a tool to amplify the issues facing the working class, specifically ethnic minorities in London, in the present day.

This article serves as a reflection on the issues and recommendations outlined in the dissertation, reinforcing its connection to architectural practice and education. Housing is integral to societal relationships of inequality, influencing many factors affecting quality of life. However, there is currently only a small minority of research and awareness on the topic.

The issues of social housing, property prices and gentrification are dissected, before being translated into recommendations and actions. The built environment profession plays a key influence on people's quality of life, and if this relationship is recognised the profession can take significant steps to rectify current inequalities.

Research Methods

The issues and recommendations proposed in this article are structured by: a literature review, a conversation with researcher David Robinson and

interviews with five housing professionals who work in Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) housing associations. The interviewees' scope of expertise ranged from the history to governance and policy in London.

It is important to address early on my own position as a white researcher: I come from a background of privilege.¹ The system that I critique disadvantages ethnic minorities but largely benefits me, which might suggest a bias in my approach. However, it is equally important to utilise my position of privilege to highlight racial disparities. The onus should not be on those who have suffered to research and dismantle issues of race, but on those who have played a part in these issues. Donna Haraway describes the notion of 'Situated Knowledge,' arguing that knowledge is always influenced by the individual producing it.² Haraway argues for a different kind of objectivity, where each perspective has a unique value, and the more perspectives that are offered, the better we can understand the subject. As far as possible, ethnic minority voices have been amplified on the topic and a critical view has been taken of my own views and those of other white researchers.

This article uses the terms "ethnic minorities" and "BAME," recognising that there is tension around currently available terminology. These terms generalise the intersections within the category, and arguably uphold whiteness as the norm. Despite this, these terms are used to conform to the sources and statistics used in the study, simultaneously acknowledging their problematic nature.

Introduction: The Context of Housing

With the increasing visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement, it is critical to refocus on racial disparities, but little has been done in the housing sector to acknowledge demands for social change. Social scholars such have investigated how white privilege operates in the UK, referencing events such as Brexit.³ Other scholars, such as Nirmal Puwar, touch upon whiteness in 'space' through examples of entering parliament, immigration or being subject to surveillance.⁴ However, the issue of 'space,' in terms of housing, has been under examined. This article attempts to contribute to a raised awareness of the way the housing system operates racially.

The interviews conducted underline how, despite a raised awareness of racial discrimination in the housing sector and across society, ethnic minorities continually face unique obstacles. Due to recent austerity policies, widespread economic inequalities have worsened, resulting in social divisions and a masking of the racial dimension of their collective struggle. Class issues have become largely synonymous with race issues, and understanding of the two in relation to housing has become obscured. This provokes a need to create a critical awareness of the scale and

- 1 Kalwant Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018); Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018).
- 2 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies*, 14.3, (1988), pp. 575-99.
- 3 Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*; Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*.
- 4 Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004).



[Figure 1: Grenfell Tower]

importance of housing issues for all, and the distinct issues facing ethnic minorities today.

Housing's Contemporary Issues

Social Housing and the Working Class

The 2017 Grenfell Tower tragedy highlighted the disproportionate effect of housing issues on ethnic minorities. Wider forces of structural racism within the UK cause ethnic minorities to be more vulnerable to poverty, and this makes them more likely to be social tenants.

Social housing supply is diminishing at an accelerating rate, aided by policies such as the 1979 Right-to-Buy programme. The aspiration of home ownership has become extensive, and governmental priorities reflect this ideology. In turn, social tenants are stigmatised, and their homes are left to disrepair.⁵ Governmental attitudes are grounded in racial discourse: social estates are tarred as crime-ridden areas which need to be “cleansed,” and are targeted by remedial action in the form of regeneration, policing strategies and surveillance. The white working class is identified as a distinct racial group, also at risk due to the stigmatisation of this tenure, but are arguably still able to leverage their white privilege over ethnic minorities.⁶ Consequently, divisions have grown within the working class, while the collective suffers the violent consequences of these racialized perceptions and policies, such as in the case of Grenfell. However, despite the sectoral issues, racism in the housing system is not exclusive to social housing.

Property Price, Poverty and Homelessness

David Robinson's work on racism and housing highlights the complex and historical issues within our housing system.⁷ The trajectory of housing inequalities is related to steady processes of financialization, commodification and deregulation. The evolution of housing over the last 60 years has led to contemporary inequalities in the system, and these processes are rooted in racial discourse. House prices have been bonded with economic growth as opposed to affordability, priming housing as an investment opportunity as opposed to a home.

The Private Rental Sector (PRS) inflates as homeownership becomes less attainable, and ethnic minorities are vulnerable to poor conditions and unethical landlord practices. Due to their often-limited eligibility for social housing and their overrepresentation in insecure, low paid occupations, such as in the gig economy or the public services, ethnic minorities

5 Ryan Powell and David Robinson, 'Housing, Ethnicity and Advanced Marginality in England,' in *Class, Ethnicity and State in the Polarized Metropolis*, ed. by John Flint and Ryan Powell. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 187-212; Jessica Perera, *The London Clearances: Race, Housing and Policing* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 2019), <<https://irr.org.uk/app/uploads/2019/02/The-London-Clearances-Race-Housing-and-Policing.pdf>> [accessed 11 May 2021].

6 Bhopal, *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society*.

are commonly left to the low-end PRS.⁸ Deregulation can lead to life-threatening housing conditions, and the lack of protections for tenants often leaves them on the streets if they cannot afford their rent.

The issues of poverty and homelessness are contrasted with the presence of the ‘super-rich’ in London, and each group influences the fabric of the city.⁹ The threat of shanty towns rises [Fig 2.], simultaneous with the presence of gated communities: these two stark identities demonstrate the large rift between the classes in the UK.¹⁰ However, largely due to a change in governmental level thinking on equality, ameliorative approaches which address and identify inequalities have decreased, moving towards a narrative of who is deserving and who is not.¹¹

- 7 Powell and Robinson, ‘Housing, Ethnicity and Advanced Marginality in England.’
- 8 Powell and Robinson, ‘Housing, Ethnicity and Advanced Marginality in England.’
- 9 Rowland Atkinson, ‘Limited exposure: Social concealment, mobility and engagement with public space by the super-rich in London’, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 48.7, (2015), 1302–1317, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0308518X15598323>>.
- 10 Ellis Woodman, ‘How Will Britain’s Cities Cope With Migrant Shanty Towns?’, *Architects’ Journal*, (2016), <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/how-will-britains-cities-cope-with-migrant-shanty-towns>> [accessed 19 April 2021].
- 11 Powell and Robinson, ‘Housing, Ethnicity and Advanced Marginality in England.’
- 12 Phil Cohen and Paul Watt, *London 2012 and the Post-Olympics City: A Hollow Legacy?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
- 13 Paul Watt, ‘Social Housing and Urban Renewal: An Introduction’, in *Social Housing and Urban Renewal* ed. by Paul Watt and Peer Smets (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 1-36, <<https://doi-org.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/10.1108/978-1-78714-124-720171004>> [accessed 10 May 2021]
- 14 Juliet Carpenter, ‘Regeneration and the Legacy of Thatcherism’, *Metropolitics*, (2014), <<https://metropolitics.org/Regeneration-and-the-Legacy-of.html>> [accessed 10 May 2021].

Displacement and Gentrification

Displacement and gentrification threaten the working-class population and have a disproportionate effect on ethnic minorities, such as in mega-urban projects like the London 2012 Olympics [Fig 3.].¹² While these projects intend to reinvigorate the local economy by encouraging middle-class reurbanisation, these “mixed-tenure” developments often result in the opposite outcome. Low-income residents are often not considered. They struggle to afford their rent, and move – either to other deprived areas, creating stronger borders of segregation, or further afield – compromising their access to employment, health services and support networks.¹³

Stemming from historical overtly racist initiatives concerning “slum clearance” and “inner cities,” regeneration policies have since evolved into more sophisticated concepts such as “social mixing.”¹⁴ Despite efforts becoming more covertly racialised, their roots are still firmly grounded within racial discourse and result in what has been critiqued as social cleansing.

An Alternate Future: Recommendations

There is still opportunity to salvage the dire issues with housing, and steps must be taken to prevent the loss of more life.

Understanding the Significance of Housing: An Equality Issue

The UK’s political, social and economic climate has amalgamated into an unprecedented crisis where housing has become a site of tension. Housing is difficult to obtain (good quality housing even more so) but this

issue is rarely understood in its implications for wider social justice. How we inhabit cities is significant in its indication of wider relationships of inequality and power between individuals, groups and at an institutional level. Housing can be viewed as a gateway through which we can access quality of life. The scale and effect of housing issues should be considered at the forefront of debate over increasing inequality, demanding change and recognition to avoid tragic outcomes.

Housing must be brought into broader conversations of equality and politics generally. Our society has moved on from postwar perceptions of housing as a fundamental human right towards a privilege granted only to those who can afford it. Housing determines our access to employment, health services, transport links, facilities for worship, social communities and much more. Hence, poor quality housing has been linked to lower educational attainment, lower life expectancy and poorer health.¹⁵ Contemporary perceptions of housing are singular, and while most of the population recognise the difficulty of entering the market, rarely is housing understood as interwoven with many facets of everyday life.

15 Michael Marmot and others, *The Marmot Review 10 Years On* (London: Institute of Health Equity, 2020), <<http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/marmot-review-10-years-on>> [accessed 4 May 2021].



Figure 2: Calais Refugee Camp, dubbed 'Shanty Town'



Figure 3: The Olympic Park

Varying from the societal, institutional and individual level, the significance of housing must be recognised. Architects must acknowledge the part we play in enacting social justice: as designers we are able to influence the distribution of resources, the quality of people's living space and the affordability of housing. While often the profession feels helpless in our ability to act independently of governmental and developer priorities, we can salvage our ability to act autonomously.

It is also important that housing is treated less as a siloed issue and viewed more broadly. In conversations around the BAME community's suffering at the hands of systemic racism, housing must be understood as influencing racial inequality. Wider forces of institutional racism must be recognised at the governmental level. The recent report on racial equality has been a step forward in recognising systems of racial inequality in the UK, but its references to housing are minimal.¹⁶ In the Grenfell inquiry, race continues to go unacknowledged, and governmental accountability is necessary to progress.¹⁷

BAME Representation

Consulting ethnic minorities in key decisions and improving representation on housing association boards and other decision-making bodies would aid in ensuring inclusive housing policies to drive positive outcomes. Significantly, BAME students suffer when entering architectural

16 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 'The Report', gov. uk, 2021 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>> [accessed 14 May 2021].

17 Leslie Thomas, 'We can't breathe' - Oral statement by Professor Leslie Thomas QC to the Grenfell Inquiry on behalf of bereaved, residents and survivors', Garden Court Chambers, 2020 <<https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/we-cant-breathe-oral-statement-by-professor-lestie-thomas-qc-to-the-grenfell-inquiry-on-behalf-of-bereaved-residents-and-survivors>> [accessed 11 November 2020].

education and progressing to full qualification, and BAME architects continue to experience racism in the workplace.¹⁸

Cultural Coherence

There is a need for housing professionals to become aware of the differing needs and vulnerabilities of marginalised groups. The importance of recognising cultural values, such as the norms of multi-generational living, has become increasingly clear in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ Ethnic minorities have suffered devastating loss of life for intersecting reasons, some of which can be linked to their housing situations. Ethnic minority households are more likely to be overcrowded, making them susceptible to more health conditions and creating obstacles for their ability to self-isolate.²⁰ Representation in the built environment profession will aid design for these groups and help to prevent further unnecessary tragedies. Additionally, diversifying the architectural curriculum will encourage designers to consider how we can creatively respond to the varying needs of different groups.

Societal Perception

The Right-to-Buy policy ushered in the beginning of the idolisation of homeownership. This has had ramifications for the social housing sector, which is now rife with classed and racialised stigma. The overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in social housing calls for a revitalisation of the sector, providing better options for multi-generational living and a better standard of social housing and maintenance. Our country's cultural perception of renting can evolve to accept different ways of living outside of home ownership. The stigmatisation of the tenure has resulted in the neglect and decline of social estates, posing a threat to ethnic minorities' health and livelihoods. Perceptions of social housing have become singular and these narratives have become mainstream in the media and policy.

Market-rule

National legislation is required to ensure that rent and property price are tied to true affordability and income as opposed to market value. The housing market has become oversaturated by investors and second-home buyers while many struggle to enter the market at all due to housing being regarded as a commodity or asset.

While property prices affect most of the population, the consequences are felt most severely by ethnic minorities.²¹ Ethnic minorities are consistently

18 Richard Waite, 'Architecture is systemically racist. So what is the profession going to do about it?', *Architects' Journal* (2020), <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/architecture-is-systemically-racist-so-what-is-the-profession-going-to-do-about-it>> [accessed 20 June 2021].

19 Michael Marmot and others, 'Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review', *Institute of Health Equity*, (2020), <<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>> [accessed 4 May 2021].

20 Marmot, 'Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review'.

21 Paul Cheshire, 'Property Millionaires: The Growing Housing Divide', *Santander Mortgages*, 2020, <https://www.santander.co.uk/assets/s3fs-public/documents/property_millionaires.pdf> [accessed 19 April 2021].

pushed into low-end private rental sector properties and areas, which detrimentally impact their quality of life. This shift can be rectified by empowering local organisations, working collaboratively with local communities and adopting measures of investment-return that consider factors other than property price or rental income. We should adopt a long term systems view on housing, understanding the intertwined effects on local economy, infrastructure and access to employment, education or health services.

Regulation

The housing sector – particularly the private rental sector – has become immensely deregulated, leaving vulnerable tenants in poor conditions at no consequence to the landlord. Too often ethnic minorities are pushed into the low-end private rental sector due to a lack of funds or eligibility problems due to migrant status. Even the minimum standards are not enforced, and the processes to become a registered landlord are insufficient. A duty of care must be awarded to landlords and dire levels of overcrowding, issues with maintenance, and other problems should be unacceptable.

Conclusion

The trends identified in social housing, property price and gentrification disproportionately affect ethnic minorities in the UK. The ethnic minority experience has been overlooked as research has been dominated by a classed view of reality, despite distinct intersections within working-class experience. While the whole population has suffered the housing crisis, the white working class are able to leverage their privilege, and this ability has not previously been identified in mainstream literature.

The recommendations for sector-wide change to address inequalities in the housing system argue for a recognition of racial disparities in political discourse. At the larger scale, we have identified a need for more representation, an evolution of societal perception and legislative change. We recommend that, given the impact of housing on many facets of life, the discussion on housing shifts to a debate on equality and empowers the architectural profession to become more culturally coherent.

The topics covered in this article are intentionally broad, however there is a wide range of topics that can be dissected through research and future design: the design of social housing and the potential for multi-generational living, solutions for affordable housing design, the connection between housing and health outcomes, and how we can avoid gentrification while developing at a large, fast paced scale.

Despite the need for radical change, the study concludes that the future can change for the better, and that there is still time to reform the housing sector into a more equal system that benefits all.

Post-Script: ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’

This article has highlighted a need to understand architecture as a social profession. SSoA’s ‘Call to Action’ identifies the interconnected nature of architecture as one that influences people and communities. This article responds to the demands to diversify architectural history and explore the relationship between architecture and power.

This process fundamentally begins with education and representation, with the ‘Call to Action’ explicitly referencing the desperate need for the architectural profession to reflect the diversity of the society within which it resides. However, this article proposes that as architects we are capable of more.

The act of architectural design is intrinsically linked with the distribution of resources and the everyday experiences of people within the built environment, and therefore they have a large role to play in spatial disparities. The issue of housing interrogated in this article underlines that housing influences countless aspects of our quality of life, from our access to education, employment, and healthcare to our social support systems. Housing inequalities in the UK have been highlighted as inherently racialised, and architects must become educated and aware of our ability to dismantle these inequalities through design.

Consequently, this article suggests that as part of the diversification of the architectural curriculum, architects should be encouraged to view issues of housing design as opportunities to dismantle racial inequalities.

Biography

Throughout my undergraduate study, I became deeply interested in the relationship between the built environment and societal relationships of power. Beginning with a focus on social housing and the sector’s history and politics, I began to understand the inequalities at play. Having sparked a passion for research and theory, in my final year I changed course to ‘Architectural Studies’, allowing me to develop my interests further, studying modules with a focus on race, diversity and health in cities. The built environment’s power to influence societal inequalities is rarely recognised, and it is important that this power is brought into mainstream debate.

