



Living Well: health, wellbeing and the built environment

A one-day conference for student nurses and health practitioners, Middlesex University, Hendon, Monday 10th February, 2020

[Anna Minton: What do we mean by living well?](#)

I'm going to talk to you about the political backdrop, the policy backdrop to housing and the housing crisis and how that relates to living well. So I am going to link it directly to health impacts towards the end of the presentation, but before I do I'm going to give you an overview of where we are with policy and politics. And that's going to be based very much on the work I did for my book, *Big Capital*, which came out in 2017, two weeks before the Grenfell Tower disaster. So it was timely in the worst possible way.

1.00 This is the first paragraph in the book; this is how I opened the book, and I'll just read it out to you:

Surrounded by boxes yet again, about to move, knowing that we are about to move again, in the New Year. I have cleaned and painted the new flat and it's still a dump with damp patches a moth eaten carpet throughout. I am 46 and I have lived in over 30 houses and I still have no security.

1.29 So I saw this on Facebook, posted actually by a friend of mine, who I've known for about 20 years, same age as me. And she posted this just before Christmas 2016 as I was coming to the end of the book. And it was one of those awful moments, as a journalist, you know I still have my journalist head when you just think "Oh My God, this is so terrible." And then you think: *that's the beginning of the book.*

1.59 You know, really this encapsulates so much of what I go on to write about, where the housing crisis today doesn't affect just those on very low incomes who aren't in work. Actually it affects nearly everybody, I mean this woman earns a very reasonable salary and look at the conditions she was living in. Her ten year old daughter was sleeping in an alcove under the stairs with a curtain to separate her from the hallway. And yet all over London, you'll have all seen, perhaps not this level of opulence but this is the Battersea Power Station development, the CGI of the Battersea Power Station development in Nine Elms, around Battersea Power Station. There are thirty new luxury apartment gated developments going up there. You will have definitely seen everywhere the hoardings not just in London, this one is actually from Bristol, Bristol luxury centre development.

3.04 You know everywhere we look there's cranes and development. And yet none of that housing is affordable to people. So what I say in the book, the thrust of this argument, is that all of this investment going in, and all of the money coming into the city, there's a huge amount of money which has come into the city since the financial crash for a number of reasons, one of which actually is the policy of quantitative easing which saw governments bail out the banks. All of this money went into the city and it went thereafter into property and property prices went up massively. So, what I argue in the book is that life at the top is inextricably linked to life at the bottom, and actually life in the middle and for the majority.

4.00 Because what politicians try to do, they tell us actually the housing crisis is this separate series of crises. Oh you know, if we can just sort the problem out for first time buyers, or for student

housing or for private rented, then we'll solve the crisis. But actually it's structural, it's the entire system that has been financialized; where every aspect of housing is now part of the financialised economy. The book looks at the influx of super-rich people in the city, the amount of foreign investment, side by side with this policy of estate regeneration, which I call 'demolition', and the displacement of people that that causes. And I also look at the death of social housing which I'm going to come to a little bit later in the presentation. And actually the failure to maintain social housing, lack of transparency, failure to listen to residents are the key factors behind the Grenfell Tower disaster.

5.10 So here are some more pictures of some of the luxury housing; sometimes it's quite difficult to know if they are CGI (Computer Generated Image) or if they've already been built, they're so sterile that they look like CGI. So I think this one is a CGI; this one is in the process of being built, it is now built it's part of the Vauxhall Nine Elms development. And this one, bear this one in mind, this is the CGI of what would become Elephant Park, in Elephant and Castle, and we'll come back to it.

5.55 This is another signifier of the great wealth, in parts of London, the so-called super-prime areas, golden postcodes; Kensington and Chelsea, Hampstead and Highgate. And this here is all you see of what are known as 'iceberg' basements, where huge amounts of construction are going on underneath, and actually building this kind of thing, where wealth is no longer visible in skyscrapers from above but actually hides itself below. And this is quite an extreme one, but actually there are four and a half thousand basements, perhaps not quite as opulent as this, but fairly on this scale in these super-prime parts of London.

6.47 And the argument is well this is good right? We're bringing in all this money. London is the most popular city in the world for millionaires, surely that's a good thing, that we're attracting all this wealth and investment, and it will trickle down to help the poorest parts of the city which need it the most. And what I argue is that wealth does trickle down, it trickles down in terms of rising property prices, and rents, but it doesn't benefit the poorer parts of the city and local surrounding communities who need that investment. Actually, it displaces them. It pushes them out. And you see it all over the city, even from a wealthy area such as Kensington and Chelsea where the old elites can no longer afford to live there. So, they'll sell up, they might move to the country, and they'll buy their kids homes. But they won't be able to afford to live in Kensington and Chelsea, so they'll move out to Peckham, Acton, Forest Gate, actually areas not so far away from here. And in turn those property prices and rents will soar, and those residents will be displaced. We all know of the influx of people to south coast towns, other cities, Margate, Hastings etc, cities like Bristol. People are being displaced outside of London.

8.17 And again, another common trope that you'll hear is that this is gentrification and the city's always changing. What I argue is that this is not gentrification. The sheer *speed* of this transformation in just a few years, this is just since the financial crisis [of 2008], that we've seen London being reconfigured to this extent, isn't gentrification, which is a much longer process that takes place over perhaps a generation. We saw parts of London like Islington, Notting Hill Gate, more recently Stoke Newington, Brixton; they did change significantly but over a far longer period and less radically. This is something quite different. And I said before this is for a number of different reasons, one of which is quantitative easing, one of which is the tax haven status of London, and one of which is something which I call state-led gentrification, which I'm going to explain in a little bit more detail.

9.24 But all of this is underpinned by the theme that Thomas Picketty introduces in his landmark book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* [2013] which is that the rate of return on capital (ie rent, property), in today's economy, is much greater than the rate of return on economic growth of wages. So, if anyone in the room, like me, is lucky enough to own their own property, we will make much more money from being asleep in our house than we will from going to work. So, it's property which is driving forward today's economy and that in turn is creating the housing crisis.

10.07 So you remember the slide of Elephant Park? Well this is the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle as was. The Heygate Estate housed 3,000 people, predominantly on low incomes, but a quarter of those residents owned their own homes under Right to Buy. And it was demolished in 2014, in common with more than 100 housing estates across London which have been demolished. This is Robin Hood Gardens in East London, now partly demolished, the other half just awaiting demolition. And this was an image that I found particularly striking, that's the half of Robin Hood Gardens that has been demolished and you can see the towers of Canary Wharf just visible through the part that has been demolished. So capital is literally eating up the social housing.

11.06 And this is a CGI of Blackwall Reach. And Blackwall Reach is the new development which is proposed to replace Robin Hood Gardens, the usual luxury apartment-type development. Twenty five percent of these developments are, by the way, earmarked for affordable housing. But the Conservative government changed the definition of affordable housing in 2010 to mean up to 80% of market rent or market value. So with values such as this, of course, £565,000 to £611,000 for a two bedroom flat that's very far from affordable for anyone, let alone people who used to live on Robin Hood Gardens.

11.54 But what is very notable to me about this image is that this here shows you that it was actually being marketed in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Hong Kong before Robin Hood Gardens was even demolished. It was marketed straight to foreign investors in Asia, to buy the properties "off-plan," which means they are bought from the plan, before the properties have actually been built. And actually, investors only buy 5% in the first year. Then they buy 10% in the second year and the balance on completion. So when developers say they've sold 100% of the scheme what they mean is that they've sold 5% of 100% of the scheme. And that actually builds in a structural instability in the property market which can lead to the whole thing tumbling down. Because if the market starts to "soften" (to use the euphemism, which it already is) then the investor can think well OK, I've spent 5% of that price but I don't like that investment, I'm not going to continue with it, and they'll pull out. So all those homes are not bought. And this is how we are structuring our property market, and actually off-plan sales are banned in very many European countries for precisely this reason.

13.23 And back to Elephant Park. So this is what has been built on the site of the old Heygate Estate. £750,000 to a million pounds for a two bedroom flat. And this is what has happened to the people who lived there. So the tenants, the social housing tenants, have all been displaced from the local area; networks, GP surgeries, schools. But largely they have stayed within the borough, although of course the disruption was very unwelcome and the development was vehemently opposed, as these developments always are. But the people who have really scandalously suffered are the home-owners. Because if you compare that £750,000 to a million pounds for a two-bedroom flat; actually the average compulsory purchase price Southwark council gave the home-owners on the Heygate Estate was £100,000. So absolutely unbelievable; and of course, none of these people were able to remain in London, they all moved out of London, and I feature in the book a couple who had to move to Sidcup. And the resulting mental health impacts in terms of depression, mental health impacts are huge. Also the difficulties if you are elderly, you've got links with a hospital in London, like they did, they had to commute back into St Thomas's. You know, unbelievable disruption to their lives.

15.06 So alongside this policy of demolishing housing estates and replacing them with luxury apartments in London – this policy is largely confined to London, it only works in areas of high land values because that's what's driving it. But we have a national picture where social housing has been in terminal decline for at least the last twenty-five years. Firstly this began with Margaret Thatcher's landmark policy of Right to Buy which stopped the building of council homes and did not allow councils to use the money from the sale of council homes to build new homes. And the idea was to shift to private renting and housing associations. But housing associations never remotely managed to fill the gap left by council housing. And the idea was that housing benefit would pay/subside tenants to live in the private rented sector. The Conservative government don't believe in social

housing. I've spoken to enough Tory policy makers and politicians to know that. That's a comment from somebody at Policy Exchange, the Conservative think tank; we spoke on a panel together and he said, "the social rent straight-jacket is symptomatic to the post-war construct". It's a bit garbled but I think it means "it's over."

16.40 So we now have a raft of marketized policies, buy to let and private renting, paid for by benefits. But what this has led to is this quite ludicrous situation, because we now see that 40% of former council housing is owned by private landlords who rent it out at three to four times the price. So you can get a situation where you have an identical flat in a council block, and the council housing will be £400 a month. And next door, the privately rented housing - *the same flat* - will be at £1500 a month. And those are the price differentials you are looking at.

17.27 And inevitably, partly as a result of this, the housing benefit bill paid to private landlords has soared. This figure is a bit out of date it was a 2016 figure: it's nearly 10 billion here, well it's probably higher today. The big big issue, and this affects people very much, is that housing benefit, in a bid to bring down that housing benefit bill, housing benefit has been capped. It's partly to bring down the bill, and it's partly as a result of the raft of austerity measures. And the gap today between the housing benefit that tenants are given, and the amount of rent they have to pay, in London, is more than £200.

18.14 So that means a constant cycle of evictions where people can't pay their rent, constant insecurity and precarity. And it is official policy for many councils to now move their tenants out of London. And actually, richer boroughs in London do deals with less wealthy boroughs in other parts of the country where they pay them more money. So it makes sense for those landlords and those local authorities to work with London boroughs. As for the tenants, they are just the collateral damage of this market system which is ludicrous.

18.56 So I've found this to be a very telling quote. It's all very complicated but it really matters. Housing benefit is now called local housing allowance. So a councillor in Luton said, "The Local Housing Allowance in Luton for a one-bed is £650 but £760 in London. So the landlord can get an extra £110 by doing a deal with a London borough. But Luton has a housing shortage too. So the stupid bit about it is we're having to do the same and move our people." So it's just a constant churn, ruled by market forces.

19.38 Housing is a public good, and it is subject simply to this financialization. This is a single mum who was moved out of Walthamstow to Welwyn Garden City, to former nurses' accommodation, where Newham, Walthamstow, Tower Hamlets, four London boroughs were exporting families in temporary accommodation. It was completely unsuitable, she was up three flights of stairs, it was not suited to families at all. Her youngest baby was sick, she had to commute back into Great Ormond Street. These are the sorts of stories that I encountered, and these are the sorts of stories that you encounter I'm sure in daily work as healthcare professionals.

20.37 And we've got what's called 'Generation Rent', just to take you back to the opening slide, the situation my friend found herself in, where it's not just people in social housing who find themselves in terrible housing conditions. There's this phenomenon called 'Rent to Rent' where somebody will sublet a room, and within that they and will rent the bed spaces. I mean this never used to exist, but you can walk down the high street and see in newsagents windows, how much a bed space will cost. There is no regulation in the private rented sector, poor conditions proliferate. If tenants complain they face being evicted.

21.29 And this is probably 'legal', but nonetheless, not uncommon. And then even worse, and this is definitely illegal, is the [phenomenon of] "beds in sheds", of which there are many many thousands, particularly in outer London boroughs. These are outhouses where people are still being charged large amounts of money.

21.51 So inevitably people are leaving London, especially in nursing and teaching. Again, this is probably outdated, 14-18% vacancy rate at London hospitals, entrants to teaching down 16%. The CBI is hugely worried about the exodus from London. But actually not everyone leaves London; what they do is that they put up with what they previously would have considered to be unacceptable. You adapt, the “Overton window” of what you thought you could live with changes. So my friend found herself living in the sort of situation she never thought she would be living in. So it’s a mixture of those two; people are moving, my friends are moving. It’s very very expensive in this city for everyone. But people are also putting up with what they shouldn’t have to be putting up with.

22.48 So just to close, on the links between the housing crisis and mental health, which is something that I’m quite keen to do a research project on. Because I was amazed when I was doing this to find that there was not that much out there on this topic, perhaps because it’s so obvious. No-one has really put too much resource into doing more. We do know, there are studies, that show that spending more than 30% of your income on housing is associated with worse mental health. In London, the majority spend more than 50% of their income on housing. Again it goes without saying the impact on mental health of evictions, and prolonged periods in temporary accommodation. And the impact of poor housing conditions on physical health: there is damp and mould in these places, children have asthma and various other conditions. So I think there’s a desperate need to do a project to look at these links, particularly I think on mental health and the knock-on associated costs to the health care system.

Thanks

This paper was presented at an event called “Living Well: health, wellbeing and the built environment.” This was a one-day conference for student nurses and health practitioners, held on 10th February, 2020, organised by the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture in collaboration with the School of Health and Social Sciences at Middlesex University.

The conference touched on a variety of topics including the unhealthy city and homelessness, experiences of mental distress and housing, representations of council housing in the media, community-centred design of the built environment, and smart homes for ageing populations.

A list of further reading and resources can be found here:

<https://rl.talis.com/3/mdx/lists/E6D01DCE-B34E-845A-4BF2-282B8157BF8C.html>