

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

[Dr Katie Beswick: How has council housing been represented in the media?](#)

0.00 Hello, my name is Katie Beswick, at the moment I work at the University of Exeter as a Senior Lecturer in Drama, and I just want to tell you a little bit about how I became interested in council housing. I studied Drama as an undergraduate student and prior to that, as a small child, I lived in council housing, as a baby, I moved out when I was about 3 or 4, and my family, my extended family, my grandmother, my cousins lived in council housing as I was growing up, as did most of my friends where I grew up.

And then when I went to university, I went to school, to a state school in Woolwich in South East London, at school I'd be the posh one, because we'd moved out of the estate and lived in a house, and when I went to university in Exeter suddenly people thought I was the most working class person they'd met in their whole life. And I got a lot stigma around my accent, around the way I presented myself, around who people assumed that I was.

1.07 And one of my overriding memories from university is that I acted in a scene. The scene was from an Ibsen play. I was playing an old lady, and in a previous scene I'd played a young working class girl. And unsurprisingly my acting teacher said "you know you're much better as the working class girl, but I think that's because you're council estate and that's all you'll ever be".

1.31 And I lodged that away in my mind, and as I grew up and left university and went to work in housing, this idea of what is council housing, what does this word mean suddenly became really, really important to me, and really important for me to find out.

So I went back to university and did a PhD. And my PhD was, the point of it was to think about that, what is council housing? When you say to someone "council estate" there's a whole range of ideas, and assumptions. Where do they come from, what do they mean, how do they affect us? How do they affect practitioners, practitioners of social work, health, teachers and how they interact with clients, students, I don't know what the right term is.

So I've been primarily concerned with understanding how representations of council estates, so that is theatre because that's my discipline, but also film, television, visual arts, media discourse, how they structure or are significant in structuring our understanding not only of spaces of social housing, but also about the people who live in social housing.

2.45 In other words what I'm interested in is not only how representations reflect or represent the reality of the social world, but in how they create that reality. I think it's important to remember that representation is a dynamic process, the things we watch and consume are not neutral but are but are part of a process of making our society. Therefore the things we see and read must always be questioned, subject to critical scrutiny and thought about carefully.

3.16 So the word in my title public sphere, I don't know if I gave that in a moment of madness, or someone made this title up for me, but it's not a term I tend to use, because I think this idea of a public sphere, that we live in a space with democratic, or that there are spaces for democratic participation in debate are partial, and not everybody has an equal access to that public sphere.

So what I've just been talking about, my overarching feelings and thoughts about representations of estates, I go into a lot more detail into my book (*Social Housing in Performance: The English Council Estate on and off Stage*, Bloomsbury 2019).

4.07 So the phrase council estate for anyone not familiar with that term refers to large scale social housing projects that have become a feature of the contemporary landscape of the United Kingdom, particularly of England.

They were originally conceived, designed and built to provide subsidised housing for the working classes, both affluent and working classes. The social history of estates is complex, that's a very partial history, but it's important to say that the make-up of social housing has changed, so one the one hand what you've had is you've gone from a period of history in the mid twentieth century when the majority tenure, so about 40% that's a contested statistic, of people in the UK lived in social housing to a point where about 8% live in social housing. And the people in social housing now tend to be poor working class people, or who are given social housing now tend to be poor working class people. There's a huge need for social housing that is not being met and affluent working classes either tend to own their own home, or to have to live in private rented housing, or to have tenure from historical social housing tenure.

5.21 But why I wanted to give that potted history is to say that the devaluing of the working classes, so the devaluing of the type of people that live in council estates which has happened as part of the neoliberal project from the 1970s onwards which has seen a decline in industrialisation, a break-up of the unions and so on, has been paralleled by the devaluing of social housing. So the idea that it is a responsibility to house people of this country by running down those people we've been able to make a case for perhaps why it's not a social responsibility to house them.

6.01 So, my work then rests on the premise that there is generic council estate. So there is this idea as was talked about this morning in the earlier ((session?)) of the individual that that idea also relies on these underpinning categories into which we can lump everybody else. And the generic council estate is an archetype that circulates in popular culture through which the perception, practice and governance of estates by both those in charge of estates but also by residents themselves, is shaped.

6:38 So in popular culture there's a council estate discourse. So this word 'discourse' the way that I use it comes from Michel Foucault's work, who is a philosopher, and he argued or used the word discourse to refer to the relationship between knowledge and power, presuming power is controlled by what's known and by those who are able to create and contribute to that knowledge.

7:03 So Foucault's ideas about discourse indicate that structural inequalities are partly hinged upon some people or groups having their voice silenced and other people or groups having their voices elevated.

In popular contemporary representations of council estates residents voices are often silenced or else used selectively to maintain existing negative conceptions of estate spaces that allow policymakers and other people to justify policies that harm the people that need housing.

So in Foucault's model estate residents are disempowered by their role in discourse. So when I use the term 'council estate' what I'm referring to is this generic idea of the estate.

7:47 And we're just going to have a look now at some of the tropes of estate representation, so some of the ideas about estates that circulate in culture and how they're disseminated. The way that we pick up ideas through representation isn't always straightforward, it's very subtle and sometimes even as we're being critical of the representations we see, those ideas are still permeating.

8:08 So this first thing that I want to look at is a Channel 4 ident. ((video plays)) So there's quite a lot going on in that ident, it's very short it's about 23 seconds, but what I want to focus on is the idea of ruin that operates through this particular image. So usually when you talk about ruins in art we think about the way that they function to show either a past or predict a future in which the present will slump into similar disrepair or fall victim to some unforeseeable calamity.

So ruins operate metaphorically to suggest that they both hark back to the past that was ruined and also to a future that might fall into ruin.

9:20 So mostly in art practices where you see ruins you see literal ruins but what I argue is that council estates, even when they're not depicted in literal ruin, function as ruins. They have a ruin affect. So in this ident for example there's this bleak empty space, we know that it's inhabited, it's not completely fallen apart because there's washing lines, there's satellite dishes – some of these have been digitally inserted to make the space look more inhabited than it actually is – and we can see flooded walkways and so on.

And what this evokes, I think, symbolically and conceptually is a ruin narrative that is typical in estate representation, the idea that when you see an estate you see a social history of the Welfare State and so on that is now no longer, as Anna Minton mentioned a politician we talked about this morning, and also the idea that if we allow these sort of places to continue then our future will also fall into ruin.

10:31 Estates are also framed as sites of crime and danger, particularly when we see the representation of London estates they're particularly implicated in discourse surrounding Black gang violence, so in the 2011 riots in England, for example, which I'll talk about a little bit more in a minute, the idea that the people who perpetrated crimes during the riots came from estates, was quite a strong argument in much of the newspaper and political discourse around that.

11:04 So this is a trailer from a film called Attack the Block, which is a sci-fi film and I think it encapsulates some of these ideas of what I call 'the hood', I mean the hood is a word I use to apply to estates, but obviously it comes out of North American inner city culture, where the hood is an inner city urban environment that's closed off to the outside and that has its own energetic and artistic culture and practices ((video plays)).

So we can see black and mixed race groups presented in sportswear, in what we might think of as fashionable clothing. And again this is quite common when you see representations, particularly of London estates. And it comes again as part of that discourse that symbolises that certain types of people particularly might be more prone to committing crime, might be more prone to being involved in certain types of criminal activity.

12:18 And finally I want to just talk to you about this final discourse which is that estate residents – this is from I think a programme called How to Get a Council House, I say I think because I made this slide quite a long time ago – but the important thing to say here is that again (I'm going to pause this) you have a representation here of estate residents, of working class people, which is quite familiar, in this case the white working class are depicted in tracksuits, no makeup, they've got

bulldogs, Staffie dogs, pit bull type dogs. And these kind of images are constructed to suggest that there is a reality in which certain types of people live. And they are very constructed.

We know for example that a lot of reality television producers suggest to people that go on reality television the kind of clothes they might wear to be shot, so you can just turn up in your tracksuit for example. Those people often expecting that they're not going to be filmed without having some sort of makeup on, and that happened to me when I appeared on This Morning to have a makeover as a favour to a friend, and they said, 'Just turn up with no makeup on,' and then they just put me under the lights. My Nan rang me up and said, 'You look bloody awful,' because they want to suggest something about the type of person that you are perhaps. But this happens all the time and it happens all the time in reality television to construct and feed into this image that we already have about the types of people who are on benefits, who live on estates and so on.

14:00 We should understand that these representational forms do not just happen on television and through fiction and constructed images, they also are repeated, secured and reinforced through what I call authentic figures. Now this comes out of Imogen Tyler's work. So Imogen Tyler, who is a media studies academic and sociologist and she talks about the figurative categories. So she talks about this idea of the chav being a pervasive image through which the white working class are constructed and demonised in order that we can legitimate policies that harm those people. And I think that we can also see how those figures circulate through real people. So real people come to reinforce these figurative categories.

14:56 So when we think about, for example, the council estate resident as a chav we can look at a figure such as Karen Matthews. So Karen Matthews was the mother of Shannon Matthews who was a young girl, it was reported she was missing in 2008, that she'd been abducted. This led to a huge spate of media interest in the case partly because the year before Madeline McCann had been abducted in Portugal, a young middle class girl.

And right from the very start the difference between this middle class and working class family was part of the debate around the case, but very quickly after it was found out that Shannon's mother had been implicated in her abduction in order to get media attention and solicit money, she became completely demonised by the press.

15:50 Now I don't want to suggest that Karen Matthews didn't do an awful thing and didn't set a great example but she became the stand in for bad mothers, for the idea that people on benefits, people who live on estates were bad mothers. In much of the media reporting of the case the fact she lived on an estate was mentioned time and again. Her estate was described as nastier than Beirut and one Conservative politician suggested that she was why all mothers on benefits should be sterilised. So we can see that this one figure becomes an authenticating mechanism for stigmatising ideas about white working class people who live on estates.

16:40 Something similar happens in relation to this idea of the hood and black gang violence with Mark Duggan. Mark Duggan, as many of you probably know, was the young man who was shot sparking the London Riots, by police. In the immediate aftermath of that Mark Duggan and the rioters were demonised by the press and by politicians as feral, criminal gang members. Here we've got a headline of the Daily Mail, 'A gangster salute for a fallen soldier.' The fact that he'd grown up on the Broadwater Farm Estate, which had been the site of some quite serious riots in 1985, was mentioned again and again in the media coverage. Again feeding into this idea of inner city estates as homes to these black criminals who are a danger to society.

17:27 What's quite interesting about Mark Duggan's case however is that in the wake of this utter demonization of him by the press his family used his image and used his memory to contest some of the worst narratives that were being put out by the police. So lots of civil rights activists eventually in collaboration with organisations like Black Lives Matter, made a case that Mark Duggan wasn't an example of this feral, criminal, violent, black, inner city gangster but was in fact an example of the ways in which the police target black people and black working class people particularly, unfairly and disproportionately.

And an example of this sort of alternative narrative can be seen in *The Hard Stop*, which is a documentary that gives a lot of voice to his friends and family in the aftermath of some of that horrible demonization.

18:32 So why I finish with that example is because part of my work after I've looked at these dominant representations is really thinking about what modes do residents have to speak back? So what strategies to resist some of these demonising narratives do residents have?

This quote here is from an artist called Lynn McCarthy. Lynn McCarthy lived on an estate called the Market Estate. When the Market Estate was being regenerated and tenants were being moved out so that the regeneration could happen there was a project called The Market Estate Project where a number of artists, I think off the top of my head it was 72, were brought in to make work in the buildings on the estate and around the estate.

McCarthy was an artist who lived on the estate at the time and she refused to let anyone make work in her house and she said, 'I will make my own work,' and she made a theatrical piece in her own property. And for her this was a political point. On this occasion she says, 'I become a participant in the staging of my own politics.'

So she wasn't happy to let other people step in and speak for her, she wanted to have a voice herself in her own representation.

19:49 And this is something that does not get the same kind of media platform as some of the demonising narratives around estate residents but something that happens quite frequently. There are many people on estates who consider themselves artists, many people who have lived on estates who make artistic work and through those works we can start to hear the voices of estate residents.

20:10 Now we were going to have I think a performance by Conrad Murray who's one of the artists that I've written about in my work but he has gone to Australia so I'm going to show you a little video from his play *Denmarked*. So *Denmarked* was a one man performance in which Conrad Murray talked about his experiences growing up on an estate, being under social services care for some of his upbringing and it's a way in which he really inserts his voice in the discussion about what estate residents are and what that might mean. And although what he's saying isn't that estates and growing up in poverty is some utopian experience his voice does add a bit of nuance, emotion, and allows you to see the individual behind these demonising categories, so I'll just play that now. ((video plays))

I'll stop it there because I don't think you can necessarily hear it that well but lots of his work is online for you to look at and engage in if you're interested in that.

So that's it thank you.

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>