

“Avoiding the mistakes of the past”

Tower block failure discourse and economies of risk management in London’s Olympic Park

Saffron Woodcraft

Abstract: A powerful dystopian imaginary dominates political and cultural representations of Britain’s postwar tower blocks, which continue to be linked to social dysfunction and alienation despite extensive empirical research that challenges such claims. This article asks what contested declarations of failure “do” by examining how “tower block failure” is discursively deployed by placemaking professionals—planners, architects, housing managers, regeneration practitioners—engaged in the construction of a “model” mixed-tenure neighborhood in London’s Olympic Park. Examining how the aesthetic figure of the “failed” high-rise housing estate is configured in relation to the normative models of citizenship and community that infuse social and spatial policy, I argue “failure” is entangled with a speculative, future-oriented economy of risk management, which refracts wider questions about the nonobvious forms that power takes in the neoliberal city.

Keywords: community, high-rise social housing, London, neoliberalism, urban transformation

The devastating fire in Grenfell Tower (London) on 14 June 2017, which trapped residents in the 24-story tower block, killing 72 people, gave renewed momentum to a long-running political and popular debate about the nature of tower block living and the perceived failure of Britain’s postwar social housing estates. In the days following the fire, a series of articles appeared in national media examining how an intersection of technical and political forces had produced a lethal set of conditions in Grenfell Tower (Hanley 2017; Khan 2017; Lammy 2017). The authors—politicians, journalists, and social

commentators—reanimated a discourse that began in the 1970s about the problematic nature of high-rise living, in which tower block architecture is implicated in community breakdown: its form driving social isolation, mental health issues, crime, antisocial behavior, gang violence, and drug abuse. Writing the day after the Grenfell fire, the *Guardian* columnist Simon Jenkins (2017) opened his opinion piece by saying, “High-rise blocks are wholly out of place and character. Rather, a modern, sociable city needs neighbourhoods . . . How many times should we say it? Don’t build residential towers . . . They



are antisocial, high-maintenance, disempowering, unnecessary, mostly ugly, and they can never be truly safe.”

A powerful dystopian imaginary dominates political and cultural representations of Britain’s postwar tower blocks. Constructed to provide council-owned modern housing for working-class families, Britain’s high-rise towers, along with low- and mid-rise housing estates, materialized the postwar social contract that offered citizens “cradle-to-grave” state support in return for labor and taxes. Similar forms of “welfare capitalism” (Esping-Anderson 1990) characterized by state-led modernization programs focused on mass housing, health, and education extended around the world, as indicated by the widespread presence of high-rise public housing across Europe, Scandinavia, North America, Latin America, and Asia. As a site where individual, social, political, and economic interests intersect, housing has long been implicated in moralizing discourses about the production of forms of citizenship, family, and community. Insa Koch’s (2015) research on postwar council housing in Britain identifies that most estates were built to provide affordable homes in “respectable working class neighbourhoods” for households headed primarily by men in stable and secure employment. However, the political economy of housing in Britain has changed dramatically since the postwar period. Since the late 1970s, successive British governments—from Thatcher to New Labour and the current Conservative administration—have pursued policies that have devalued and disinvested in state-managed social housing. The advent of neoliberalism has seen government withdraw from the direct provision of many public services—health, housing, education, and security, for example—and open up these spaces to new, non-state actors.

This new social settlement has reconfigured the terms on which citizenship and access to state supports are negotiated. The postwar “right” to housing—and other publicly funded services—for working citizens has shifted to a deregulated, financialized, and primarily market-led housing

system (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994). These shifts, alongside processes of economic decline linked to deindustrialization, have seen, over a period of decades, social housing estates pathologized as “problem” places characterized by deficits: unemployment, benefit dependency, crime, and immorality (Hancock and Mooney 2013; Johnston and Mooney 2007). This “territorial stigmatization” (Wacquant 2008) of social housing estates and their primarily working-class populations, often in isolation from the impacts of wider economic conditions, has come to dominate discourses about place and poverty in the United Kingdom (Baxter and Brickell 2014; Hancock and Mooney 2013; Koch 2016) and internationally (Arrigoitia 2014; Fennell 2015; Pfeiffer 2006). Although social housing in Britain has taken various architectural forms—from interwar cottage council estates to semidetached, precast concrete homes of the 1950s and the Radburn-style car-free estates of the 1970s new towns—it is the modernist high-rise housing estate that has become the preeminent symbol of working-class exclusion and the failure of mid-twentieth-century urban policy.

This article seeks to contribute a different perspective by asking what contested declarations of failure “do”. It examines how “place-making” professionals—planners, architects, housing managers, regeneration, and community development practitioners—engaged in the construction of Chobham Manor, a new neighborhood in East London’s Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, invoke the “failed” high-rise housing estate as an aesthetic figure that sustains and carries forward in time the threat that new communities may also fail. Configured as a void sociality—an absence of community understood in the normative terms that infuse housing and planning policy in Britain—the aesthetic figure of the “failed” high-rise housing estate of the past is deployed in these accounts as a counterpoint against which to justify decisions and investments made in the present. In this context, spatial design policies, social programs, and neighborhood projects that are understood to engender a sense of community are

enacted to mitigate future risks. The arguments made here are based on ethnographic fieldwork, carried out between 2013 and 2016, following the work of Chobham Manor’s placemaking team as they participated in public planning meetings and community consultations, took part in private meetings and conversations, and engaged with a series of wider debates about planning, housing, and regeneration that took the form of new research, industry events, and dialogues among practitioners and policy makers. Examining “tower block failure” discourse ethnographically, this article takes a situated deployment of failure as a starting point from which to unpack its nonobvious meanings and to consider the implications for understanding wider processes of urban transformation.

While London’s Olympic Park is the setting for this research, this article does not directly engage with literature about the politics of mega-events or the emerging outcomes of legacy regeneration in East London. Analyzing the social and economic benefits of Olympic Games is a field of scholarship in its own right (Baade and Matheson 2016; Gaffney 2010; Poynter and Viehoff 2015; Zimbalist 2015), and an extensive cross-disciplinary literature addresses various dimensions of London’s Olympic legacy, including work on regeneration (Evans 2016; Ryan-Collins et al. 2017; Ward 2013) and housing, gentrification, and displacement (Bernstock 2014; Cohen 2013; Watt 2013). Instead, Chobham Manor is treated here as metonymic of the large-scale, multistakeholder regeneration projects that characterize much contemporary urban development in the United Kingdom, in which public-private partnerships combine government land and grants with private investment in residential and commercial assets to underwrite the provision of social housing and public space—a model that Erik Swyngedouw and colleagues (2002) describe as neoliberal urbanization. Catherine Alexander and colleagues (2018) observe how, in the context of housing, such partnerships bring non-state actors (housing associations, housebuilders, land developers, and mortgage lenders) into spaces and roles

previously occupied by the state and state agencies. In the case of Chobham Manor, these actors include the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), a quango with both statutory planning and regeneration development responsibilities; and Chobham Manor LLP, a joint venture partnership between private-sector housebuilder Taylor Wimpey and housing association London & Quadrant, a “social business” and regulated charity.

By documenting the everyday practices of this group of professionals, what Paul du Gay (2008) terms the ethical conducts of office, the discussion that follows aims to illuminate how discourse and decision-making intersect in placemaking practices, and to bring forth voices that are less commonly heard in anthropological accounts of urban planning, housing, and regeneration. In this sense, the article engages with Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur’s (2015) call for greater attention to be paid to the forms of institutional space and bureaucratic practice in which radically different notions of public goods and the social contract are negotiated.

Architecture for “more community” in the Olympic Park

In 2010, the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC), the predecessor agency to the current London Legacy Development Corporation, unveiled its revised master plan: a vision for five, primarily family-focused neighborhoods, drawing on London’s traditional housing typologies, replaced the outline master plan approved in 2004, which had proposed 10,000 to 12,000 new homes in high-density, high-rise apartment blocks. The earlier high-rise vision was rejected in favor of an urban form felt to be more “characteristically London”: terraced housing of various types within a pattern of streets, neighborhood parks, and squares. The new master plan was inspired by London’s seventeenth- and eighteenth-century great estates, places like Bloomsbury and Belgravia, which were the purpose-built neighborhoods of their time. The

master plan narrative attributes the enduring popularity of the great estates to their village-like form—configured around urban blocks, terraces, and streets—and human proportions that can accommodate adjustments in scale from large townhouses to middle-class terraces and workers cottages (see Figure 1). This flexibility is contrasted to tower blocks, whose “singularity of form and scale is resistant to change and reinterpretation” (OPLC 2011: 51).

Chobham Manor is the first of five new neighborhoods to be constructed in the Olympic Park as part of a major regeneration program that constitutes the legacy of the 2012 Olympiad, which were envisaged by London’s

Olympic bid team as a catalyst for investment and development that would “change the face of the capital forever” (Tribe quoted in Vijay 2015: 427). In addition to planned new neighborhoods, the legacy program will create public spaces, schools, university campuses, cultural institutions, and commercial space for major corporations and tech start-ups—making it one of the United Kingdom’s largest and most high-profile regeneration initiatives. The five legacy neighborhoods have been conceived of as a model for twenty-first-century urban development (DCMS 2008) and, in this sense, materialize current policy and planning ideals to create “mixed” neighborhoods that become



FIGURE 1: Chobham Manor’s “pro-social” urban block and street configuration (© Saffron Woodcraft, September 2018).

socially cohesive, thriving communities. Chobham Manor, like the other proposed Legacy Communities Scheme neighborhoods, is a mixed-tenure, mixed-use neighborhood, which on completion in 2021 will provide about eight hundred homes for private sale and "affordable" housing to rent.¹

When the revised master plan was made public, then Chair of the OPLC Margaret Ford described the new vision to *The Architects' Journal* as "a stronger masterplan with much more community" (Fulcher 2010). Ford's statement seems to suggest the strength of the revised master plan lies in its capacity to produce "more community"—a claim that assumes changing the spatial and architectural configuration of the Park's new neighborhoods will also change their social nature. In this case, Ford's statement implies that changing the proposed spatial and architectural form is a question of value: if the measure of future success is "more community," which built form will be the most socially productive? Chobham Manor's reimagined urban village of streets and terraced housing is presented as agentive: engendering the forms of sociality that support community formation and, ultimately, success. Implicit in Ford's statement is the supposition that high-rise architecture produces "less community" than the urban block/terraced dwelling composition of the revised master plan. Yet, British cities like London and Manchester have seen a renaissance in high-rise living since the late 1990s (Baxter and Lees 2009): 510 towers more than 20 stories high are currently in London's planning pipeline (New London Architecture 2018)—both "elite" towers such as the 50-story One Blackfriars and the rash of new, mixed-tenure high-rises on former postwar housing estates such as Aberfeldy Village (formerly Aberfeldy Estate) in Poplar (East London), and Elephant Park on the former site of the Heygate Estate in South London. This tension points to both the prevalence and the elasticity of the tower block as a shorthand for failure and the nonobvious meanings that are invested in this discourse. Furthermore, Ford's statement is illustrative of the linguistic

slippage evident during my fieldwork, in which high-rise housing was frequently discussed in generic terms as a problematic architectural and social form.

The discursive construction of social "problems" that connect housing, poverty, and place, and how such discourses are deployed in support of urban renewal and poverty reduction programs that favor the demolition of social housing and displacement of working-class populations have been closely documented (Arrigoitia 2014; Jacobs et al. 2003; Pfeiffer 2006), as have the classed nature of such problematizing discourses and the elisions that occur when distinct analytical concepts—class, citizenship, poverty, place—are conflated into a moralizing shorthand (see, e.g., Hanley 2007; McKenzie 2015; Slater 2016b). However, the postwar tower block has become a cultural trope—a classed shorthand for urban life gone wrong—with an established place in media headlines, television drama, documentary, literature, art, and advertising² (see Figure 2). This trope is frequently called upon by politicians and public commentators to convey the societal risks of alienation. In January 2016, then Prime Minister David Cameron announced "an all-out assault on poverty and disadvantage" as a key goal of his second term in office. Setting out his agenda in a *Times* article, Cameron listed the problems limiting life chances in Britain—blocked opportunity, poor parenting, addiction, mental health issues—and linked these to postwar tower blocks, arguing: "There's one issue that brings together many of these social problems—and for me, epitomizes both the scale of the challenge we face and the nature of state failure over decades. It's our housing estates" (Shipman 2016). The article goes on to portray postwar housing estates as spaces that are "outside" society, depicting them as "cut-off, self-governing and divorced from the mainstream"—marginal spaces that pose a threat of social contamination to the wider population as problems are allowed to "fester" and "grow unseen."

Connecting architectural form and deviance in this way, while discounting radical changes



FIGURE 2: Footbridge on “decanted” Heygate Estate, South London (© Saffron Woodcraft, June 2014).

to the political economy of housing, Cameron’s words both perpetuate the stigmatizing discourses discussed above and consolidate the central claim of “tower-block failure” in Britain: that there exists a straightforward relation between high-rise form, social alienation, and crime. Cameron’s suggestion that high-rise estates are self-governing implies a systemic patterning of alterity, something comparable to a Durkheimian (1889) “*anomie*,” that poses a threat to wider society and must be contained. However, the postwar tower block is merely the latest iteration of a moralizing discourse that demonizes the urban poor and connects housing and spatial form to deviant behaviors. Victorian housing reformers generated their own “failure” discourse around the slums of London’s urban poor, which were described as plague-ridden moral swamps, whose narrow alleys enabled crime and encouraged criminals by eluding the

gaze of “civilized” society (Gilbert 2007; Wohl 2002). The notion that moral and physical conditions are aligned was sufficient justification for Victorian reformers to support slum demolitions and rehousing the urban poor in model dwellings designed to embody middle-class moralities (Gaskell 1887). Cameron’s estate renewal policy follows the same logic. His proposal to “tear down anything that stands in our way” reasons that remaking the physical environment will assimilate what Talal Asad (2004) calls the dangerous bodies and territories that exist at the physical and metaphorical margins of the state.

“Avoiding the mistakes of the past”

In April 2013, I began fieldwork observing the decision-making processes of the Chobham Manor development team as they sought to materialize the Olympic legacy vision. Early

conversations and meetings focused on exploring which aspects of imagining and building a new community mattered to different individuals, how community was conceptualized, and what influenced these ideas. A predominant concern—“getting it right” and “avoiding the mistakes of the past”—surfaced early in my first conversation with a community development officer from Chobham Manor’s housing association. Over the months that followed, the same phrase—“avoiding the mistakes of the past”—was spontaneously invoked on numerous occasions and in various fieldwork contexts: from discussions about materials, to plans and policies determining the relationship between public and private space, and the potentials for community gardening, apartment balconies, and satellite TV aerials, to support or disrupt the “making” of community. On each occasion, the speaker would discuss a particular design choice, community project, or potential investment in relation to the desire to “avoid the mistakes of the past,” yet offered no further detail about the mistakes being referred to. After observing this exchange several times, I began prompting the speakers to elaborate on what was meant by this phrase and its relevance to Chobham Manor’s emergent community. Speakers were often surprised when asked to clarify their intent, explaining that “avoiding the mistakes of the past” referred to the social failures associated with postwar tower block housing estates, specifically the lack of community and social alienation experienced by high-rise social housing tenants. These exchanges rarely focused on a specific case—a named housing estate or particular piece of research—but rather spoke to what was understood to be taken-for-granted knowledge that circulates in professional practice.

A close examination of these responses showed that while the phrase referred to the same problem—a “failure to generate cohesive communities,” as one respondent described it, or as another said, the “failure to create communities that thrive socially”—its causes were understood to be varied. Statements that, on

the surface, appeared to suggest people held the same views in fact expressed quite different interpretations and intentions. Individuals held varied opinions about whether architectural form, housing policy (tenancy allocations, estate management, tenants’ right to buy council housing), or the changing economics of social housing were to blame. In a conversation with a local politician about the legacy neighborhoods, he explained his use of the phrase “avoiding past mistakes” unequivocally referred to a specific set of social conditions associated with high-rise council housing—unemployment, welfare dependency, and antisocial behavior. However, it also became clear that his use of the shorthand contained assumptions about the success of specific policies, both past and present—such as the undesirability of mono-tenure estates and a preference to allocate housing to in-work families. Referring to a well-known tower block in East London, he said: “We don’t want to develop a new generation of sink estates with no-one employed on them . . . as an elected representative I have to make sure it [new development] doesn’t turn into a sink estate with a negative future.” During a meeting about community development, a housing manager used “avoiding mistakes of the past” as shorthand to refer to high-rise failure, but the phrase was intended to convey a set of problems associated with estate maintenance and support for residents to manage debt and uphold their tenancies. Conversations with the urban design team from one architecture practice unpacked “mistakes of the past” in relation to design that encourages or inhibits social interaction. In this sense, “avoiding the mistakes of the past” was a phrase used frequently by the team—in public and private meetings and passing conversation—to signal both the risks of failure and the potential for action.

In 2014, the LLDC published *An Action Plan for Building Community in a New Estate* (Blume and Zander 2014)—compiling examples of successful approaches to building a sense of community from Europe and North America. Produced as a resource for the organiza-

tions developing Chobham Manor and other legacy neighborhoods, the report addressed the question of how to avoid past mistakes and failures when building new neighborhoods, asking: “Why do ‘good’ social relations emerge in some urban neighborhoods and not others?” and “What enables a sense of community?” The LLDC’s report was one of several publications and industry events that took place around this time addressing the question of how to avoid “past failures” and bring insights and lessons to bear on contemporary planning, design, and placemaking practice (Berkeley Group 2012; JTP 2013; RSA 2014). These events played an important role in animating the “presence” and threat of failed communities among London’s networks of urban policy makers and built environment practitioners. By convening interested actors, sharing reports that were framed as new forms of knowledge, and encouraging dialogue about solutions, these events served to construct, as well as represent, the risks posed by “tower-block failure.” In this sense, the discussions about failure and prevention taking place among the Chobham Manor team were part of a wider discursive landscape, which sometimes intersected directly with the team’s work—if a report was formally brought into discussion—or otherwise provided a backdrop to placemaking practices, as research and insights from recent debates were circulated. Like the cases just described, the events and debates happening contemporaneously with the Olympic Park regeneration also used the phrase “avoiding the mistakes of the past” in ambiguous and fluid ways. The two examples that follow examine how different actors invest opposing meanings in the same claim to failure, and how this equivocality obscures radically different propositions about how to mitigate or redress those risks.

Making and remaking “failure”

In January 2010, the Young Foundation, an independent research institute, hosted an event at the House of Lords to launch *Future Commu-*

nities, a research collaboration with the government’s Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)³ to address the question of why some new communities succeed and others fail. Leading the discussion were Lord Victor Abelowale (a life peer with a long career in housing and homelessness services), Sir Bob Kerslake (then Chief Executive of the HCA), and Geoff Mulgan (then Chief Executive of the Young Foundation). Attending the event were housing managers, policy makers, and planners from central and local government, public agencies, housing associations, and housing advocacy groups. A working paper—“Never Again: Avoiding the Mistakes of the Past” (Bacon 2010)—set out the proposition for debate: at a time of acute housing need and newly imposed austerity measures, how can the next generation of large-scale house-building programs succeed where previous experiments with mass housing have failed? What can we learn from past mistakes? And how can these lessons be applied to future policy and practice?

Mulgan offered the audience a new way of thinking about failure. The problem, he argued, is not solely architectural but also intellectual; there is a gap in the knowledge accessible to built environment experts about how to design places that can be socially, as well as economically and environmentally, “successful.” Mulgan argued professional knowledge about how to plan, design, and construct high-quality and ecologically sustainable buildings is far in advance of knowledge about the complex social and behavioral interactions between dwellers and the places they inhabit—knowledge, he argued, that is siloed in academic domains. As a consequence, too much attention is paid to physical and economic infrastructure (transport, environmentally sustainable housing, local job creation), and too little afforded to understanding how planning can support the social and cultural life of places. The high public costs of failure—in terms of both public spending and life chances—could be avoided, he argued, by establishing cross-sector partnerships to transfer knowledge to new domains of practice.

The shorthand “avoiding the mistakes of the past” is also used by Nicholas Boys Smith, founder of Create Streets, a research institute that describes its purpose as “encouraging the creation of more urban homes with terraced streets rather than complex multi-storey buildings” (2013: 2). Mulgan and Boys Smith embody the poles of “failure” discourse. Mulgan, as former head of policy and director of strategy for the New Labour leaders Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, is one of the architects of New Labour’s policies. Boys Smith, on the other hand, co-created Create Streets with Policy Exchange, a center-right institution described by the *Telegraph* as “David Cameron’s favorite think tank” (Helm and Hope 2008), which is publicly critical of high-rise housing. Mulgan and Boys Smith deploy rhetorical strategies that make use of the dominant claims associated with tower-block failure to problematize urban development and to advocate specific solutions. One proposes that policy makers and built environment professionals make better use of available evidence; the other advocates the demolition of high-rise housing on the grounds that “multi-storey housing is more risky and makes people sadder, badder and lonelier” (Morton and Boys Smith 2013: 29).

Theorists of discourse and linguistics observe that language is performative in the sense that words are often intended to do much more than simply present a fact (Austin 1962, 1979; Foucault 1991). Making sense of discursive practices requires an understanding of where and how claims are situated in relation to existing knowledge, the contested terrain in which problems are formulated, and the context in which speech or text is communicated. Mikhail Bakhtin (1992) argues discourse is always bracketed by what has come before: prior associations and the meanings of specific words and phrases are deployed anew in relation to other works and voices, and can be recalled and reconfigured in novel ways to construct new claims. Meaning and intent can become ambiguous and difficult to locate, as words and phrases acquire new, nonobvious significances and operate as

“shorthand” for a set of values, knowledge, and organizing principles within a particular group. The instances described here illustrate how the phrase “avoiding the mistakes of the past” is a discursive shorthand used by practitioners and policy makers engaged in the production of urban space in London. In a dialogic sense, the aesthetic figure of the failed high-rise housing estate has been reworked in a new political context as the symbolic opposite of the sustainable community, which provides a structure for the effective governance of bodies and places.

Critics of postwar high-rise housing estates argue tower blocks are dehumanizing and disrupt the “natural” patterns of everyday movement and social interaction that build the familiarity, trust, and cooperation between neighbors that is essential for a sense of community to emerge (see Campkin 2013 for discussion of literature by Coleman 1985; Newman 1973). This narrative is central to mainstream cultural and political representations of the postwar high-rise tower block as a site of social dysfunction, in which architectural scale and form play a critical part in social alienation. Returning to the *Guardian* article discussed earlier, Jenkins (2017) reiterates this claim by juxtaposing the antisocial effects of tower block architecture with the pro-social spatial order of the neighborhood and, in so doing, implying there are both a “right” way for modern urban citizens to live alongside each other and “proper” ways to organize urban space. Anthropological theories of architecture challenge such claims to environmental determinism, arguing that people, buildings, and landscapes are mutually constitutive (Buchli 2013; Yaneva 2012), and empirical accounts exploring belonging, sociality, home, and self-making, heritage, and identity in the kind of postwar high-rises discussed here challenge dominant representations of alienation and dysfunction (Baxter 2017; Baxter and Brickell 2014; Melhuish 2005). However, it is the association between the postwar high-rise and “complete, cataclysmic” failure (Forty 1995: 26) that dominates the public and political imagination.

Conclusion: Community as governance

Community is considered by some scholars as an outdated and unproductive concept (Amit 2012: 3), but it has undergone an ideological reinvention in British politics since the late 1990s—reaching its peak under New Labour (Raco 2007b)—to become one of the central organizing principles of government policy. New Labour’s reimagining of community envisioned the revitalization of social and civic life as part of a wider urban renewal agenda targeting declining cities. The Aylesbury Estate, a postwar high-rise estate in South London, was the location for Tony Blair’s inaugural speech as prime minister, in which he promised “no more no-hope areas” (BBC 1997) in New Labour’s Britain and unveiled a vision for a new “bargain” between government and citizens based on an ethic of mutual responsibility.

Drawing heavily on a branch of Communitarian philosophy (Prideaux 2002), New Labour policies were infused with ideas about the significance of civic values, moral responsibility, and the “local” as the “key scale of meaningful human interaction” (Imrie and Raco 2003: 5). An expanded model of social capital was embraced: shifting from Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) theorization of cultural capital as a means of maintaining social status and structural inequalities, to framing social capital as a means to realize the potential of disadvantaged groups by expanding their networks and connections to power (Baron 2004). Numerous policy programs were initiated to build local social capital as part of a wider vision of a new settlement between citizens and the state that would transfer of responsibilities from government to communities (Rodger 2000). Two initiatives have had far-reaching implications for urban neighborhoods. First is the Mixed Communities Initiative (MCI)—launched to transform deprived, mono-tenure, mainly inner-city housing estates by changing the housing stock (primarily through demolition and regeneration) to attract new populations (Lupton and Fuller 2009). The

MCI was informed by “area effects theory,” or the claim that day-to-day coexistence of people from different backgrounds can increase social interaction, increasing the likelihood low-income households have exposure to “more advantaged and aspirational social networks” (Silverman et al. 2005: 9). Second is the “active citizenship agenda,” which sought to mobilize individuals through local volunteering and democratic participation to build strong social networks at the neighborhood level that would encourage community self-help (Seyfang 2003).

New Labour’s sustainable communities policy agenda has received widespread criticism from scholars who have questioned the validity of area effects theory (Lupton 2008), arguing the mixed communities principle is a form of state-led gentrification that problematizes and displaces low-income, primarily working-class households (Lees 2008; O’Hanlon and Hamnett 2009; Raco 2007a; Slater 2016a). However, these policies established a normative model of active citizenship and mixed, self-organizing communities that successive governments have adopted and institutionalized in planning policy (DCLG 2012; Mayor of London 2011; UK Parliament 2011). Analyzed on these terms, “community” as a political ideology and policy goal is not merely a vehicle for revitalizing urban neighborhoods or devolving power. “Community” is a governance framework that defines the normative urban subject through the performance of specific citizenship practices—self-organization, civic participation, volunteering and participation in local decision-making—which are measured, monitored, and used as a proxy for the health of society (Woodcraft 2019). Furthermore, the extent of state-led privatization of housing, infrastructure, and public space in Britain has brought new non-state actors into processes of urban place governance in ways that are often neither immediately obvious or transparent.

The accounts in this article illustrate how “tower block failure” is discursively invoked to carry forward, in both time and space, the threats of social alienation and exclusion that

undermine this normative ideal. In this sense, the aesthetic figure of the failed high-rise can be understood as apotropaic: a ritual invocation made to ward off misfortune. However, warning is only one half of the purpose it fulfills: an essential element of this entreaty is to legitimize actions in the present that will mitigate future failures. The accounts discussed here invariably followed this pattern: invocations of “past mistakes” to be avoided were juxtaposed with interventions, either proposed or in operation, to minimize risks or amplify community-building potentials. These preventative or productive interventions were designed, in the case of the former, to minimize the possibility of friction between residents that could undermine an emergent sense of community: for example, attention to the design and governance of communal and semipublic spaces (bike stores, rubbish bins, balconies) that if left unchecked cause complaints and irritation, and indicate the neighborhood is not cared for; and, in the case of the latter, attention to social practices that build the conditions required for normative communities to flourish—a community garden, time banking, small grants for local projects, and plans for a resident-led neighborhood association. These interventions were framed as preemptive or precautionary—speculative investments made in the present to prevent future harms and, specifically, to avert the high social costs and associated financial implications of failing to create and sustain normative subjects and governable places. In this sense, “tower block failure” is entangled with an economy of risk management that implicates non-state actors in state of governance in ways that far exceed neoliberal models of privatized public service delivery. Attention to the terms on which failure and success are constructed in relation to a new, model neighborhood in Olympic Park illuminate how the failed high-rise as an aesthetic figure is reconfigured and implicated in political and ethical framings of citizenship and community, which refract wider questions about the nonobvious forms of power at work in the neoliberal city.

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Notes

1. Affordable housing is defined in housing policy for London as housing to rent or to purchase through shared ownership schemes, which is provided to eligible households whose needs are not met by the market (Mayor of London 2016).

Eligibility is determined by local incomes. In practice, affordable housing policy includes three tenure types that are provided mainly by local authorities or registered social housing providers: social housing for low-income households where rent is set at target levels related to median local income; affordable rented housing where rent levels are no higher than 80 percent of local market rents; and intermediate housing for rent or sale through shared ownership or equity loans, at a cost above social and affordable rent but below market rates.

2. See, e.g., J. G. Ballard's (1975) novel *High Rise* (translated to cinema in 2016); Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), filmed at the Thamesmead Estate in South East London; and the documentaries *The Great Estate: The Rise and Fall of the Council House* (dir. Chris Wilson, 2011) and *Dispossession: The Great Social Housing Swindle* (dir. Paul Sng, 2017); Channel 4 received harsh criticism for the dystopian advertising it filmed on the Aylesbury Estate in 2004.
3. The HCA was the government agency responsible for investing in homes and business premises and regulating social housing providers in England from 2008 to 2018. The HCA was renamed Homes England in January 2018.

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