

THE CONVERSATION

Demolishing iconic tower blocks is an attack on whole idea of social housing

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Down they came. Glasgow's Red Road Flats have (mostly) been demolished, having dominated the north-eastern skyline of the city for half a century. Following the destruction of the first two blocks in 2012, the passing of the remaining six is a moment where the whole country should take stock.

The flats are among the more memorable of the post-war public sector housing developments in the UK, perhaps the most iconic of all. Where in the 1960s they represented for politicians a new Glasgow, the tallest public-sector housing blocks in Europe at the time, they soon came to symbolise the failures of modern urbanism.

They became a byword for urban decline, deprivation and unpopular housing, emblematic of the failure in social housing and even part of a wider attack on the welfare state. Look no further than the plan to demolish these tower blocks as part of the opening ceremony of last year's Commonwealth Games, until it was quickly overturned by widespread protests.

The demolition mission

Red Road's demise is the latest in a wave of social housing demolitions both in Glasgow and across the UK over the past decade or so. They have become spectacle, creative destruction as entertainment, played out in the media and in countless YouTube clips. Once again we are being asked to join together to celebrate the removal of a blighted and failed urban past, and of course a **bright new urban future**.

This reflects a widely held antipathy to social housing and its tenants in our culture. Living in these places **has been** positioned as a "marker of personal failure". The demolitions represent a view that the state cannot provide – should not provide – housing for rent. These housing developments were born of the Keynesian-Beveridgean welfare state, which many of different political persuasions is best confined to the past. For many, the demolition of the Red Roads is used as an argument that social housing doesn't work across the UK.

It is time **another story** was told here. Other aspects of urban life are being demolished along with these high-rises. The Red Road Flats represent important elements of Glasgow's working-class folklore – as did life in "the schemes" more generally. Without wishing to deny the poor quality of the flats, they were once **sought-after housing** – a tenancy was seen as a route out of the appalling slums that remained in huge tracts of Glasgow in the 1960s and early 1970s. Communities were forged, new relationships and ways of life were established. This helps to explain why life in the Red Road Flats has been captured in social histories, a **novel** and of course a **film**.

All the narratives that have portrayed flats like these as dangerous ghettos, concrete jungles, ultimately doomed to failure, overlook the fact that they emerged in Glasgow in a time of large-scale industrial decline. This failure to locate these schemes in the wider social, economic and political context is highly political.

It has made it possible to focus on the allegedly problematic lifestyles and cultures of their residents, fuelling demonisation and stigma along the way. When we looked at the east end of Glasgow in a **study** last year, we found a very different reality. We found residents who were proud of their history, their homes and heritage, even while the processes of urban change were increasing their **feelings of insecurity**.

Lies, damned lies and social housing

In truth, refurbishment and investment in previous years could have saved blocks like Red Road for future use. If there was a failure in social housing, it was never inevitable. Neither were the slums of Glasgow's post-1945 housing crisis from which the flats emerged inevitable, nor their clearance, which moved huge numbers across the city and beyond, breaking up long-established communities, disrupting a shared sense of the past.

The same is true of the current housing crisis in many parts of the UK. The systematic running down of social housing over successive decades reflects the classed politics of housing. Where once we saw housing as a social need, now it as an investment, just like the land upon which it is built.

Really there is nothing utopian about providing good quality, affordable housing for all. We are facing a future of more and more tenants being forced into private renting and housing insecurity. Let's not let the demolition of the Red Road Flats represent the annihilation of

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social housing in the UK. Let's use it as impetus for a rethink, a fresh start, a future truly worth looking forward to.



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