The urban injustices of New Labour’s ‘new urban renewal’: the case of the Aylesbury Estate in London

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‘Regeneration was always ever a gentrification strategy, and we knew it. We knew it from Blair’s 1997 launch of New Labour’s regeneration policy from the stigmatised Aylesbury Estate in London where the desperate “70s class-neutral language of...regeneration was revived in the 2000s – a ... friendly cover for class cleansing in the urban landscape’ (Neil Smith, 2011, on Owen Hatherley’s *Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*).
The Aylesbury Estate built on slum cleared land 1967-1977
The Aylesbury Estate today
Under New Labour the council estate played a symbolic and ideological role as a signifier of a spatially concentrated, dysfunctional underclass.

‘Over the last two decades the gap between these worst estates and the rest of the country has grown....It shames us as a nation, it wastes lives and we all have to pay the costs of dependency and social division’ (Blair in SEU, 1998:1).

As Levitas (1998) and Watt and Jacobs (2000) have argued their ideas were dominated by a moral underclass perspective even if it came out as a social integrationist one.
New Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair on the Aylesbury 1997

made an infamous speech highlighting Aylesbury Estate’s residents as Britain’s ‘poorest’ and the ‘forgotten’, many of whom ‘play no formal role in the economy and were dependent on benefits’. The Aylesbury was subsequently given New Deal for Communities (NDC) status.
Tenants vote for council refurbishment

The NDC was given £56.2m in order to lever in a further £400m as part of its proposed stock transfer from council to housing association tenure. But in December 2001 the local community voted in a local referendum against the stock transfer of the Aylesbury from Southwark Council. 73% voted to keep the whole estate council (76% of the estate voted).

‘Over 70% voted to refurbish, because people didn’t want to move. So I’m thinking if it was that bad, everybody would have said – lets’ go, let’s get rid of it. People, including myself, voted to make it better. Instead of moving us out, they could have repaired it. It’s been done on other estates...That’s what people wanted. It was turned down. What people wanted they didn’t agree...’ (interview Head of a TRA, 2011).
The grammar of the ‘sink estate’

‘...It matters little that the discourses of demonization that have mushroomed about them often have only tenuous connection to the reality of everyday life in them’ (Wacquant, 1999:1644).

From The Times 2008:
‘...the infamous Aylesbury estate, has had a bloody recent history. It was here, last Boxing Day, that a 20-year-old Nigerian-born asylum-seeker ...was shot dead after being chased through the estate. His body lay undiscovered for 26 hours in a communal garden.

Here, too, in late 2005 an 18-year-old pastor's daughter...was pulled from a car and stabbed repeatedly by a teenage Angolan immigrant for failing to show him respect’.

From The Daily Mail 2008:
‘To walk around the sprawling landscape of the Aylesbury estate is like visiting hell's waiting room’.
The Aylesbury on primetime tv

For the Channel 4 logo using the Aylesbury see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IfOLvzoww

The Bill being filmed on the Aylesbury
Residents are clear that to classify the Aylesbury as a ‘sink estate was/is wrong

‘The best example was many years ago when the regeneration first started, was having politicians coming through the estate. We just walked them through the estate and they said where are all the youth hanging on the corner, where’s all your trouble. I said it isn’t here!’ (interview A, 2011).

‘I wrote back and said it’s not a hell hole to live in. There’s people that live here’ ... ‘don’t just keep telling us we live in shit and that we’ve got drugs, crime, prostitution and everything around us when we haven’t....that really, really angers me’ (interview B, 2011).
Residents faced with ‘false choice’

If they rejected the regeneration ‘deal’ they would continue to live on an estate that needs upgrading and repair (but would be very unlikely to get it)

or

If they accepted the deal (which actually they didn’t!) they could have a newly built neighbourhood in which they may not even get a chance to live and would be totally change

The contrast between disinvested local authority stock in London and the highly valuable land it sits on has created a ‘state-induced rent gap’ with massive capital accumulation potential.
The grammar of consensus: the Aylesbury project has been hailed as a prototype in tenant-led democracy

‘Wholehearted community engagement has been at the heart of the AAP process from the outset and residents have been integral in shaping the plan...We are confident that the extensive consultation over the last four years has resulted in an AAP which reflects the aspirations of the local community’ (Revitalise: Aylesbury Area Action Plan, Southwark Council, 2010).

‘They’re telling you you would be listened to.... But it’s just a bit of show because they don’t really take what you said. They make up their minds and they’re just saying that so that it looks good’ (interview Head of a TRA, 2011).
Social mix became the discursive vehicle with which to sell the plan to both the public and the residents

‘A neighbourhood where there is a mix of tenures, incomes, ages and household types. Mixed communities help to overcome the problems associated with areas of deprivation such as reduced local business activity, limited local jobs and employment ambitions, downward pressures on school quality, high levels of crime and disorder, and health inequalities’ (Aylesbury AAP - Preferred Options Report, Southwark Council).

‘The people who are going to be living here in the future, which excludes all of us who have been kicked out as part of the scheme, will be better educated no doubt, and will be wealthier’ (interview D, 2011).
The tenants can see through the council concealing exclusionary sentiments in the progressive clothing of social mix

‘I don’t think they were really trying to sell the social mix...behind closed doors I think what they probably say is that they’ll attract new businesses and new people. Obviously guys with the money...So there’s a lot of undertone to it, which implies what’s going to happen. But nobody is actually saying that we’re going to bring people from the City to come and live with you...’ (interview TO representative, 2011).
The (then) Director of Regeneration in Southwark - Fred Manson:

‘We’re trying to move people from a benefit-dependency culture to an enterprise culture. If you have 25 to 30 per cent of the population in need, things can still work reasonably well. But above 30 per cent it becomes pathological’.
Gentrification and Displacement

In October 2007 the first buildings were demolished. ‘...from the very first day that the demolition was announced, the social bond was affected, because people knew that ultimately within the next few years, they wouldn’t be seeing each other on a daily basis again. They wouldn’t be part of the same community. I’ve got a friend of mine – Terry - he could only afford to move out of the area with what the council was offering him and ended up moving into a home somewhere just outside Sidcup. Terry’s probably in his late 50s and he lives with his wife. He’s lived here all his life. He’s got people that would see him on a daily basis and his family lives here in the area. He’s now living there isolated just outside Sidcup having broken all of his social ties, he’s now suffering from severe depression...It’s not easy to build new social ties, especially the older you are...I mean the number of people I heard who’ve passed away as a result of having to move... for me, it’s genocide’ (interview, D, 2011).
Community buy in a Con?

New Labour advocated that local communities should play a larger role in urban regeneration partnerships:

‘Unless the community is fully engaged in shaping and delivering regeneration, even the best plans on paper will fail to deliver in practice’ (Tony Blair in SEU, 2000:5).

*The Aylesbury Tenants and Leaseholders First* is calling for an independent inquiry into the manipulation of democracy (the CONsultation process):

- calling for the suspension of activities of the Aylesbury NDC and its successor The Creation Trust, and asserting that ‘the whole estate demolition-privatisation strategy is completely unrealistic in the new and profound financial crisis’.
The Aylesbury Tenants and Leaseholders First are calling for the construction of a new image of the Aylesbury

‘Our lived experience of crime on the estate does not match the myth and this is borne out by statistics. We need to counter these pernicious negative stereotypes. By listing and emphasising the many positive features of our homes that we enjoy, and celebrating our diverse community, we strengthen our bargaining position’.

‘We believe that the reasons for wanting total demolition of the Aylesbury were political, not structural. We question the wisdom of any council selling off its property assets – rather they should be enhancing them with investment and the best estate management. There should be whole-sale block-by-block re-evaluation of structural soundness and financial viability of refurbishment’ (The Aylesbury Tenants and Leaseholders First, http://aylesburytenantsfirst.org.uk/).

Opposition to state-led gentrification in London is intertwined with ‘aims to protect or preserve gains made under the Keynesian managerial state’ (Watt, 2009).
The MCI plans for the Aylesbury fold

June 2010 it lost £20 million of Homes and Community Agency (HCA) money.

There is optimism now but also new fear:
‘The Aylesbury has been set back now as well because it lost the HDA funding that it’d been allocated. So there is a bit of optimism there and there is now a fight on to try and swing it round and force the council to keep the estate and to maintain it and refurbish it. But I’m worried it will be swung round the other way. And instead of regenerating or building with HDA funds, they’ll just hand the land over to a private developer ...’ (interview D, 2011).
Conclusion:
the ‘naked class politics of austerity’

June 2011 Boris Johnson dropped Ken Livingstone’s affordable/social housing quota for large redeveloped sites in London, leaving it up to boroughs to decide.

Developers can now pay boroughs instead of having to build affordable/social housing in redevelopments.

It seems that the social experiment of using planning laws to mix communities across London is slowly being abandoned.