SOCIETAL NEGATIVE STIGMAS AND PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL HOUSING; AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE RESIDENTS OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Owais Qazi

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This dissertation has 5 chapters outlining the issue

Heygate Estate

INTRODUCTION:
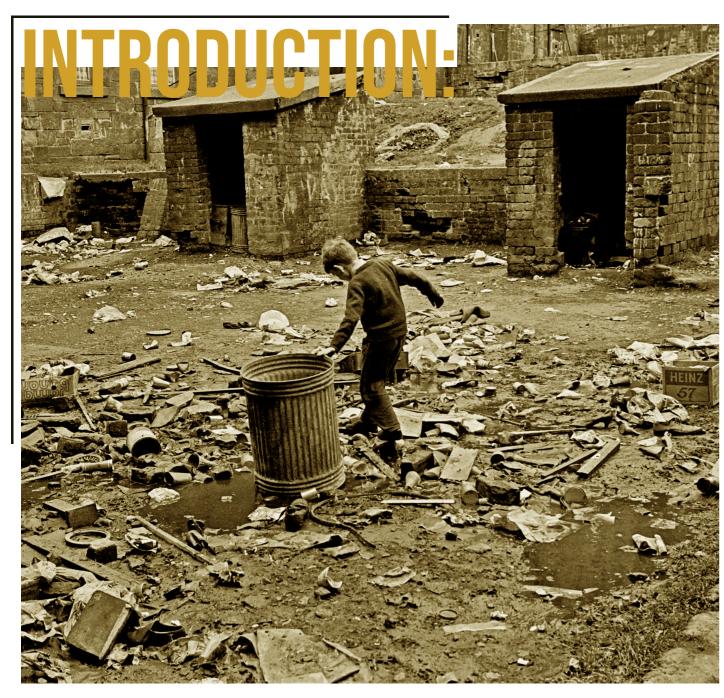

Figure 1: Showing Britain's slum housing crisis (The Guardian, 2021:online)

The experiences and perceptions of social housing in the UK will be examined from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century. An overall view of social housing including the history, past examples, housing schemes, alternative arguments, cities, and geographical locations will be taken into consideration to determine how housing residents have been affected. The evidence supporting the poor treatment of residents will illustrate how the government has given extremely little to no support through policies and housing acts, which has led to several social and financial issues. A greater comprehension of how media and politicians influence the general public will be explored through the use of their platforms to project their views (by extensive research, personal interviews, ongoing improvements, and protests that will help them voice their issues and concerns) onto the wider public which has led to negative stigmas, attitudes and perceptions being instilled about social housing community to this day. Now, the 'council estate' and the 'low-income neighbourhood' have a bad image surrounding them, one that is hard to remove or change. Building a new image is difficult because the demolitions caused additional problems for residents, and they were forcefully displaced across the country which led to unemployment and social exclusion. Their lack of ability to access the usual facilities caused many complications regarding the ongoing housing crisis, waiting lists, and helping residents gain their right to be a part of society.

The effects of World War I from 28th July 1914 to 11th November 1918, and the Blitz era of World War II from 7th September 1940 to 11th May 1941 Had significant impacts on housing and the wider urban environment in Britain. During World War II, Nazi Germany attacked Britain with uncountable bombs. For eight months, the Luftwaffe bombarded London and other cities across the country. This resulted in Britain having suffered great industrial damage which led to major problems including the mass demolition of overcrowded slums. Many areas at this time were industrial, which meant that there were a lot of factories, ports and docks that brought in goods and resources from abroad.
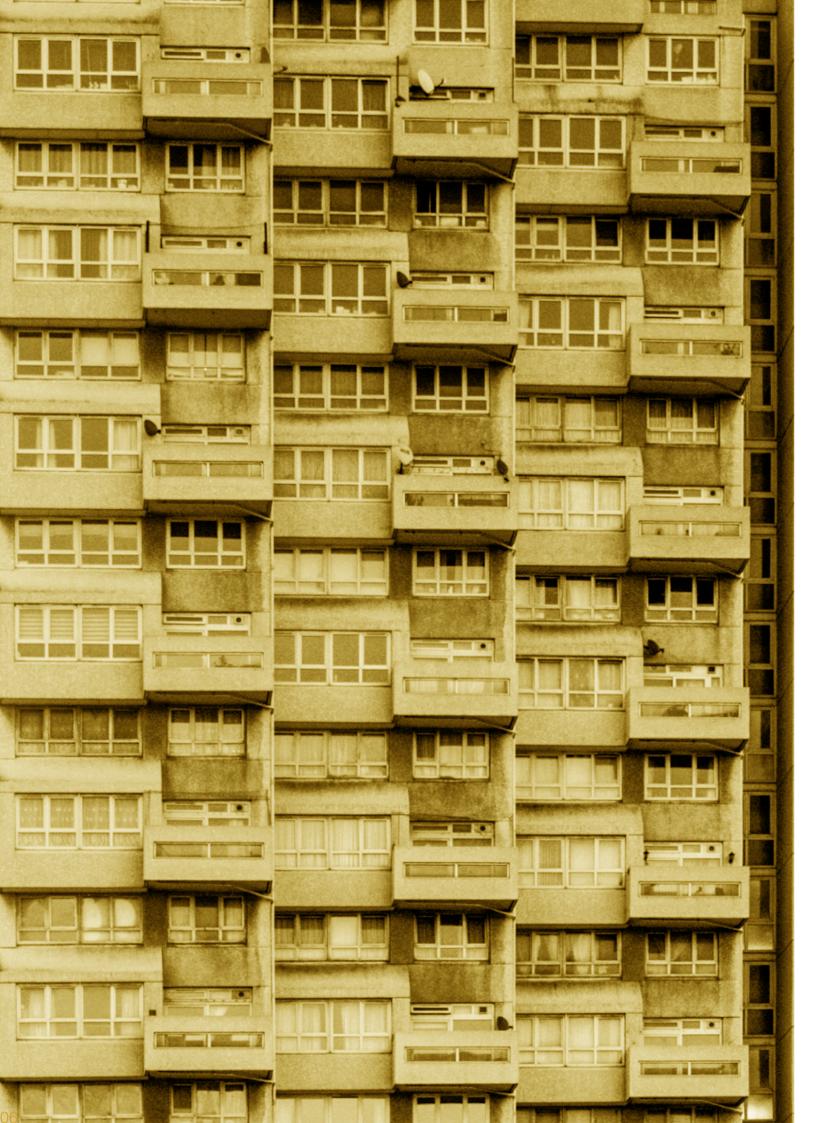

Figure 2: Showing a Heinkel He 111 bomber over the Surrey Commercial Docks in South London and Wapping and the Isle of Dogs in the East End of London on 7 September 1940 (Wikipedia, 2023:online)

Figure 3: Showing the peak of the baby boom during the post war period (BBC, 2012:online)

Due to this fact, these areas were extremely vital for Britain's survival during the war and Germany would target them by destroying these regions. Since there were substantial employment opportunities, the majority of employees were working class and lived there despite them being the most affected. After World War II, Britain faced a national crisis, and the top priority was to focus on the problems that had resulted from this war. If the country was going to be rebuilt socially and economically, it was crucial to address the problem regarding the high demand of social housing. One of the many solutions for the homeless, working class, soldiers, sailors, and airmen was to return to normal life with a place to live and to secure a job. This was possible with the 'homes fit for heroes' scheme that gifted these individuals with social housing. Another reason why many young couples and bigger families moved to social housing was due to the baby boom that peaked in Britain in 1946, followed by a second boom that peaked in 1964.

O1 OVERALL VIEW

The experiences and perceptions of social housing in the UK will be examined from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century. An overall view of social housing including the history, past examples, housing schemes, alternative arguments, cities, and geographical locations will be taken into consideration to determine how housing residents have been affected. The evidence supporting the poor treatment of residents will illustrate how the government has given extremely little to no support through policies and housing acts, which has led to several social and financial issues. A greater comprehension of how media and politicians influence the general public will be explored through the use of their platforms to project their views (by extensive research, personal interviews, ongoing improvements, and protests that will help them voice their issues and concerns) onto the wider public which has led to negative stigmas, attitudes and perceptions being instilled about social housing community to this day. Now, the 'council estate' and the 'low-income neighbourhood' have a bad image surrounding them, one that is hard to remove or change. Building a new image is difficult because the demolitions caused additional problems for residents, and they were forcefully displaced across the country which led to unemployment and social exclusion. Their lack of ability to access the usual facilities caused many complications regarding the ongoing housing crisis, waiting lists, and helping residents gain their right to be a part of society.

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CASE STUDIES:

02

In the course of this chapter, we will look at the following case examples: Park Hill, Heygate and Chelmsley Wood estates. These are some examples that will provide a better understanding of why these particular estates failed many designs and caused financial and social issues.

PARK HILL ESTATE

Ivor Smith, Jack Lynn (1957)

Figure 4: Dave Hudson, Park Hill Estate West block, built 1961 (Municipal Dreams, 2013:online)

Figure 4 shows the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield, with 4-13 story high housing blocks built on a 400-acre piece of green land. The government thought it was a perfect opportunity to build and experiment at a large scale between the time period of 1954 and 1961, and in 1998 it was set as grade II listed building status. As a pioneer of modern architecture, Le Corbusier was one of the architects responsible for this housing project; he influenced it to become fashionable in the 1960s. (Monclus; Diez Medina: 2016) It was arguably **'One of the most celebrated public housing schemes of the post-war period.'** And **'One of the first paradigmatic episodes to show the gap between expectations and realisation.'** As the estate met the housing demands and provided better living conditions for low-income families and opportunities to advance in life, many families saw themselves living within the golden era of social housing. They had the opportunity to seek employment and start a family. Materials were limited after World War II; bricks, reinforced concrete, board-marked concrete, and glass were among the few materials available. This led to architects not having much of an option when selecting materials for the project. These supplies were chosen because local factories could produce these materials at a low cost in large quantities (this had many consequences later on). In an attempt to save money and to accommodate to as many families as possible in such confined spaces, countless major structural problems appeared, such as the **'Public spaces belonging to nobody soon turned into neglected and desolated corridors.'** And **'Park Hill became the ghetto of a suppressed underclass.'** (Monclus J Diez Medina C 2016). It is clear from the example of how a poor design can lead to residents and families feeling like prisoners in their own homes, as this resulted in poor architecture, lack of facilities, little green space for children and parents, and no activity system put in place to keep residents engaged because the government did not provide the funding to keep the estate running and maintained.

Another example would be, **'Since the end of the 1950s modernism became indelibly associated with social housing and with being the dwellings of those who had no choice.'**

(Monclus J Diez Medina C 2016). It is obvious from the usage of 'no choice' that there was a lack of free will and those from low-income working-class backgrounds were obligated to live in horrendous living conditions.

Life in Park Hill was glamorous at first, but over time it deteriorated because of a lack of funding and very little maintenance. Thus, making the community become increasingly dissatisfied which resulted in an increase of numerous social crimes including vandalism, alcoholism, knife crime, and gun crime. Families lived in constant fear, and children were particularly unsafe when they left. Simply put, the Park Hill Estate was a housing disaster, and if funding and appropriate materials had been maintained, and close attention was paid to the resident's needs, the results of this estate might not have been so catastrophic. This would have provided an improved level of living standards as many families and residents would have benefited from this.

Upon deeper exploration of these case studies, we found that the living standards had plummeted over time due to lack of funding from the government and no regular maintenance, which contributed to their catastrophic failure. There was, however, a golden era for many families during the housing boom of the 1960s and post-war periods, when various social blocks and council estates had functioning bathrooms and kitchens, and larger living spaces, which met the requirements and criteria for a high standard of living. However, different architects in different decades attempted to change things to become more exclusive over time. This was by limiting certain things, such as design layout, minimising green space, making cuts on facilities residence, and cutting corners on materials. This led to a knock-on effect that had many consequences including design mistakes, respiratory illnesses, allergies, and social issues that allowed the media and politicians to stigmatise residents, creating bad images of the neighbourhoods.

CHELMSLEY WOOD ESTATE

Birmingham, by Birmingham City Council Architects (1960-Present)

Figure 5: Chelmsley Wood Estate showing an aerial view of the whole estate when it was first opened in 1960 (BirminghamLive, 2014:online)

The Chelmsley Wood Estate in Birmingham, constructed by Birmingham City Council Architects In 1960, was built to house many young couples who needed a place to live. It had all the facilities provided with easy access to work, shopping, and essential needs. However, a personal account of the shocking living conditions and the harsh reality of living is evident in the Chelmsley Wood estate (Birmingham). As seen in Estates: an intimate history (2017) by Lynsey Hanley, these mass-produced social blocks were located on the outskirts of the city. The segregation between the working classes was evident, as the upper-class did not want to mix or be seen with the poor and middle classes, which displayed the negative image and stigma that the local government and councils had to deal with at the time. Nevertheless, this had a huge impact on local residents and low-income families, as they were essentially cut off from society and limited in their access to many services and employment opportunities. They had no choice but to live there despite this, due to many factors such as: families coming from low-income backgrounds, shortage of housing, and being forced to live there by the local council because they were vulnerable and had fewer options.

Hanley saying to 'Live in a **society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter.'** And '**Prickle the edges of every British town.'** (Hanley: 2012:5) implies that the physical placement of these social blocks reflects the unfortunate truth that the estate was completely blocked off from society, preventing many families and residents from using the proper facilities to truly improve their lives. On the other hand, Hanley does suggest that various residents were content to be living on the estate as they came from overcrowded slums with no proper facilities and had no complaints regarding the estates living conditions. For example, she spoke about her grandmothers' experience living within these blocks, explaining that '**My nan has nothing but wonderful things to say about the wood, her home and the local council, but that probably has something to do with the fact that she grew up in a falling-down house.'** (Hanley: 2012:4) According to Hanley's grandma, the estate was a good choice for her because she grew up in an overcrowded slum that was falling apart, with poor sanitation and little space to do activities. This estate was the first to house countless families who came from nothing and moved here in the wake of the baby boom. Young couples had to have their own space and privacy as they could not live with their parents in crowded two-up, two-down house, and they could not afford to buy their own.

Another reason these social blocks were created was due to the bombings of World War II. Overcrowding and poor sanitation were prevalent in the post-war inner cities of Birmingham, which had major impacts on many working-class families who were left homeless or living in slums that were falling apart. Many families saw this as a golden opportunity to move to these newly built estates that had all the facilities provided such as a shopping Centre, primary and secondary schools, a pub and much more. It also had all the amenities that they needed, such as a working kitchen and bathroom. As families settled in, they developed a close-knit sense of community. However, problems started arising for the residents when the government stopped funding (resulting in no regular maintenance) which developed degrading living conditions that affected many families due to minor design flaws in the space layout of each flat. This then led to cramped and confined spaces, which most likely restricted mobility for disabled and elderly residents and caused even more problems. Diseases such as respiratory illnesses and allergies from pipe leaks, legionnaires disease, along with mould infestation and lack of air ventilation affected these flats. Other than this, the estate created many social issues for the residents living there such as 'Vandalism, alcohol addiction, drugs and street crime', (which increased dramatically over time due to easy access of drugs and alcohol from shops to drug dealers).

Certain resident's behaviours and attitudes changed negatively due to the negative stigmatisation of the media. This created a negative image of the neighbourhood and the estate which portrayed the idea that it was a disastrous embarrassment to British architecture and implied that the council had every right to regenerate these blocks to allow private developers to build. This was so that they would be able to house wealthier families who were able to pay the rent charges, which is another example of how cities can negatively affect those in social housing and how image building is the only way forward to rid themselves of the bad perceptions that were left behind.

Figure 6: A mixture of houses and tower blocks will provide accommodation for many in the new housing estate of Chelmsley Wood (BirminghamLive, 2014:online)

HEYGATE ESTATE
Elephant & Castle, Lambeth (1960-2020)

The Heygate Estate, Elephant & Castle and London is examined in the book 'The Heygate: Community Life in an Inner-City Estate' by Michael Romyn (2016) Which mentions that the Heygate estate failed as a housing project and the residents of Heygate underwent decades of neglect and isolation. However, it clearly demonstrated the constant fear the residents felt, indicating that this was the harsh reality of being a resident on the estate. **'They were required to carry out a nightly patrol of the estate.'** (Romyn 2016) portrays that residents of this area were enclosed like prisoners within their own homes. They felt as though they were under constant observation but also needed safety patrol to feel safe in their homes. Heygate was simply a failed housing scheme amongst many others. It was being gentrified by the private sector, which resulted in the removal of the remaining families forcibly with little notice. This was because the new fully developed flats would house wealthy families who were able to afford the rent.

As a result of poor maintenance and underfunding, social housing in the city did not last long, the word **'vulnerable'** conjures up a sense of feeling unsafe and residents were easily attacked from alcoholics and drug addicts and illustrates the harsh reality of living on this estate. There was a **'deck-system'** that had **'Elevated pathways- twenty feet up in some cases.'** This system increased the difficulty of accessibility, putting the resident's life at risk. This caused numerous problems throughout the estate for the elderly, mothers with prams and disabled residents who struggled to get by using this system. This was a network of concrete ramps, stairwells, and bridges meant to make the site more accessible for the handicapped but resulted in the opposite due to it being **'Hazardous when covered in ice. The deck system routes could also be impractical.'** (Romyn 2016) This shows the damage these networks could cause, forcing residents to stop using it completely. It springs up the question of whether architects

purposely designed this to cause more problems and failed to take into consideration that some residents have a prominent physical disability and needed easy access around the estate. Considering these low-income residents would not be living in these blocks permanently, it was evident that these deck systems were designed inadequately. There was also the possibility that it could have been an experiment that was set by the government, which was intended to fail, while investigating how low-income families were residing within these poor living conditions. This had many social and financial consequences and there were numerous structural and social problems with these social blocks over time. As a result, these blocks were becoming more of a problem than a solution thus forcing families out of their homes. They were sent to the outskirts of the city rather than having their needs addressed by the local council, which could have produced a positive outcome for both parties.

Figure 7: Heygate Estate looking east from Claydon block 1976 (Source: JSTOR, 2016:online)

SOCIAL HOUSING RESIDENTS AFFECTED BY PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES, AND STIGMAS

03

This chapter will be looking at how residents of social housing are stigmatised and degraded by the media, politicians, and the general public. Also, these 'People who are stigmatised have opportunities to tell others about their lives and explain how the stigmatising actions have affected them.' (Infontd, 2022). Turner claims that larger estates are the most vulnerable as it shows that the media is continually 'Shifting the focus to stigma from places to people.' (Inside housing 2018, Alex Turner). This demonstrates that larger estates, such as Heygate, will always repetitively be criticised by the media, but to create more difficulties, they shift from one thing to another, leaving residents and families defenceless and without a voice or platform to fight back. This shows the harsh reality that politicians and the media do not care about the residents that live in social housing as they are seen as a forgotten identity of society. However, once an estate is demolished, the stigmas and perceptions persist because of negative media coverage that constantly influences the public and serve as a constant reminder of what it once was, even if they have not been visited. This portrays a negative image on the neighbourhood for many years to come that will be impossible to get rid of. To illustrate this, 'large-scale demolition that took place.' And 'Yet, the stereotypes persist.' (Inside housing 2018, Alex Turner). The evidence clearly indicates how words and the actions of people who are in power can heavily impact a group of residents and families such as the Heygate Estate in chapter 2. This shows how negative stigmas, attitudes and perceptions can affect residents mentally and physically.

Secondly, it focuses on a bigger scale of concerns involving larger estates, such as the Chelmsley Wood Estate in chapter 2, which had such high expectations, resulting in constant disappointment and a lot of media attention over time, making it a failed case of British architecture. For example, 'A lack of knowledge of the area.' And 'On top of that, a stigma.' (Wassenberg, 2004) suggests that larger estates' sole purpose was to house as many residents and families as possible at the time, when there was a housing shortage, but this led to stigmas developing as their distinct role was to exacerbate the problems that already existed. Making the entire situation even worse, this creates a long-term problem that leads to the demolition of image building once again which creates this theme of repetition. However, this does not get rid of the negative stigmas and perceptions around the estate which shows the harsh reality of the effects these stigmas can have.

Finally, this peer review conducted by Dr. Mecy Denedo and Dr. Amanze Ejiogu in 2021 exposed the stigma surrounding social housing. A recent analysis focused on revealing various stigmas aimed against social housing and tenants, as well as analysing what other politicians, governments, and the media might implement. For example, 'Benefits stigma criminal stigma mental health stigma' (Dr Mecy Denedo and Dr Amanze Ejiogu 2021) implies that residents that lived on the Park Hill Estate in chapter 2 were always stigmatised for who they were and where they lived, demonstrating that there is no escape from such brutal media and political exposure. This creates a vicious cycle that will never end no matter how much effort is put in to prevent it. However, to gradually change this view, everyone in society must work together to make a difference. This can result in moving forward and making a positive impact on residents who live in social housing by providing them with a platform and a voice to be heard.

04

Several similarities are identified between the authors within the academic findings highlighting the negative stigmas and negative images associated with social housing and neighbourhoods. In terms of social, political, and governmental perspectives, there are reasons for the failure of these social housing schemes. Alex Turner speaks on 'How the words and actions of those with power – including social landlords – can conspire to denigrate people living in social housing.' In his 2018 article, which illustrates that these cheaply built apartments, with poorly designed layouts and inconvenient locations became vulnerable and easy targets over time as they were exposed. This clearly indicates that those that are in power and have control can influence the public and have the power to forcibly evict and displace residents and families.
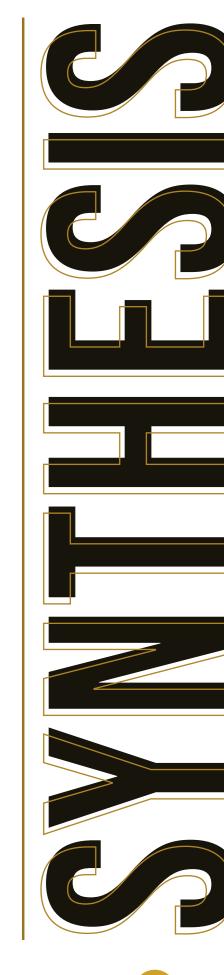
As a result, they became homeless and had an increased risk of losing their jobs which, unfortunately, was critical to their survival. This had not only led to serious social and financial problems, but also led to the production of many negative images for social housing residents. This included creating documentaries, videos, and podcasts which resulted in further stigmatisation of them. During the Windrush period from 1945 to1960, South Asian immigration to England from 1947 onwards, and the post-war housing boom, Britain survived the housing shortages of World War II. As a result, these council estates were the largest in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, providing homes for soldiers returning from war, young couples starting families, large families, the vulnerable and homeless people.

These developments paved the way for people and families to lead better and more fulfilling lives with purpose.

The reputation of those living in social housing and their neighbourhood is constantly criticised, resulting in negative cultural characteristics since they are located on the outskirts of cities or in the inner cities. Upper working-class people also did not wish to mix with those who lived there. As a result, their reputation became damaged by media exposure. Wassenberg (2004) argues that 'Reputation is based on the physical and social characteristics of the neighbourhood'. Which indicates that physical location does have a negative impact on the characteristics of the countless council estates that were placed on the outskirts of cities. They became disconnected from society and were a forgotten identity, swept under the rug. The mindset and attitude seen from the Government could be compared to the Margaret Thatcher era from 1979 to1990. She advocated for greater individual independence from the state and less government intervention in the economy, while privatising the sale of public housing to residents and reducing medical, educational, and housing expenses. This resulted in politicians and the media acquiring power which allowed them to influence the public to portray social housing negatively, seen as they were not a priority for the government. These consistent attacks made them vulnerable and easily targeted Due to them being negatively viewed and stigmatised. This creates an endless cycle that is difficult to break as the residents are continuously unable to voice their concerns. In addition to that, residents are also affected mentally and physically.

In contrast, most council estates always have negative perceptions surrounding them, which the public weaponises due to the media and politicians portraying them. Mercy and Amanze (2021) discussed the use of common phrases that were used to describe these council estates, some of which included: 'Sink estate', 'Zone of Crime', and 'Drug infested'. Larger scaled council estates became vulnerable over time and due to no funding, no maintenance and negative behaviour from some of the residents, it attracted a lot of media attention. This puts the residents who live in social housing in an uncomfortable situation and makes them feel helpless and exposed, leading to sociological problems.

This prompted the media and politicians to encourage this despicable behaviour, making it almost impossible to remove this stigma surrounding social housing. There are similarities within the academic findings which show that the government, politicians, and the media have all the power and action to influence the public to have such negative attitudes and perceptions on residents that live in social housing, creating even more problems that are never ending. This leads the ideas mentioned within this chapter to interlink with each other, emphasising the points made. They demonstrate how negative stigmas, perceptions, and attitudes are created as the government, politicians and the media have a platform where their voices and actions are heard and seen by the public. However, a current solution that is commonly being used across Europe in the design industry is called 'Image building'. This is where designers and architects try to solve these housing schemes that were built during the post-war period that had major structural and social problems and resulted in demolitions and evictions of families and residents.

SYNTHESIS

05 |CONCLUSION

In the course of this essay, the subject areas that were mentioned have been investigated whilst carrying out a deeper level of analysis. This is based on the theory that was set out in Chapter 1. This concludes that the causes of societal stigma and perceptions of social housing and their effects on the residents have been negative. This is due to the lack of funding from local councils and the government which led to the deterioration of council estates because of very little maintenance. However, social housing was effective in terms of housing a large number of the population who would have become homeless in the inner cities across Britain and Europe. Theoretically speaking, it could have been considered a success.

However, when put into practice, it was not - as mentioned in Chapter 2. These failed housing schemes caused societal stigmas around all social housing (despite that some still function well across Europe). Whilst they were only built as a short-term solution in the post-war era, they were able to last long periods of time and are still being used to this day. As mentioned in Chapter 3, society will always have negative perceptions of those that are still functioning due to the influence of the media and politicians. The perceptions that were created due to failed experiments had a negative impact on those living in social housing now. Although all social housing was set out with the best of intentions, some have been more successful than

others. However, this meant that those who did live in successful ones had to be burdened with the atrocious stigma created by the failed ones. To move on from this and create a starting point for positive change, members of society must work together in order to ensure that residents, who each have their own cultural identity, have the opportunity to have their voices be heard and valued. Eventually, this vicious cycle needs to end, and positive outcomes that will benefit the residents moving forward must be achieved. By changing negative perceptions, stigmas and attitudes into a more positive outcome, it will be possible to overcome this housing issue that Britain faced.

'TO MOVE ON FROM THIS AND CREATE A STARTING POINT FOR POSITIVE CHANGE, MEMBERS OF SOCIETY MUST WORK TOGETHER IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT RESIDENTS, WHO EACH HAVE THEIR OWN CULTURAL IDENTITY, HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE THEIR VOICES BE HEARD AND VALUED'

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