

Slum Clearance – a personal experience



Hartington Rd SW8 in 1907.

Most of the left side of the street was demolished as slums in the 1950s

Slum clearance started as a social movement in the 1920s and 30s with the aim of replacing unsatisfactory, overcrowded and unsanitary housing with modern accommodation. It was fuelled by government grants, and a side objective of giving employment during the depression. This led to the demolition of Victorian properties, some of low grade, particularly tenement blocks, but also to the wholesale demolition of many streets of terraced Victorian houses (including the streets between Hartington Rd and the Wandsworth Rd).



Le Corbusier 1887 – 1965



Unite d'habitation, Marseille 1921

Architecturally it was driven by the principles of Corbusier who advocated consolidating accommodation into flats surrounded by green open spaces for recreation and communal activities. His iconic building was the Unite d'Habitation in Marseille, copied across Europe. The resulting proliferation of high-rise blocks of flats across our cities had unintended consequences. Firstly the demolition of streets caused the breakdown of longstanding social networks. Secondly the housing density of the flats was generally less than that of the Victorian terraces. Thirdly the open spaces became areas of desolation and danger since no one had considerate ownership of them. Finally the flats led to isolation and unhappiness compared to the sociability of street living.

Following the 1939-45 war slum clearance was taken up again. The Victorian practice of having WCs at the rear of the property or in the yard was considered old fashioned and unsanitary (for reasons that are not clear). Terraces were declared “unfit for human habitation” by the Local Council Medical Officer, who generally walked (or later drove) down the streets without inspecting the houses internally. Large areas were designated for clearance, so that properties fell in value and the only purchaser if one fell vacant was the council, who could buy at a distressed price. These properties were left to decay, or boarded up, thus exacerbating the downward spiral of the area, so that the compensation value on eventual compulsory purchase was low.

Terraced streets and indeed whole areas were again demolished, often with little idea as to what should replace them. The destruction due to slum clearance was hugely greater than anything inflicted by the Blitz. By the 1960s the disadvantages of high rise was becoming recognized so cleared areas

were turned into new design lowish-rise houses or flats, left as open spaces, or used for schools or offices. Some of the cleared areas have only been built on in the last decade or two. Part of the problem was that while purchase and demolition was relatively cheap (and was supported by government grants) there were insufficient funds for rebuilding, particularly as it became clear that earlier concrete structures had a short life.

We became involved as we owned a house in De Laune Street. This was part of the “Braganza St Slum Clearance Area” behind Kennington Tube Station, stretching from Ambergate St in the north to Kennington Park Place in the south and comprising some 200 Victorian terraced houses of 3-4 bedrooms each and designated for Slum Clearance by Southwark Council in about 1967. Julie and I lived at 5 De Laune St for some time while I was a junior doctor at St Thomas’s Hospital in the late 1960s. By 1970 about a third of the houses were owned by the Council and boarded up. There was no market for the remaining houses, other than to the council.



1. **5 De Laune St SE17**

A small group of residents formed a task force to fight the demolition order, led by Toby Eckersley. We were represented at the public enquiry and demonstrated that the medical officer on whose signature the houses were deemed “unfit for human habitation” had never entered any of them. We also argued that the cost of demolition and rebuild was far greater (about x6) than the cost of refurbishing the houses (particularly as refurbishment costs would fall largely on private owners rather than the public purse). The Inspector rejected both arguments: the former on the grounds that in his opinion the houses were indeed unfit (even though he also had never been inside any) and the second on the grounds that funding was “not a relevant consideration” for him to consider. Our barrister advised us that the latter point was correct, but we appealed to the High Court nevertheless. The High Court duly rejected our appeal on the grounds that longstanding case law stated that public bodies were not required to consider finances when proposing such schemes.

The case would have rested there and the houses would have been demolished, were it not for a young barrister, Desmond Keane, living at 25 Lansdowne Gardens. He heard our story, considered the case and decided it should be tested in the Court of Appeal, since it was against reasonable expectation that finances should not be a ‘relevant consideration’ in public schemes. Thanks to his skill and the wisdom of the judges the Appeal Court decided that finances were indeed a relevant consideration and that the decision to demolish was therefore ultra vires. This judgment has itself become case law (see note 1. below). Southwark Council backed off and the houses in Kennington still exist, have been refurbished, provide valued accommodation, and change hands for substantial sums.

The decision that demolition must be justified financially was the final nail in the coffin of Slum Clearance. However we live with the consequences of this well-meaning but flawed policy today. It shaped the urban landscape around us.

Malcolm Green

Notes.

1. “In *Eckersley v Secretary of State for the Environment* (1978) the Secretary of State confirmed a compulsory purchase order for the acquisition of land to permit the clearance of slum properties, by virtue of powers contained in Part 3 of the Housing Act 1957. It was decided that the confirmation was ultra vires on the ground that there was a failure to take into consideration comparative costs of demolition and rebuilding.” (Introduction to administrative law, Hawke N, Parpworth N, Cavendish Publishing, 1998). (Full judgement available for legal eagles!)

This decision had wide ranging consequences beyond housing in that for the first time (!) it required public bodies to justify and be accountable for the financial implications of their policies. It seems inconceivable today that it could ever have been otherwise.

2. Lambeth also embraced Slum Clearance both pre- and post-war. Indeed Lambeth and Southwark were known as ‘bulldozer boroughs’. Lambeth bought up Victorian houses when they became vacant under their so-called “Short-Life” scheme (‘short life’ as they were soon to be demolished). As recently as 2000 Lambeth still owned some 2000 properties scattered across the Borough bought in the 1960s under this scheme. These have been slowly sold off over the last decade, although there are still scores remaining in Council ownership.

After WW2 Lambeth demolished the streets between Hartington Rd and the Wandsworth Road to build the Lansdowne Green estate, which opened in the mid 60s.

In the 1960s the area to the north of Thorne Rd including the Victorian terraces on the north side of Thorne Rd were designated as slums, and demolished in the early 1970s. The area south of Thorne Rd was next in line, but was saved by the bell. By the late 1970s this area was designated as the Lansdowne Conservation Area, and shortly after many of the houses were listed grade 2. Now demolition would be a criminal offence!



Thorne Rd in 1922 and below in 2012



**Original terrace
remains on left,
new build on right**

