

The estate of things to come?

The Aylesbury Estate, with 2,704 flats, and built from 1963-77 and is home to 7,500 people, is currently undergoing a major regeneration programme.

On September 27, 2005, Southwark council decided that rather than spend £350million updating it, it would replace them with 4,900 flats in blocks built by a housing association. The sale of half would fund the whole scheme.

Author MICHAEL ROMYN makes a passionate plea for its survival.

A concrete jungle not fit for people to live in.' This was councillor for Dulwich Ian Andrews' single-sentence assessment of the Aylesbury Estate, as reported by the *South London Press* in October 1970. Nearly six years later, at the estate's topping-out ceremony in September 1976, Roy Cooper of the *South East London Mercury* dubbed the Aylesbury the greatest housing disaster in the country.

He went on to describe it as a nightmare, an atrocity, and a monstrous hell.

Such was the atmosphere into which Southwark's showpiece estate was born.

Marred by the partial collapse of Ronan Point, a 22-storey system-built block in east London, in 1968, and by vogueish accusations of

environmental determinism, the belief that mass, flattened housing was inherently flawed had become commonplace by the 1970s.

Once viewed optimistically as a modern, expedient and transformative solution to the post-war housing problem, large municipal estates like the Aylesbury came to symbolise the mistakes of the budding welfare state.

As design flaws emerged, and as maintenance programmes were hobbled by a lack of financial planning, and by central government parsimoniousness, the critics' catcalls only grew more raucous.

Singling out Aylesbury's 'towering cliffs and harsh concrete passages', columnist Simon Jenkins, for one, looked forward to a time when the high rises and slab blocks were consigned to the rubble heap of history.

He wrote: "One day we will have the courage and the resources to pull them down and start again."

And this in 1975, when Aylesbury's builders were still raising them up.

The Aylesbury was a major piece in the borough's ambitious rolling programme of slum clearance and housing construction undertaken in the late 1960s.

Finished, it comprised approximately 2,700 flats, accommodating as many as 10,000 tenants in blocks ranging from four to 14 storeys.

In sharp relief to much of the overcrowded and outworn housing it replaced, the sprawling estate included indoor toilets, fitted bathrooms and modern kitchens, not to mention a nursery, pram sheds, laundry rooms, meeting halls, and club rooms.

One early resident, marveling at the luxury of space that Parker Morris standards afforded, likened her still-sparkling flat to Buckingham Palace.

And yet, despite the positive reactions many Aylesbury tenants had to their new surroundings, it was the crude slogans and hoary adjectives voiced by the likes of Andrews and Cooper that dominated the newsprint.

While far from perfect – the estate's size could prove bewildering, and Government-imposed cost restrictions led to various bothersome problems – it was a narrative wildly incommensurate with early residents' experiences, and worse, one that fixed the

estate with what would prove an unshakeable narrative of failure.

The contradiction between this gloomy public discourse and tenants' often diverse and contented lived experiences is a recurring theme in my new book, *London's Aylesbury Estate: An Oral History of the 'Concrete Jungle'* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Based on the interviews and correspondence of residents and former residents, but also youth and community workers, Southwark councillors, officials, police officers, and architects, it strives to inject traditionally myopic accounts of council estate life with a more democratic view – to position tenants and local people as authorities on their own lives.

Of course, the Aylesbury was beset by

much greater problems than its notorious native reputation.

The Thatcher years were tough ones for the estate, and for council housing generally. Thrown up relatively quickly and cheaply, the Aylesbury's fortunes would always track to the level of upkeep it received. Yet sapped of central government funding, and overwhelmed by the size of its deteriorating housing stock, Southwark largely failed to supply what was needed.

Residents bemoaned their reduced surroundings while the council scrambled

to adapt. Meanwhile, the estate grew poorer. Rising unemployment, and the substitution of better-off tenants with consignments of priority homeless – as designed by the 1977 Housing Act – put even greater demands on the borough's stretched resources.

The proportion of lone-parent families rose, as did the number of pensioners living alone, as did the rate of residents in receipt of housing benefit.

These could be disorientating years, then, and precarious years, too, for they saw in a growing array of problems, not least of which was crime.

The majority of residents, however, seemed to have lived on the Aylesbury untroubled. Community groups and more traditional tenants' organisations were prized assets for many, while the estate itself continued to generate strong loyalty and attachment. Having long-occupied a central role in Walworth community life, the surrounding streets, pubs and markets further supplied tenants with valuable coordinates of sociability and belonging.

Heralded by the visit of newly elected prime minister, Tony Blair, in June 1997, Aylesbury's protracted regeneration has proved to be an agitated, unsure and unjust final chapter for the estate.

In 2001, tenants voted overwhelmingly against Southwark's plans to transfer their homes out of the public sector and redevelop the estate; while residents welcomed



The Aylesbury Estate in July 1976

refurbishment, they rejected the uncertainty that such a scheme entailed.

However, in 2005, the council chose to push ahead with the transfer and eventual demolition regardless. Overheated narratives of the estate's failure and notoriety were regularly drawn upon for justification.

Estate regeneration is nominally about improving the lives of residents and communities.

In reality, it often throbs with deracinating potential, and exposes a political fealty to the market that at this point seems ingrained.

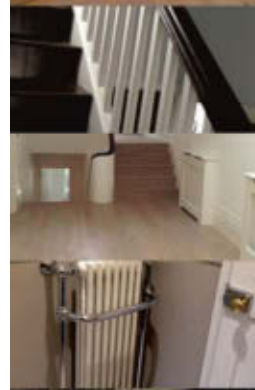
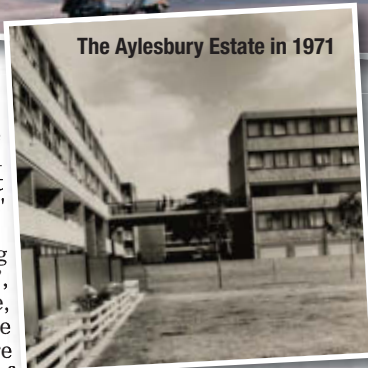
The destruction of the Heygate Estate in 2011 laid bare the disdain with which council residents are often treated. Similarly, the closure of the Elephant and Castle shopping centre in September underscored the voicelessness and expendability of local people in the face of gentrification.

The half-regenerated Aylesbury, now one of the last remaining fragments of Walworth's modernist past, is a part of this same story. Contrary to assertions both past and present, neither its decline was inevitable nor its erasure just.

The old against the then new in July 1976



The Aylesbury Estate in 1971



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