

## THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

### 'THE NEW-OLD TENEMENT: 19th-CENTURY LEITMOTIV OF 20th-CENTURY HOUSING'

by Miles Glendinning (Director, MSc. Architectural Conservation, Edinburgh College of Art)

#### INTRODUCTION

The subject of this lecture, the Tenement, might well seem a completely obvious, unambiguous subject. Almost more than any other building type of the past two centuries, everyone has some idea what 'tenement' means, and everyone has some idea that it's a building type of wider cultural importance than just 'mere architecture'. This is maybe because the tenement is seen by many people as the specially Scottish contribution to urban housing, and thus as something which falls especially within the area of 'national identity', an area that has assumed such a heightened significance in the new era of home rule. Over the previous three decades, especially - the 1970s, 80s and 90s - the tenement has come to be viewed as something which is both firmly rooted in the Scottish communities of the past and also points forward to the uncertain future. In other words, it has come to appear an especially Scottish way of making sense of the housing problems of modern society, of rooting modern solutions in tradition and in national community. It seems to be both a living testament and a bridge to the future.

That idea was, for example, expressed in the very name of one notable 1980s housing project modelled on the tenement pattern, in Maryhill, Glasgow. This project tried to combine innovative internal planning with a classical exterior evoking the 19th century work of Alexander Thomson. Some 20 years before time, it called this combination the '21st Century Tenement'. And although the 90s saw a change in the architectural style of housing towards a revival of modernism, still descriptions of virtually all new urban housing projects in the past decade have made some reference to the inspiration of the 'traditional' tenement. It was seen as admirable for both social and visual reasons. It was seen as a dense and sociable setting, in which all different social groups can freely mix, and whose wall-like facades reinforce the public space of the traditional street. It was seen as something that could combine a strong moral and social authority with a direct, highly specific material aspect, because it is associated with a real, very distinctive object. So for all these reasons, it was seen as something simple, directly accessible, and important to the wider community.

What I want to do in this paper is to interject a note of caution, and to argue that 'the tenement', as an idea and a 'thing', far from being palpable and unchanging, is in fact subjective, ambiguous, shifting – and certainly not inevitably fated to stay a central feature of housing debates. I want to argue that 'The Tenement' has been not so much a fixed object but a fluid polemical device, a piece of political rhetoric dating from an age when housing was one of the most 'political' areas of public life. By 'political', I do not mean party political, but something concerned with matters of burning public concern, with conflicting ideals, which could only be made sense of by extreme polemical arguments. And this has a consequence for today, because while housing was inevitably 'political' in that way in the past, under the new market economy it's become largely depoliticised, and so 'the tenement', as an ideal, seems to be very slowly but surely slipping into the background again.

So, to begin with, the question of why housing had to be political and polemical? Well, over a period of about 100 years, the era of mass society and world war, from the late 19th century until the 1970s and '80s, the main domestic political issue in Scotland was class politics. Its focus was whether and how the conditions of the mass of the people, or what used to be called the 'lower orders' of society, should be improved. The 'housing question' was probably the most impassioned and important aspect of this system of class politics. Like other aspects of party politics, it was addressed through a series of competing visions whose main feature was their highly polarised, polemical character in relation to each other. The reason for this combative framework was as a way of motivating people's zeal and passion, and defusing more extremist positions. This general political passion about housing was also paralleled by a more specific debate about the architecture of housing, a debate which in Scotland and England had also been highly 'politicised' since the late 19th century. This housing built form debate also took the form of a succession of polemical, utopian visions of architecture and society, each one vehemently rejecting its predecessor. Such a violent, combative framework was doubtless essential, to act as a lightning conductor, but it had the effect of concealing the in many ways even more fundamental continuities

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which also ran through the period.

Now what do I mean by continuities? Well, you could argue that the built form of housing in this era, as before and since, was actually dominated by one main theme that was carried through pretty relentlessly and unswervingly: the spreading across society, including to the working classes, of the ideal of the self-contained family home, previously the preserve of the rich. Alongside that main theme ran a subsidiary theme or counter-theme, which had only really come into being in this period: a concern to try to make sure that all these homes added up to a wider social 'community' of one type or another. Basically, that tension between the drive for domestic privacy and the yearning for community was found in all modern countries; the only difference was the precise argumentation and built forms in which it was expressed. The relationship between the two also developed over time in each country. The most common chronology in industrial Northern Europe was a two-stage one. Up to the 1960s, the stress was on building of new communities of sanitary family dwellings under the aegis of the state, and a strong condemnation of the older 19th century mixed-together environments. Then came a surplus of these new dwellings, a reaction against mass building, and an identification of community instead with the old mixed patterns.

In Scotland, this chronological development was not expressed openly, but was filtered through, and obscured by, a polemical utopian debate focused on the idea of the Tenement. The concept of the tenement, within this highly politicised framework, underwent two stages of evolution. The first was that of the tenement as a bad thing, as a bogeyman. This was a concept originally devised by hostile housing critics a century ago as a weapon in the political drive for housing reform. The tenement was an obsolete dystopia, and the corresponding utopia was the low density garden suburb community made up of self contained family cottages.

The second evolutionary stage in this 'political', polemical, utopian exploitation of the tenement began in the 1960s and '70s, when that drive for reform finally lost impetus and ran into political opposition. From that

point, the portrayal of the tenement reversed, and it was made into an extremely good thing. It became a utopia of the past, a symbol of the community of the good old days which could be cited by those against alienating modernisation. In this second phase, the tenement became part of a broader current of ideas in moral and religious affairs, the movement of 'fundamentalism' - a way of dealing with the alienating, fragmenting effects of change and modernity by appealing to the authority of 'tradition.' The idea was that the state had been building masses of self contained dwellings, but in the wrong form, heaped together in alienating modern blocks. These were housing, not homes. They provided not privacy but loneliness, and not community but fragmentation. To secure proper homes and community together you had to look to the tenement as a symbol of a pre-modern golden age. Also, in the specific politico-cultural context of Scotland, it became to some extent a nationalistic totem, a symbol of the Scottish divergence from England and of the supposed affinity with 'Europe.'

So: round about a century of extreme, social and political debate about housing, with the tenement acting as a kind of symbolic lightning rod. A century of turbulence that now seems to have ended, with the demotion of mass housing to a depoliticised, privatised status. So now, I'd argue, is a very good time to stand back and take an overview of this century of turbulence, and of the way the tenement symbolised the changes in ideas and values within it.

What I'm going to do is to discuss these two past phases of tenement polemic, negative and positive, working forward from the tenement dystopia to the tenement Utopia that it spawned, and focusing especially on the overall motives and origins of both. It had some bad aspects - it led to a succession of distortions of the true, complex story of Scottish housing. But it also had a very positive result - it was a way of giving passion and concrete reality to the often dry housing debates - a passion that is no longer completely accessible or comprehensible to us today.

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#### THE TENEMENT DYSTOPIA

My first basic point is that the positive, fundamentalist picture of the tenement today actually sprang out of a highly negative, modernising argument devised a century ago by people who were fervently opposed to tenements! Both arguments are similar in their polemical tone, but their individual elements are almost exactly reversed. They were two polar extremes in the 20th century's portrayal of the tenement. Both formed part of utopias of the future, defined with reference to a highly polemical picture of 19th century housing, with the tenement as its symbol. This was just one aspect of the way in which the vigour of the 19th century cast a long shadow across much of the 20th century, with things like the welfare state or modern architecture defining themselves as much as anything negatively, as the opposite of the 19th century, and then people reacting against that by hailing the 19th century as a utopia. But all 20th-century commentators were agreed on all the most important features of the tenement, whether they saw those features as good or bad. They agreed that it was highly dense, crowded, mixed in uses, and that, in this, it contrasted with the greater self-containment of England; the 1990s commentators added the claim of affinity to 'Europe'.

Let's begin with the anti-tenement period at the turn of century. Here, I want to illustrate my point by looking in detail at one key text, a text which actually changed the whole course of Scottish housing for over fifty years: the Ballantyne Report of 1917, or, to give it its full name, the Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland. This was a massive government-sponsored investigation into housing, in the heat of wartime, which comprehensively attacked the existing system of private-enterprise housing and argued that the state should take overall control. As part of its attacks, it strongly criticised the tenements and dwellings of the Scottish industrial city. The Ballantyne Report's anti-tenement dystopia was a highly modern, rationalistic thing; it formed part of the variegated attempts to modernise society through state coordination. And, typically of the 'unionist nationalism' of the pre-1914 years, these were defined by a different sort of comparison with England, a friendly

but competitive one in which the role of Scotland was to see itself as a leader in some areas, such as education or military prowess, while needing to catch up in some others, such as housing.

In the Ballantyne Report's critiques of the built-form of Scottish housing, the tenement was portrayed as a specially Scottish variety of urban high density: one which contrived, in particular, to muddle together all the urban classes and functions that should best be segregated. That density and social mixing was - it should be emphasised - seen by Ballantyne not as good but as extremely bad. The word used to describe it all was 'overcrowding'. The Report argued that tenements were deficient in precisely the aspects which would later be praised by the tenement revival people. Above all, they were claimed to be unsuitable for wholesome family life. In contrast to the mawkish praise of the tenement as family friendly in the Jeely Piece Song today, the Report claimed that the tenement was a completely unsuitable place for children: piteous stories were related of their 'sad attempts to play' in the stairs and back courts. The 'crowding' or lack of segregation of people within dwellings was said to lead to moral as well as medical degeneration: Ballantyne thundered that the 'single-end' (one room tenement flat) 'lies on the extreme margin of industrial civilisation ... life in one room is incompatible with family decency ... How can you live and preserve "the white flower of a blameless life" - in one room?' These dwellings were neither suitable for the fostering of privacy nor for the fostering of community. They were actively harmful to both aims.

This supposedly uniquely Scottish dystopia was bolstered by a national comparison, exclusively with England. The English patterns were seen as more conducive to family life: the tenement, a human anthill, was 'so different from the two-storey self-contained cottages in English towns', which had more but smaller rooms than the Scottish flats. In its recommendations, the Ballantyne Report, perhaps disingenuously, implied that the real choice facing the nation was between old, overcrowded Scottish slum tenements and new, English garden suburbs.

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So far, all well and good: the tenement was supposedly an extreme of density and promiscuity, and things in England were totally different. And for that reason the government would have to intervene to put things right, by stamping out the wicked private market that had brought this about, and by imposing new and better standards of housing. But, as with all rhetorical and political slogans, it bore very little relation to reality. Here we get to the first of the distortions I want to focus on, distortions caused by the political, polemical framework of discussion we're dealing with here. This is the fact that pre-1914 Scottish housing, judged by international standards of comparison, was neither particularly dense nor radically different from England.

Owing to time restrictions, I can only focus on one or two factors. The first, the most basic measure of density, is that of the number of dwellings on a given site. Here the Scottish-English comparison foregrounds differences in building height and whether the dwellings are flats or not. But what if we look instead at the even more basic factor of the distribution of building mass on the site? In that case, what we find is that in the case of typical continental tenements, as for instance in Germany, France or Austria, each building plot was usually entirely built over, with a network of 'front', 'back' and 'cross' blocks, forming a continuous mass, punctuated only by courtyards; the social implication of such layouts is that higher-rental front and lower-rental back dwellings are mixed together in the same block. The open spaces in the middle of street blocks were typically occupied by light industry (see for example the plot diagrams in R Eberstadt, *Handbuch des Wohnungswesens*, 1909).

The most extreme case of this overbuilding of plots was not on the continent at all, but in the United States – the 'railroad' tenements of New York City, where the long thin sites were filled by a succession of tightly crammed flats ventilated by only tiny air-wells. The name railroad refers to the relentless arrangement of flats one after the other, like railway sleepers.

In 19th century Scotland, the picture is totally different. Building plots or stances were developed as part of a street block in which the housing was confined to a strip round the outside of a huge open rear

courtyard, and generally only one social class inhabited the development. Only in later infills and through social decline would this back space become cluttered. Also unlike Germany and Austria, Scottish tenements had no cellars, and no attics. A typical urban street block in Scotland would combine 'perimeter' planning, including a continuous rear courtyard strip, with complex and relatively highly-serviced flat plans; the flats, unlike the German examples, are all the same size. (see for instance C Gourlay, *Elementary Building Construction and Drawings for Scottish Students*, 1903) By comparison to the high site coverage and small internal courts of Berlin tenements, the ribbon-like street-block perimeter layouts of Scotland seemed rather low in density. That applied whether we refer to 'classic tenements' or to other types. For, in a further complication of the simple rhetorical picture of the 'Scottish tenement', pre-1914 urban flatted housing in Scotland consisted not just of four-storey city tenements, but also many other patterns, such as the ubiquitous two-storey blocks with external stairs to the upper floors, found in medium-size towns from one end of the country to another. If there is any 'typical Scottish urban house-type', it should perhaps be this two-storey type rather than the four storey tenements of Glasgow or Edinburgh.

Inside the block, too, - whether a four-storey tenement or one of the other types - there were startling differences from the continent, and from the rhetorical picture of 'dense', 'mixed-together' Scots flats. Most pre-1914 Scottish urban tenement dwellings were through-ventilated, and on the whole they were much larger and better equipped than continental flats for equivalent social classes. The two-storey external-stair types had, in effect, separate access to different floors. And the normal sleeping provision in new Scots working-class houses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries - the internal bed-closets or bed-recesses constantly attacked by reformers - in fact achieved a considerable segregation of sleeping from living and cooking, while maximising the proportion of living to sleeping space, even within 'single-ends'. By contrast, a one-roomed house in Germany was just that: one single undifferentiated space! What actually seemed remarkable in the terms of the Ballantyne Report's argument was how far 'ahead' Scotland was, not only in

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self containment and segregation in dwelling plans but also in the crude overall matter of density reduction. In Glasgow, the percentage of households living in one-room houses dropped from 26% in 1891 to 21% in 1901, whereas in Berlin, the percentage in one-room dwellings in 1901 was 50%, a percentage which was actually higher than in 1861!

At the risk of leapfrogging ahead in my argument, one should mention that in the 1980s' and 90s' highly positive climate towards the tenement, we heard constantly of the close affinity between the Scottish tenement and the apartment blocks of European cities. In particular, the 'IBA' project in Berlin, a 1980s showpiece piecemeal rehabilitation of a large inner-city zone, was cited as the chief model and aspiration for the Crown Street Project in Glasgow, which as we'll see was the centrepiece of the 1980s and 90s campaign to 'revive the tenement'. The argument of this paper is that such an association is fundamentally flawed: it is an architectural argument based on superficial facade resemblances. And even the facades are really quite different. The typical 19th century Berlin tenement is like a separate palazzo, loaded with dense plaster ornament, with a huge attic, and cornice, whereas the Scottish tenement is most commonly a unit in a row, shaved off at the top. The projecting bay windows of many Scottish tenements mark out the individual flats, but within a relentlessly repetitive, almost industrialised framework.

So, if the Scottish pre-1914 tenement was not a real dense anthill, like those of Berlin, Vienna or Paris, what was it like? The closest foreign comparisons are with countries like the USA, Denmark or the Low Countries, all of which, perhaps not coincidentally, embarked early on the modernisation of agriculture, with its highly segregated, systematised use of land – although when speaking of the United States we always have to bear in mind the great exception that proves the rule: the dense New York tenement. But the closest comparison is, perhaps unsurprisingly, with England. Despite the lack of an English 'tenement tradition', in the areas of the organisation and physical form of their housing, there were many features which set both Scotland and England apart from that of the Continent.

Some common features seemed to stem from the early and comprehensive adoption of capitalism throughout urban Britain: these included the building of specialised residential areas at high speed by speculative builders; and the use of materials (whether ashlar or brick), and architectural 'terrace' styles, which emphasised repetitive uniformity and an almost industrial modernity and hard, precise external finish. Other factors seemed to be influenced by maritime climate, notably the obsessive preoccupation with openness and ventilation: this emerged in features such as the external drainage systems and use of sash windows, both carried to a greater extreme in Scotland than in England. The two-storey external access Scottish tenements were in many ways almost identical with the 'Tyneside flats' found around Newcastle. Even internally, the Scottish use of partitioned recesses and subdivisions within rooms was, in some ways, closer to small English rooms than to large, undifferentiated Continental spaces.

All these segregatory and sanitary features in 19th century Scottish tenements were encouraged by the steadily growing impact throughout the 19th century of official controls, something which the Ballantyne reformists polemically had to ignore. Within the municipal or burgh-police regulatory framework, Dean of Guild inspectors had long controlled the layout of tenements' surroundings, and the internal planning of the block or the dwelling, by constantly introducing more space, openness and sanitary facilities. We can see the results in standard presentations of turn of century improved tenements like Gourlay's book, where we see quite an uncomplicated picture of steady improvement.

All in all, it would be possible to have presented in 1917 a very different overview of Scottish urban housing from the Ballantyne account, one which stressed the very real but piecemeal progress in all sorts of aspects of design and layout in new houses, the growing pressure to demolish unsatisfactory older houses, and the resemblance to housing patterns in England. Instead, there was a combination of the utopian reformist pressure to condemn the tenement absolutely, along with the more directly political pressure of 1917 for a revolutionary change in the organisation of housing by destroying private landlordism – it was the combination

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of these two which led to the simplistic and exaggerated picture in Ballantyne. And once Ballantyne's recommendations had been accepted, and the private landlord was overthrown in favour of institutionalised system of council housing from the 20s, the status of that tenement dystopia then changed from being a revolutionary or reformist propaganda to become a kind of establishment ideology for over half a century, something which helped legitimise the huge open-ended effort of the housing drive. Its slogans were rather like the ossified revolutionary street names, the Barricade Square or Leninplatz, of every Soviet city.

So – let's recap. So far, we've seen the first stage in the creation of a politicised, polarised tradition of housing debate in Scotland, a debate formed out of a succession of distorted and heroically biased visions. We saw the way in which the tenement was the first major focus of these distortions, at first as a bogeyman in the pages of the Ballantyne report; and then with the institutionalisation of mass council housing and its supporting ideology after 1919. Everyone agreed with this ideology and its vilification of the tenement, not just housing reformists or socialist zealots. For example, Edinburgh's Labour housing committee convener, Pat Rogan, recalled of his tenement clearances in the 60s that 'It was a magnificent thing to watch, as I did many times, whole streets of slum tenements being demolished – all those decades of human misery and degradation just vanishing into dust and rubble!'

But although the picture of the tenement stayed as black as ever, during the 20th century increasingly the council housing that was being provided to replace the 'castles of misery' diverged away from the low density garden city cottage formula beloved of the Ballantyne generation of reformists and council housing advocates, and back to something less radically different from the tenement. Here we get to the second distortion I want to focus on: namely, the notion that the tenement was supposedly so different from what followed it in the 20th century, the post-Ballantyne period. Because, just as the reality of the tenements had been different from the picture in the polemic, the same applied to the reality of 20th-century council housing, which was one of considerable continuity with the complex patterns

that had been built before. This continuity was most obvious in the ubiquitous two and three storey blocks of flats, which continued to be built in smaller groups: for instance, the two storey flats with external staircases became the 'four in a block' flats with their separate external access. And it also even continued into the post-1945 period. Very often, the old patterns were straightforwardly perpetuated. By the 1950s, political pressure on land supply had forced Glasgow and some other big urban councils to build most of their council houses in the form of tenements once again. By the 1950s, the typical new urban 'council house' was a three-apartment tenement flat with bathroom: its plan was a miniaturisation of the 19th-century middle-class tenement, for use in working-class municipally-built suburban schemes.

But of course, new tenements in the 19th century had been constantly refined and improved, too, so this was hardly anything novel. What was increasingly built in cities by the 60s certainly was more novel, though – tall tower blocks that combined density and monumental scale with the open space and air beloved of the garden city reformists, all within the new Modern Movement spatial conception of abstract shapes in free-flowing space. While some links to Garden City open air ideology, at first glance the tower blocks could hardly have been more different from the tens, with their continuous facades and insistent contrast of front and back. Yet even here one could plausibly argue that the Modernist housing developments, with their combination of flatted, multi-storey built form, 'grey' architectural repetitiveness and rectilinearity, and their continuing drive for openness and fresh air, were actually still a kind of developments of the Scottish tenement tradition.

Certainly, what the Modernists undeniably did carry on from the earlier period was an assumption that the main concern was to build homes for 'the family', with all the latter's overtones of moral self-containment. Despite Ballantyne's passionate claims that the supposed promiscuity of tenement life was incompatible with the 'white flower of family decency', in fact, in its own piecemeal way, 19th century tenement architecture had constantly pursued the ideal of the self-contained

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dwelling, and that aim was just as important now in the mid 20th century. To this was added a linked ideal of 'community', ultimately derived from the utopianism of Robert Owen and others, the idea that these new groups of homes should be built so as to encourage collective social life as well as private family life.

That was a heavy burden of expectation, and soon people began to have doubts about whether the vast corporation schemes were achieving either proper homes or communities. A feeling began that the older areas of burghs might have been better in some ways, although this was still hardly articulated directly. An initial response, from the 1960s, was to try to devise new types of Modernist multi-storey development which could actually begin to try to evoke or echo some aspects of the 19th century tenement townscape. The 'deck access' pattern was made up largely of medium-rise 7-storey blocks built in courtyards, as for instance at Hutchesontown Area E (1969-74), on the so-called 'deck access' system with pedestrian streets in the sky and separate 'front doors' for each dwelling. These were not 'tower blocks' at all, but part of a 1960s reaction against tower blocks, led by town-planners within Glasgow Corporation, towards buildings more in scale with the 19th-century tenements and their grid layouts. In some ways, these were layouts that tried to reconcile modernity with tradition.

#### THE TENEMENT UTOPIA

Therefore, even in the mid 20th century, with all its dramatic switches of tenure policy and architectural fashion, continuity was as important as revolution. But by the 1970s, all that consensus and continuity seemed to be under threat, at any rate at first glance. There was a sudden loss of political momentum and of credibility for mass housing and welfare-state provision, especially after the years of radical protest around 1968. Now all new development was damned; community was no longer something you must build or provide new, but something old that you must protect. This suddenly led to a veneration of what had been most damned before - the 19th century tenements. Within a couple of years, in the early 70s, they changed from the symbol of

dystopia to the symbol of utopia. This was supported by a new and different consensus, formed out of a coalition of a new kind of enabling 'community' architect with a new kind of highly active local residents group, focused together on a kind of post-1968 ideal of 'community action' and participation. This praise of the tenement had strong overtones of fundamentalism. In Glasgow and the West, it also has an additional importance as part of the phenomenon of 'Clydesideism' - the literary and media praise of what is seen as the greater realism and gritty humanity of the West, in opposition to the snobbish coldness of Edinburgh and the East.

Correspondingly, a new dystopia was identified: the now-discredited tower blocks and mass housing. Ironically, it was the deck access blocks, supposedly a compromise with 'traditional street scale', which came a cropper most dramatically. It was Hutchesontown E that became, in 1976, the focus of the first major tenants' protest movement - the so-called 'Dampness Monster' protest, which included a siege of the city chambers.

During the 1980s this critique of Modernist mass housing was fully elaborated. From this perspective, in which the tenements are seen as a praiseworthy extreme of mixed-together density, the Modernist redevelopments were correspondingly branded an extreme of amorphous openness, replacing Scottish community by rootless alienation. These attacks were founded on a trenchant rejection of the Modern Movement as alienating and mechanistic, and on appeals to the supposed community and urban order of what went before Modernism. An especially elaborate formulation of the argument was contained in a 1980 report on high density housing issued by the National Building Agency, written by Charles Robertson. Using case studies of individual areas, including the Gorbals, it argued that the supposedly high density of the tower block redevelopments was a sham, and that you could get higher densities with all-medium rise developments similar to the 19th century tenements. By the late 1980s, in projects like the 21st Century Tenement in Maryhill, which I mentioned at the beginning, the same argumentation was being used to justify building of new tenement projects, often on the site of demolished Modernist mass housing and tower block areas.

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To sum up this utopian Cult of the Tenement of the 1980s and 90s, I would like to look more closely at one key legitimising text (in rather the same way I did with the Ballantyne Report earlier) for the dystopia view. This text is the 1992 founding report of the Crown Street Project in Glasgow. One should emphasise that this report is of not of epoch-making national importance like Ballantyne but of rather more local significance. But it was still a landmark document: Crown Street, a partial 're-redevelopment' of the Modernist, high-rise environment of the Hutchesontown/Gorbals Comprehensive Development Area, was the first large-scale exercise in the 'return to the tenement'. Appropriately enough, its site was previously occupied by Hutchesontown E, the deck access complex that was the subject of the Dampness Monster campaign of the late 70s. The 1992 report began with a resounding rejection of the 1960s Modern redevelopment of the Gorbals, with its openness and high flats: their uncontrolled openness, it argued, had replaced community with scattered isolation. What should replace the discredited Modernist environment, according to the 1992 report, was a revival of 'tradition', in the form of the tenement, set in the wider urban context of the Glasgow street-grid. The authority of this formula was rooted in the past, in the lost golden age of the 19th century industrial city, when the tenement and the street supposedly made possible a combination of mixed social community and architectural order.

Here are a few quotations to give a flavour of the report: 'Historically, the street has always been the basic element of city life. As with the tenement, it is being rediscovered after the rejection of tradition by the Modernist movement. Architects are learning again how to create the flow and purpose of the street, after the isolation of the high rise block'. The street would be 'a meeting point and a place where people want to linger'. And the tenement within the street would allow people 'to be part of an urban community, while retaining the right to be themselves'. These claims about the relationship of architecture and community were backed up in the Crown Street document by national-identity comparisons with England and Europe: 'As in many other European cities, the tenement in the traditional building block of the Scottish city ... Contrary to the

European tradition, housing in England has always shied away from the close knit community of the city. A housing pattern of terraces and semi detached estates is essentially alien in a Scottish environment'. Here we can compare with Ballantyne, which also compared with another country, namely England. But here everything was reversed exactly by comparison with the negative 1917 Ballantyne rhetoric.

So, to sum up, under this argument, in the 1992 Crown St Report, the tenement is seen as good because it embodies a kind of Scoto-European traditional dense community, in contrast to supposedly modern Anglo-Saxon fragmentation and alienation. And like all highly polemical slogans, this in turn has bred even more sensational versions. Schoolchildren across the country have been indoctrinated with its general principles through the 'Jeely Piece Song', which dramatises tower blocks' supposed unsuitability for 'normal family life'. Here the role of history is a central one. Recently, for example, one of the leading figures in the Glasgow community housing-association movement assured me that in the early part of this century, Glasgow had the densest slums anywhere in the world, 'except Calcutta'. And another key housing-association leader, Rob Joiner, wrote that 'the Victorian Glasgow tenement was a building form which housed all classes in society'. In fact, as we've already seen, even among European industrial cities, Glasgow had a fairly middling density. And although Rob Joiner was certainly right when he said that the 19th-century tenement housed all classes in society, what he also failed to mention was that they were not housed in the same tenements, as in France or Germany, but in different areas of the city! But, in a sense, the historical 'facts' are irrelevant to the power of this argument. 'Facts' can hardly dislodge these kinds of slogans, because the prejudices behind the latter go back not just to the 1970s but to the late 19th century, and are grounded in a whole century-long system of talking about housing.

From the 1980s onwards, with the perpetuation of this value-system, inexorably the next distortion of 20th century Scottish housing polemic emerged. Just as the stereotypical picture of the dense 19th century tenement, which formed the basis of both the hostile

## THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

### 'THE NEW-OLD TENEMENT: 19th-CENTURY LEITMOTIV OF 20th-CENTURY HOUSING'

by Miles Glendinning (Director, MSc. Architectural Conservation, Edinburgh College of Art)

Ballantyne critique and the later tenement revival praise, was a seriously distorted one, the same also of course applied to the hostile picture of Modernist 20th century housing, on which the 1980s/90s tenement revival was based. In reality, what was actually built, or done, by the tenement revival movement shared a very high degree of continuity with both 20th century mass housing and 19th century tenements. Despite the different kind of stress on community, elements of the old Modernist rhetoric of 'needs' and 'standards' were linked with tenement rehab; there was a continuing stress on numbers of houses 'improved', with modern kitchens and bathrooms, and an underlying continuity in upholding social privatisation as a central aim. Rehabilitated tenements, no less than tall blocks, were envisaged as self-contained dwellings with all mod cons. Conversely, in the now stigmatised Modernist mass projects like Hutch E or Red Road, there now began to grow a kind of beleaguered community spirit not unlike that supposed to be associated with tenements. It was the very fight against the blocks and their dampness problems in Hutchesontown E which cemented a kind of community in adversity - as in many other postwar Glasgow council housing schemes.

Another internal contradiction was bound up with the fact that the cult of the tenement formed part of the cultural strategy of the 1970s and '80s to distinguish Scotland from England as a more 'social', community-minded place. The emphasis on the tenement as the embodiment of a special sense of classless community and urbanity has depended on an implied contrast with the allegedly more class-segregated cottage-type dwellings of England, and claims of the supposed 'European' character of the tenement. Yet in reality much of the arguments of the Tenement Revival, about traditional street community etc, were lifted straight from the English Terrace House Revival of the 70s, and much of its fundamentalist rhetoric is borrowed directly from books such as Nicholas Taylor's *The Village in the City* of 1973. And ironically, even the Crown Street masterplan, supposedly an exemplar of Glasgow's European, non-English urban traditions, was actually conceived by an English architect, Piers Gough, who modelled its layout - not a grid, but a somewhat sinuous pattern - on 19th-century London suburbs. Gough

described the concept of Crown St as a call for 'out with the new and in with the old'. And more generally, many of the fundamentalist ideas of Crown Street originated in the Postmodern Historicism of the 1980s in England, as promoted by Prince Charles.

So, let us now sum up this complex, if not confusing narrative. By the 1980s and 90s, we had built up, on the one hand, an entire century of quite consistent 'progress' and evolution in Scottish housing, and on the other hand, superimposed on it and partly obscuring it, a mountain of dramatically fluctuating 'debate' about utopias and dystopias, above all the tenement. What I've traced in this paper is a century of polemical debate, cutting and thrusting and disappearing into a distant haze of ever more convoluted argumentation. But all things come to an end, and today is a time when the wider political situation of housing has changed completely, compared to the 20th century years of slums, scandals and emergencies. Housing is much lower-profile, politically, nowadays. There isn't the same public sense of urgency, overriding and reaching into the professional debates, so with the lessening of the crude drive for numbers of new dwellings above all else, with the disappearance of the great crusades against the slums, and even of the mass demand for 'family homes', this entire structure of radical, politically-driven polemic in housing seems to be fading. And the power of the 19th century as a symbolic past focus of praise and blame seems to be fading too. Instead, a new heritage is becoming more important - the 20th century Modern Movement, and what followed it.

The idea of reviving Modernist freedoms in new urban housing was at first explored almost secretly in the split level planning of 1980s and early '90s: buildings which looked like tenements on the outside, such as the '21st Century Tenement' mentioned earlier, the projects of Mackintosh School lecturer Mark Baines, and a number of housing-association projects by Elder & Cannon. As I said at the beginning, virtually all innovative housing projects of the 1990s still had to be described as 'tenements' - for instance, a pioneering ecological car-free project by Hackland & Dore in Gorgie, Edinburgh, was also described as a '21st century tenement', while Gerry Grams's apartment block at Bellgrove Street,

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Glasgow, was more modestly described by the architect as a 'tenement of the late 1990s'. But during the later '90s, the new freedoms began to break out into the open, in the planning of entire residential areas. For example, in the Gorbals, the strict street lines of neo-tenements with ornate historicist detailing in the early phases of Crown Street, deliberately flouting or ignoring the remaining Modernist tower blocks, have been replaced by more open, experimental layouts, with freely planned modern blocks.

That doesn't, of course, mean an end to the wasteful policy of blowing up 'original' modern public-housing tower blocks – far from it! But if the tenement is now moving back into the background of contemporary debates, at least for us historians that will be a benefit, allowing us to try to get behind the misleading slogans and reveal the complex reality of 18th, 19th and 20th century Scottish housing. We need to raise our sights and ambitions beyond the level of Frank Worsdall-style anecdotal people's histories, at a time when other countries are embarking on serious national research and publication projects. In Germany, for example, the fourth book in a massive, five-volume history of housing in that country, *Geschichte des Wohnens*, totalling over four thousand pages and financed by a philanthropic housing society (the Wustenrot Stiftung) was published a number of years ago. Why should we in Scotland not aspire to something of that ambitiousness? Richard Rodger's excellent book on 19th century Edinburgh has established a benchmark for exhaustive civic and regional housing research from a social and economic history perspective. That approach needs to be extended nationally and augmented with specific built environment research – together with appropriate international contextualisation. Seen in an international context, Scottish housing – 20th, 19th, and earlier - is just as distinctive and internally variegated a subject as is German, Dutch, English or French housing – and I hope it will inspire in the future studies of an appropriately ambitious kind.