

proper". In the skilful, panoramic sketch of the eighteenth-century penal system that he provides in his first substantive chapter, "The Debtor's World", White persuasively argues that these and other prisons, including those designed for seamen and political prisoners, as well as for debtors and felons of one kind or another, "amounted to an archipelago of incarceration that stretched across London in every direction".

White's language here echoes Michel Foucault – perhaps unintentionally as no explicit reference is made – who in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) famously identified the features of what he described as a "carceral archipelago" functioning "well beyond the frontiers of criminal law" in nineteenth-century France. Although *Mansions of Misery* is in general far from Foucauldian in its analysis of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prison regime, it does offer fascinating insights, of a distinctly Foucauldian kind, into the fact that, because debt was predicated on personal transactions, it pressured individuals into circumscribing their own movement through the city, not least "in order to avoid embarrassing local encounters", and thus had significant "spatial consequences".

White's preferred approach, as the book's subtitle indicates, is not to anatomize the archetypal operations of what Foucault called "biopower" but to offer a concrete, finely detailed reconstruction of a single penal institution in the form of a "biography" of the Marshalsea (there is a hint in the preface, incidentally, that White himself is reluctant to adopt this "fashionable" term, as he puts it, perhaps because it was his publisher's idea to do so, but he nonetheless robustly defends its application to his project). As a result, *Mansions of Misery*, in contrast to his magnificent trilogy of histories of London in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, published between 2008 and 2012, manifests what he confesses to be "a renewed taste for the microhistory approach".

The book has the strengths and weaknesses characteristic of this methodology. It is a scrupulous piece of scholarship, which makes imaginative and brilliantly illuminating use of its archival sources, not only in order to reconstruct the everyday lives of numerous ordinary and not so ordinary debtors incarcerated in the Marshalsea, but in order to provide a vivid sense of "what it meant to be a Londoner between 1700 and 1842". The chapter on John Baptist Grano, a distinguished early eighteenth-century musician of Italian origin, is particularly gripping and even moving in this respect. And the account of Charles Dickens's father John's experiences in the Marshalsea, as commemorated in *Little Dorrit*, is also captivating (so to speak). White's prose is as elegant as it is pungent – especially when it is spiced with eighteenth-century prison slang.

And yet one limitation, common among biographies of institutions or social entities, is that Jerry White misses opportunities to explore the macrohistorical implications of his topic. It was during this period that Britain first acquired a significant national debt, which rose according to the Bank of England's records from roughly £12 million in 1700 to a monstrous £850 million in 1815; so it seems a pity not to pursue the complicated connections between private and public forms of indebtedness in the formation of the modern nation state.

# Estates of the nation

## Working with people who inhabit and adapt social housing

LYNSEY HANLEY

Stephen Willats

VISION AND REALITY

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The artist Stephen Willats first came to English council housing not as a tenant but as someone who believed that artworks should be anchored to the society in which they are made. In the introduction to this collection of over 500 photographs and short testimonies, he writes: "My feeling in the mid-1960s was that the artist and art practice had become divorced from the reality of most people's lives". His way of reconnecting art with its audience from the early 1970s to the mid-90s was to undertake collaborative projects on dozens of council estates, interviewing and photographing residents and their homes before compiling public display boards – often situated in stairwells and communal foyers – of their contributions. Only once this aspect of each project was completed would he then transform them into his characteristic pieces of geometric, abstract art.

It is significant that this book, which comprises such a detailed compendium of a specific aspect of post-war urban life, is not by an architecture critic, a town planner or a social historian. Willats approaches council estates and the people who live in them without prejudice, and asks refreshingly straightforward questions. How do you find living on the ground or the fourth or the eighteenth floor? What do you think of the view? How have you personalized your home? The responses he collects are considered and varied, each adding a layer of perspective to a communal experience that has, in media and political discourse, often been reduced to a single tale of social dysfunction. Once those layers build up, however, some overriding themes and preoccupations become clear.

Social isolation is treated as a fact of life. Women living on higher floors with young families repeatedly lament the fact that they

cannot let their children out to play, and often that they don't see people other than their spouses or children from one day to the next. Several people – usually men living alone – comment on the role of home aquaria in providing quiet company and relieving stress. Those used to living at close quarters with others – perhaps on the same street as extended family members – find that they "suffer with their nerves" on moving to a quiet modern estate. Willats records an elderly woman in a low-rise block in west London insisting she needs little in the way of food: a packet of fish fingers lasts several days, eaten two at a time with a boiled potato. She has a bowl of soup at lunchtime and perhaps a boiled egg later in the day. Her testimony went on to form a triptych now owned by the Tate, entitled "Living with Practical Realities" (1978), in which Willats depicts the woman sitting alone in her flat, walking alone along a concrete walkway, and negotiating, alone, the task of managing on a restricted income. We see her cooker furnished with tiny saucepans, over which is superimposed the phrase: "Providing just a little at a time for one".

By contrast, Willats describes the unusual experience of working with tenants of two identical tower blocks in Leeds, one of which is cherished and functions as a successful residential community, while the other fulfils every cliché in the "high-rise hell" book. There is no obvious reason for how the situation

occurred, apart from the fact that the tenants in the former block gelled well socially and worked together to form a stable community, and those in the latter failed to do the same, which created a cycle of people wanting to move out and those moving in either staying for a short time or becoming trapped there with no other option. This pair of case studies lends weight to the argument that many of the problems of post-war social housing come down to the people who live, or have lived, in it, rather than the designs themselves. If the allocation of tenancies is weighted towards similar people with similar needs – for example older couples without children – then an estate is more likely to be successful.

As Stephen Willats's project moves through the late 1970s and 80s and into the early 90s, the ways in which tenants seek to make their flats homely and representative of their individual tastes seem to change, to become more precise and individuated, with the help of greater disposable income. At the same time, council tenancies become ever more squeezed and allocations restricted to those with, essentially, no other choice of housing tenure.

Young single tenants – the very people who find it almost impossible to gain council tenancies now that there are so few available – end up isolated and anchorless, less motivated by age and responsibility to involve themselves in social activities based on the estate. Older tenants, while visibly less poor than their counterparts of twenty years previously, become conscious that, along with palpable improvements in living conditions, the building of new estates has caused something – barely tangible and hard to put into words – to be lost. This is a rare and essential book which records, respects and, above all, gives necessary context to people's accounts of their own lives.



Homecourt, Feltham, Middlesex; a detail from the three-panel work "Our Interpersonal Home" by Stephen Willats, 1990