

Our Housing Disaster - and how to fix it

Julian Richer introduces the book

Our Housing Disaster - and how to fix it
by Julian Richer with Kate Miller
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Far too many people in this country cannot afford a decent roof over their heads - a growing scandal that is having huge social consequences. As a businessman who has had an active involvement with social housing and as a landlord myself, I've seen this problem grow, read numerous reports exposing the shocking facts and seen housing ministers come and go (15 since 2010!) - while little gets done.

This book has been a long time in the making. It was born in 2017 when I wrote a paper on social housing for the then shadow chancellor, John McDonnell. It started as a hotchpotch of observations and suggestions based on my 40 years of experience as a property owner, now with a sizeable property portfolio, but my frustration with the status quo pushed me to keep my thoughts alive and develop them further. Meanwhile, I could see the housing crisis getting worse, until it is now nothing less than a disaster.

Housing is a fundamental necessity for all of us, but it is a huge subject. Here in this book, I don't intend to cover all aspects of housing in the UK but want to focus on the most challenging and least glamorous sector, which is social housing. This is where I see the biggest problem for society, in that it's the most neglected sector, where there has been the least progress, causing the most suffering and affecting so many people in need of a decent and genuinely affordable place to live. It is also the sector where, I believe, the best solutions to our housing disaster lie.

Every year, as the gap between stagnant wages and rising house prices grows, fewer and fewer people can buy their own home. Consequently, millions are in private rented housing, paying high prices for insecure tenancies and often unsuitable and poor-quality accommodation. A million more are on waiting lists for the dwindling number of council or housing association homes, and many more would like to join those lists if they could be deemed eligible.

Having a secure, affordable home is a vital anchor in people's lives - I might even argue it is a fundamental human right. It is surely something we expect in a modern democracy. By 'affordable' I mean genuinely affordable - where people can cover their housing costs through their caring or through housing benefit, without getting into financial difficulties. I emphasise this because, as I'll come back to in this book, the word 'affordable' is frequently used in the housing sector in a very misleading way, referring to homes that are not at all within the reach of people on low, or even average, incomes.

Politicians' responses to the growing housing disaster have been feeble. They are fixated on home ownership and, currently, Labour's main policy on housing is a claim that it will get the home ownership rate back up to 70%.¹

But let's drop this fantasy and face reality. For there to be a surge in homebuying, young peoples' wages would have to shoot up, or house prices would have to plummet, or the taxpayer would have to finance huge state 'help to buy' subsidies. None of these

seem likely. The only other way would be for families to cripple themselves financially, taking on a massive burden of debt if they were allowed to borrow more than five times their earnings, or locked into immensely long mortgages. Would that be good for them?

As I'll set out in this book, there are 8m people in this country in housing need, plus millions more who have a

roof over their head in the private rented sector but live with the fear of arbitrary eviction or rents rising beyond their reach. Vote-catching promises about increasing home ownership are not going to bring these people any closer to a secure home, in good condition, that they can afford.

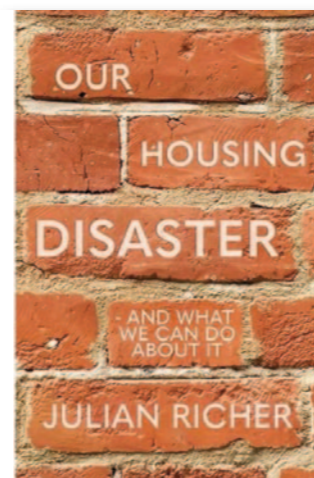
I want a better deal for them.

We have a housing disaster on our hands. This book argues that the only way to tackle it is with a new mindset, decisive action, and cash. There is no escaping that the government will have to invest money, but in the long term there will also be huge savings, plus a gain in state assets. We need to recognise that providing good quality, rented housing, let on secure tenancies, at rents people can afford, is the only way to address society's immediate, urgent needs. We must acknowledge that this calls for state intervention - that the housing this country needs as a priority is what we'd broadly call 'social housing': homes to rent that have not been developed for profit. We need to admit that dismantling the supply of council housing, through a combination of underinvestment and the Right to Buy, has created a real social crisis.

Policy-makers have already recognised that the UK has an undersupply of housing and that many more homes need to be built over the next decade. My argument is that boosting the supply cannot be simply up to the market. All that will happen is a repeat of what has taken place over the past 20 years, with house prices moving further and further out of reach for ordinary working people and nothing done for those who will never be able to buy.

In this book I look at how bad things are, how Britain got into this mess and what we can do to find practical ways forward. There is much that can be done if there is the will and if we can get rid of the legal and financial restrictions preventing the supply of genuinely affordable homes.

I'm calling on politicians, local authorities, and private landlords to have the courage to act, and to get this country out of the mire of bad housing that is causing misery for millions. ■



SEE what Peter Bill says about this book in *iPILLO!*



Julian Richer

INTERWAR British Architecture 1919-39 by Gavin Stamp

An authoritative survey of British buildings between the wars by the late Gavin Stamp – one of Britain's best-known architecture critics

INTERWAR British Architecture 1919-39 by GAVIN STAMP
592 Pp | £40 Hardback
Profile books

Jeremy Melvin writes:

Gavin Stamp, who died in 2017, devoted much of his career as an architectural historian to promoting architects whose reputations had suffered from swings in ideology and fashion, writes Jeremy Melvin.

Many of his favourites practised during the interwar period, though some began their careers before 1900 and several survived into the 1950s.

He was instrumental in founding the Thirties Society (itself a response to an influential exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1979), which has since become the Twentieth Century Society; he personally resurrected the reputation of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott – designer of Liverpool Anglican Cathedral and Cambridge University's central library and much else, who was possibly his favourite and certainly the subject of his most extensive research. He also played a role in the revival of Edwin Lutyens' reputation after another Hayward exhibition in 1981-2, and, as *Private Eye's* architectural correspondent *Piloti* (where he replaced John Betjeman), became the scourge of unthinking redevelopment of buildings with even the most remote merit, their owners, local and statutory authorities and architects.

Left more or less finished at his death, *Interwar: British Architecture 1919-1939* (Profile Books, £40) was prepared for publication by his widow Rosemary Hill (herself a biographer of AWN Pugin), who also contributes a foreword. This book can be

seen as the culmination of Stamp's oeuvre. In assembling a cast of interesting, sometimes superb but often quirky buildings, it does not disappoint. True to form, it is also provocative and opinionated, often with some justification. He claims Lutyens' Memorial Arch at Thiepval, a tribute to the British army's missing on the Somme, is the best piece of British architecture of the period, which is eccentric though not wholly unsupportable.

Less plausible are the seemingly endless array of elaborated shaped and constructed new churches in suburbs (often London but also other cities). The best are outstanding, but too often they seem formulaic compositions based on a loose interpretation of the ziggurat form. The urge for ziggurats has unclear origins though may have something to do with the awakening interest in Byzantine architecture, with centralised plans rising to a dome. But many of these churches see, to this reviewer at least, to be the equivalent of the long – and dreadfully tedious – poems that TS Eliot, long after 'The Wasteland' and 'Ash Wednesday', wrote to fulfil his duty as a convert to Anglicanism.

Most of these buildings appear in the chapter 'Modern Gothic', though in some examples the gothicness is even less apparent than in *Modern Gothic Architecture*, a book written by Sir T G Jackson in 1873, which underpinned the 'Queen Anne revival' of the late 19th century. Other chapters are Armistice (war memorials); the Grand Manner – monumental classicism; Swedish Grace; Brave New World, in respect of new building

INTERWAR British Architecture 1919-39 by Gavin Stamp

A comprehensively illustrated & refreshing history of inter-war British architecture that looks beyond modernism and gives a fuller picture of a rich and varied era.

British architecture between the wars is most famous for the rise of modernism – the flat roofs, clean lines and concrete of the Isokon flats in Hampstead and the Penguin Pool at London Zoo – but the reality was far more diverse. As the modernists came of age and the traditionalists began to decline, there arose a rich variety of styles and tastes in Britain and across the empire, a variety that reflected the restless zeitgeist of the years before the Second World War.

At the time of his death in 2017, Gavin Stamp, one of Britain's leading architectural critics, was at work on a deeply considered account of British architecture in the interwar period, correcting what he saw as the skewed view of earlier historians who were unable to see past modernism. Beginning with a survey of the modern movement after the armistice, Interwar untangles the threads that link lesser-known movements like the Egyptian

revival with the enduring popularity of the Tudorbethan, to chronicle one of Britain's most dynamic architectural periods. The result is more than an architectural history; it is the portrait of a changing nation.

As an account of the period that still shapes much of Britain's towns and cities, Gavin Stamp's final work is the definitive history of British architecture between the Great War and the Blitz.

*Gavin Stamp was an architectural historian and scholar, one of Britain's leading experts on pre-war building and design. 'Brought up in a Tudor bungalow on the Orpington by-pass', as he recalled, he was educated on a scholarship at Dulwich College. Prolific as an author, curator and journalist, as 'Piloti' he wrote *Private Eye's* 'Nooks & Corners' column from 1978 until his death in 2017.*

He was chairman of the 20th-Century Society from 1983-2007, and wrote more than twenty books on topics including Edwin Lutyens, George Gilbert Scott, brutalism, and telephone boxes.

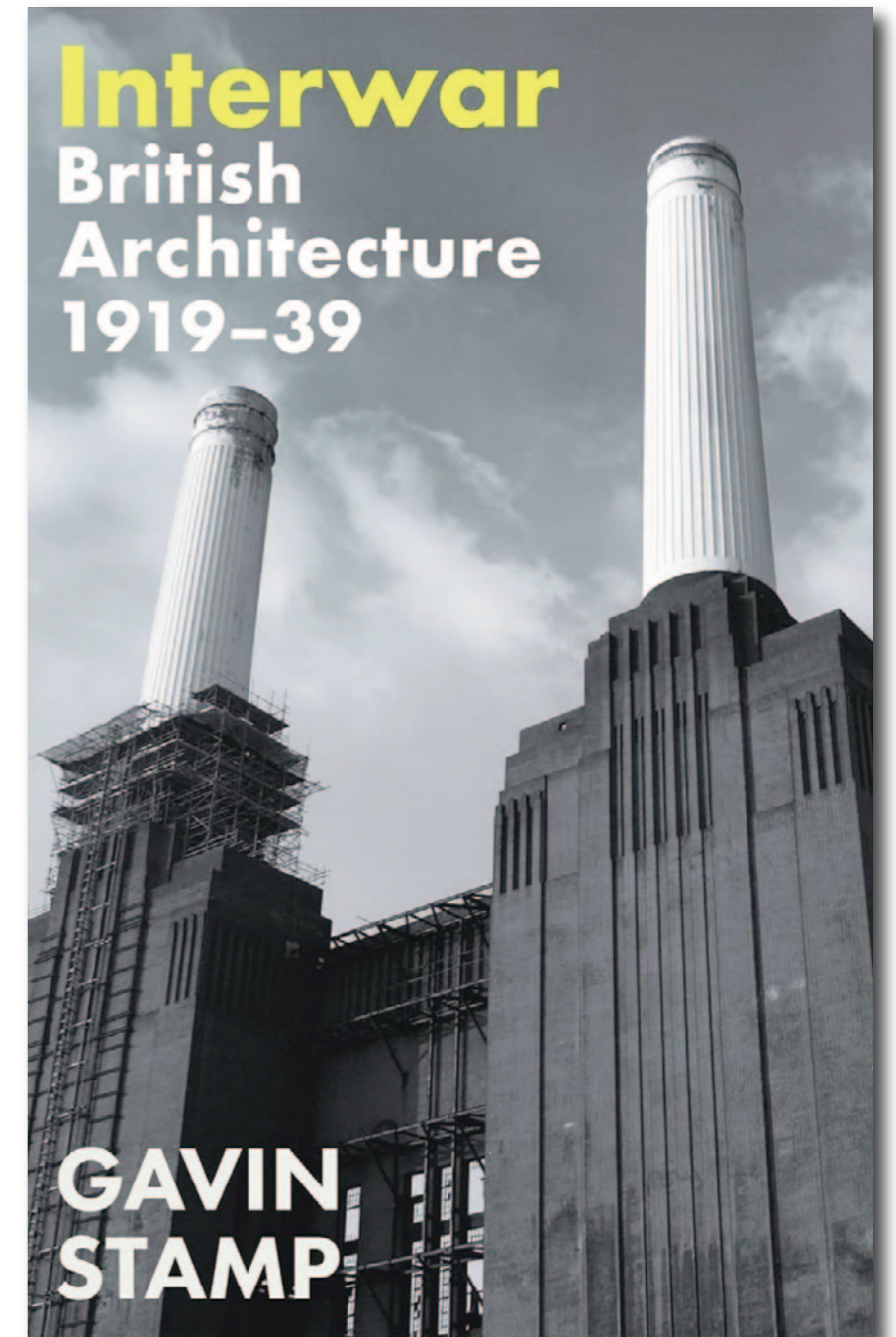
types like tube stations; Tutankhamen, dealing with the vogue, following the opening of the boy pharaoh's tomb in 1922, for Egyptiana and its cousin, the English version of Art Deco; the arts and craft diehards in Merrie England; the New Georgians; and a slightly mealy-mouthed analysis of modernism and social architecture in *The Shape of Things to Come*.

This certainly looks comprehensive. There is much to enjoy, since Stamp writes elegantly, informatively and with wit. His pithy way of recording what his acute eye noticed introduces new ways of looking at buildings that conventional opinion had dismissed. However, at times his enthusiasm carries him away – do we need so many mentions of Sir Giles Scott's World War I Memorial Chapel at Charterhouse, for instance? I am sure Stamp would have justified this vigorously, if only because to modernists it would superficially have been anathema; his close inspection might reveal greater depth.

Stamp clearly enjoys eclecticism. He relishes Oliver Hill's undogmatic capability to swing from modernism in a series of houses at Frinton-on-Sea or the Midland Hotel in Morecombe, through the almost Spanish Revivalism (Marylands in Surrey) to the ruggedly magnificent arts-and-crafts-based Cour House in Kintyre. In the same country, similarly rugged but recognisably classical, he admires Robert Lorimer's Scottish National War Memorial. And of course his dislike for Herbert Baker's London work, such as the elephantine additions to the Bank of England, draw his ire, though he respects other commissions such as the Winchester College War Memorial. Indeed his comment that Baker's triumph in getting that commission over his old bete noire Lutyens may have saved the latter a loss of reputation. It is Lutyens whom Stamp admires alongside Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (two of the six architects to receive the Order of Merit, the highest British honour). Stamp's opinion of the Thiepval Arch has already been mentioned, but the Viceroy's House in New Delhi (now Rashtrapati Bhavan or President's Palace) is almost as praised.

In this range, admirable though it is, lies the rub. For all its erudition, this book remains a litany of building descriptions. There is little analysis of the underlying forces that were driving architecture at the time, bar the odd reference to the collective shock and national grief that arose after World War I, or the need to build new churches in expanding suburbs. The major housebuilding programme following that war gets no more than a passing mention.

This period saw a remarkable and often inventive eclecticism, which was almost guillotined at the end by World War II and its effects, one of which was to bring modernism to the fore as a mode for publicly funded architecture. The generation who held sway after 1945 may not have agreed on what modernism was, but they knew they had to present themselves as modernists. How and why this happened may be outside the strict scope of Stamp's work, but it does beg the question of why one mode, which barely existed before 1939, swept almost all before it after



1945.

One partial answer is that the 1930s saw the fulfilment of the RIBA's policy of compulsory registration for architects. Started in the 1890s, when all the best-known architects opposed it, registration finally became law in 1938. It meant that architects, for the first time, became an identifiable and legally recognisable group to whom a technocratic government, first during World War II and then during post-war reconstruction, could turn to in realising their policies for munitions factories or housing.

Bound up with this is the growth of town planning, again through statutory legislation in the 1930s – generally considered unsatisfactory. Cemented through (second-world) wartime policies established by the Barlow Commission and the Abercrombie Reports, it culminated in the Town & Country Planning Act of 1947. The evil genius behind this was J M Keynes, the leading light on the Macmillan Commission of the early 1930s, who managed to transform conceptions of planning from a function of public

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RIGHT:
Arnos Grove Underground
Station (Charles Holden,
Adams Holden & Pearson
1932)

BELOW:
Hoover Factory, Perivale
(Wallis, Gilbert & Partners
1932)



>>> health into a tool of economic policy. Both registration and statutory planning still shape the possibilities and indeed the very existence of the architectural profession. Bound up with this is the growth of town planning, again through statutory legislation in the 1930s – generally considered unsatisfactory. Cemented through (second-world) wartime policies established by the Barlow Commission and the Abercrombie Reports, it culminated in the Town & Country Planning Act of 1947. The evil genius behind this was J M Keynes, the leading light on the Macmillan Commission of the early 1930s, who managed to transform conceptions of planning from a function of public health into a tool of economic policy. Both registration and statutory planning still shape the possibilities and indeed the

very existence of the architectural profession.

Both registration and planning segued into the architectural profession's collective liking for socialist policies, which guaranteed a stream of post-1945 work on fixed fee scales. Principals of firms like Yorke Rosenberg and Mardall, Powell and Moya, and Howell Killick Partridge and Amis benefited enormously from the public building policy covering housing, education and health.

Exploring this would require another book and an author with another set of skills. It would complement Stamp's impressive prelude. ■

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Look Here - on the Pleasures of Observing the City



**Look Here - On
the Pleasures of
Observing the
City by Ana
Kinsella, Daunt
Books reviewed
by Diane
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London Society
Trustee**

£9.19 on Amazon

Ana Kinsella takes the reader on a stroll across London observing its buildings, people and seasons as the walks frame moments in time, revisit memories and form new ones. With some of the book set amid the Covid-19 pandemic, it also captures the very strange time when central London was empty; when it felt like someone had pressed pause, yet only a couple of miles either side some neighbourhoods thrived and parks became the centre of outdoor life.

The book connects the reader to London and even for those who don't know it that well there will be mentions of a view, a building or a journey that will likely stir a memory.

Not content with offering her own memories and observations on her London walks the author also intersperses her thoughts with individuals, tube station staff, musicians, fashion designers and others, some of whom remain anonymous, reinforcing that it's the capital which is the focus here.

From Chinatown to Smithfield, Hampstead to Mayfair she criss-crosses London and its neighbourhoods from the globally famous Oxford Circus, Tate Modern and Trafalgar Square to the neighbourhood squares at a more local level where she notices the trees and benches near her home and how the people who

use the space interact with each other. Along the way there are field notes to mark the seasons and how areas change.

A quote by American urban planner Kevin Lynch puts the book in context as he suggested that "We use the built environment - streets, walls, districts, monuments - to form a mental map of the place where we live".

This is what Kinsella does in taking us with her on a walk around London and in reminding us that there are many aspects of cities that shape how we experience them.

Perhaps the key takeaway is how it's impossible to be an objective onlooker – anywhere - but more so in cities as there is so much to observe. Kinsella suggests that we always bring our own identities and biases and experience with us during our observations and also that there are barriers to movement that relate to class, race and money if we choose to look.

Whether you know London really well or just pass through, this book is an enjoyable read. It comes back to you when you're walking around some of the better-known places featured and makes you pause a little longer now as a reminder to see what's around you. ■

From the London Society newsletter

