Studies on Housing Policies from the Perspective of Town Planning in Modern Britain

Yuan LIANG¹,a,*

¹School of Translation Studies, Shandong University, Weihai 264209, China
²lyraliang@sdu.edu.cn
*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Housing has been one of the most pressing problems during the urbanization process in modern Britain. This paper tried to interpret housing policies beyond the fields of politics and laws, and understand this issue with a new perspective of town planning. Through combing the changes of housing policies within the scope of town planning, and combining the relevant housing legislations and local authorities’ practice, this paper analyzed various features and effects of housing policies in public health, housing planning and comprehensive planning stages respectively. Housing policies have been deeply incorporated into town planning policies and evolved with the latter. Consequently, residents have gained not only sanitary and adequate houses, but also the improved urban environment. As town planning developed in depth and scope, housing policies even became an efficient method to evacuate the population in big cities and the important measure to optimalize spatial structure at the regional level.

Introduction

As the pioneer of modern industrialization and urbanization, Britain also first confronted serious “urban disease”, represented by housing problems, environmental pollution, epidemic diseases and crimes. Under this circumstance, town planning arose as the realistic method to solve economic and social problems in modern Britain. Residential houses were architectures with the biggest amount and occupied for the longest time, so their condition has been of great influence to urban environment and citizens’ health condition. Therefore, housing problems have always been the priority in urban governance and environmental improvement. Consequently, housing polices have played as an essential part of town planning and evolved with the development of the latter.

Since the first Public Health Act, 1848, Britain had carried out town planning movement through three stages. The first stage focused on public health, which lasted from 1848 to 1875. The second stage focused on housing problems, which lasted from 1875 to 1909. The third stage focused on comprehensive management, which lasted from 1909 to 1939. Housing policies had occupied an important position all through these three stages. However, housing problems had taken on various features and were dealt with unique measures.

Though many publications have involved with housing policies in modern Britain, few of them paid much attention to their evolution, especially within the frame work of town planning movement. Therefore, through combing the changes of housing policies from the perspective of town planning, and combining the relevant housing legislations and local authorities’ practice, this paper tried to analyze various features and effects of housing policies in different stages, therefore to deepen the understanding on housing administration in modern Britain.

The Public Health Stage Focusing on the Quality of Individual Houses

Residential houses have always been considered as a private commodity, nearly out of governments’ control. In the middle ages, residential houses were usually constructed and occupied by owners.
themselves, who would consider the sanitary condition and appearance of the houses consciously. With the rapid increase of population in the cities since the Industrial Revolution, the factory owners and private constructors began to build residential houses, selling or renting them to labors. From then on, houses had become the commodity and the aim of construction had transformed into gaining profits. Under this circumstance, in order to save cost, most residential houses were built in low quality and within bad environment. The high rent and exceeded population also caused congestion problems. What’s worse, most residential houses of working classes lacked necessary water supply and draining devices, which meant that the waste water was put into the streets and polluted the underground water. As the drinking water, their pollution would further lead to cholera epidemic. Therefore, town planning rose in modern Britain primarily coping with sanitary problems, signified by the first public health act in 1848.

From 1848 to 1875, management toward housing problems was within the framework of public health legislations and executive administration. According to the authorization from public health acts and some housing acts, local governments were able to control not only the existed houses, but also to set standard for new buildings and control the spatial relation between streets and houses. As the first legislative response, Public Health Act, 1848 focused on improving the surrounding environment of houses but failed to empower local governments to control the architectures. It was Sanitary Act, 1866 that first began to cope with insanitary houses, in which “all houses with too many residents, all dirty and crowded factories and workshops” were considered as “nuisance” and subjected to local governments’ public health measures (s. 19). Then the Public Health Act, 1875 further strengthened the power of local authorities in improving the quality of residential houses. They were empowered to force the owners of insanitary houses to install or renew drainage systems (ss. 23, 24); to close down insanitary houses (s. 75); to make bylaws with “respect to the structure of walls, foundations, roofs and chimneys of new buildings” to secure their stability, prevent fires and for purposes of health; “with respect to the sufficiency of the space about the buildings to secure a free circulation of air and the ventilation of buildings” (s. 157).

Under the guidance and authorization from the central government, local governments make great effort to raise the quality of residential houses in order to improve the overall physical environment for disease control and prevention. The primary attention was paid to deal with the drainage and sewage problems of existed houses, which directly decided the inner sanitary conditions. In Manchester, under the order of the Council, the sewers of most houses were transformed from “privy middens” into “pail closets” which could be cleaned more easily and frequently. By 1881, out of 72,504 houses, 60,000 had been installed with pail closets.[1]178-179 In Birmingham, the treatment to houses and streets were synchronous, whose successful solution was the construction of a general drainage system and most sewage was finally discharged into the sewage farm alongside Tame River.[2]426-428 Secondly, local governments improved the quality of existed houses by reconstruction and reconditioning. The Council of Manchester established the Building and Sanitary Regulation Committee as early as in 1844. By 1851, this committee had organized to reconstruct 17,927 houses, which accounted 35% of the total number in the city. Through the Manchester Waterworks and Improvement Act, 1867, the Council got the power to make “closing orders” to insanitary houses which was carried out by the Unhealthy Dwelling Committee. According to the record of their first year’s achievement, 9,400 dwellings (8,181 houses and 1,218 cellars), containing 47,000 people, 19% of the total population, had been inspected and dealt with. After the alterations, the ratio of the privy to inhabitants had been lowered from 1:60 to 1:12.[1]287-288 Finally, local governments began to regulate new houses by passing local acts and provision. According to the Birmingham Improvement Act, 1861, all builders of houses in future should “provide proper drains and to submit plans so that the local authority could judge whether the drainage was adequate”; houses could “no longer be left by the projectors altogether unprovided with any sanitary requirements”; house fronts “were to stand at least seven yards back from the center of the road”. [2]425 Whereas in Leeds, a local act in 1872 required no future building of enclosed court to be allowed in the city [3]173.
Generally speaking, compared with pre-planning period, Britain not only strengthened its administrative intervention, but also laid standard for new buildings which changed the mechanism in treating housing problems from “afterward remedy” to “prearranged guidance”. However, the legislations and execution on housing problems within the scope of public health movement focused mainly on the quality of residential houses in a small scale. But for big slum areas, if local governments couldn’t make massive clearance, the houses’ quality couldn’t be improved thoroughly. What’s worse, the building groups couldn’t form suitable layout, and the streets constrained by them couldn’t be constructed with a better design. In this sense, the housing management in public health period was still at the primary stage, and the effect was limited by the public health legislations. More comprehensive and prospective housing policies still depended on the further development in town planning.

The Housing Planning Stage Focusing on the Quantity and Structure of Building Groups

Under the legislative and administrative limits of public health movement, the housing problems couldn’t be solved from the root. The improvement of individual houses’ quality couldn’t bring the overall change for urban appearance. Since 1870s, people gradually realized the urban environmental problems were not only related with the quality but also the quantity of houses, especially those occupied by working classes. Therefore, the focus of town planning had been turned into massive clearance toward slum areas and sufficient accommodation for working classes. Britain passed the Artisans’ and Laborers’ Dwelling Improvement Act in 1875. From then on, the new stage of town planning movement had begun, in which the housing management actually evolved into the housing planning.

Before the 1875 act, only individual and small-scale houses were subject to legislative and administrative control. Under this circumstance, such phenomenon might appear that one specific building was or had been improved to be sanitary, well ventilated and with enough sunshine whereas it might strike negative influence to other architectures or even the whole block. In an essay called “Why the Artisans’ Dwellings Bill Was Wanted”, the famous social activist Octavia Hill wrote vividly, “The houses all round belonged to owners who had no interest in awarding a larger share of light and air to the dwellers in the court. Nor was there any means of compelling them to do so. … Who among us could ever move back that great wall which overshadowed the little houses and made twilight at mid-day? … Who would remove the house at the entrance under which the archway passed, or that at the end, and let a free current of air sweep through the closed court? None of us.” [4]95-96

The 1875 act was passed to deal with problems above. The act was to be put in motion if the medical officer reported to state that “an area was characterized by houses or courts that were unfit for human habitation, or that diseases indicating a generally low condition of health amongst the population have been from time to time prevalent in a certain area”. These conditions had to be “reasonably attributed to the closeness, narrowness, and bad arrangement or the bad condition of the streets and houses or groups of houses” and “the defects cannot be effectually remedied otherwise than by an improvement scheme for the re-arrangement and reconstruction of the streets and houses within such area.”[5]58 Under this act, local authorities were empowered to purchase the land where slum areas lay and demolish all the buildings above, therefore to make comprehensive improvement by means of “improvement schemes”. Therefore, compared with public health acts, the 1875 act paid much attention to the structural problem of building groups. Besides, this act extended its management object to undeveloped areas that local authorities must make improvement schemes to plan the demolished, reconstructed and newly developed areas in advance. The schemes would be put forward to Local Government Board, some of which could be proved as provisions. They must be further confirmed in parliament, then to be carried out by local authorities. [5]59-60

At the stage of the public health movement, local authorities had already begun to improve residential houses by means of reconditioning and reconstruction which however applied only to
individual buildings. Empowered by housing acts, local authorities began to manage houses in a much greater scope through comprehensive improvement schemes, and the attention was beyond the quality of architectures themselves but extended to layouts of building groups. In Manchester, a special committee, “the Unhealthy Dwellings Committee”, was appointed to deal with the dilapidated and insanitary dwellings. The sanitary inspectors reported houses unfit for human habitation; the Medical Officer of Health and committee members would inspect them. Then the Committee would inform the landlords to close down the buildings and provide them with a plan of alterations. In practice, various methods of improvement were adopted: “back-to-back houses were converted into through houses”, or when this kind of houses existed in rows, “every third pair might be demolished so as to provide common yards shared by those remaining”. “Some of the houses in congested groups were knocked down so as to provide more light and air for the remainder.” From 1885 to 1906, about 500 houses had been reconstructed each year. The number had risen to over 2000 from then on till the outbreak of the War. [6]15-17 All the reconditioned houses were good in quality and reasonable in architectural layouts.

On the other hand, the shortage in housing had also gained enough attention. Even the quality of houses could be improved by public health movement; the inner sanitary condition would become worse due to overcrowding, which could hardly be solved by sanitary management. Therefore, Britain began to consider the quantity problems of housing as a new emergency. During housing planning stage, “rehousing” or “replacement” principle was established to ensure that all the displaced population in slum clearance could be properly resettled. According to the 1875 act, if the local authorities applied improvement schemes, they would bear the responsibility to replace all the removed families with proper houses. [5]46-42 In the following Artizans and Labors Dwellings Act, (1868) Amendment Act, 1879 and Artizans’ Dwelling Act, 1882, the rehousing obligation was relaxed and then entirely withdrawn, owing to “the laze-faire ideology, the disposal of government’s role, the over pursuit of profits and ignorance to the poor”. [7] It was not until the pass of Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890 that the slum clearance and rehousing the displaced population were confirmed as the obligation of local governments. Meanwhile, the 1890 act enlarged local authorities’ power in building and purchasing land, adjusted the location and number of new dwellings and provided more favorable loaning policies (ss.11, 13, 23, 40, 70). Under both pressure and motivation, local governments were more willingly and more capable of implementing improvement schemes, and the rehousing task was carried on more efficiently. The Council of Manchester put forward an improvement scheme, which was confirmed by the Local Government Board as “the Manchester Laborers Dwellings Scheme, 1890”. [8] According to the scheme, two large blocks of five-story flats, located “within the reach of the displaced tenants” and much better than the old slum houses, were erected to rehouse one half of the working class displaced (1, 870). During the years 1897 to 1904, the Manchester Corporation undertook various schemes for building small blocks of two- and three- story flats. [6]21-22 In Leeds, where back-to-back houses had a long tradition, there were 30, 000 such housed built prior to 1844. Between 1844 and 1874, there were 28, 000 newly built back-to-back houses and another 12, 000 by 1909 after the bold slum clearance schemes. However, under the regulation of housing acts and local provisions, these new houses were built with high sanitary standards. [9]135

In short, all the rebuilt and newly built architectures, no matter commercial, public buildings or residential houses, were all constructed and designed in a more comprehensive perspective within the improvement schemes. Therefore, the sanitary problems caused by unsuitable structure could be avoided in the future. However, as the improvement schemes were only applied in a certain area of the city, it was quite impossible for local authorities to ensure that the architectures within the improvement area coordinated with those besides. For instance, in Birmingham, by the end of the 19th century, “the shopping areas were fairly clearly defined”. “The administrative buildings were conveniently at the western end of Colmore Row,“ and the “highly specialized industrial areas were near the center of the city, like the Jewelers’ Quarter, near St. Paul’s Square”. [10]22-23 On the contrary, improvement schemes scattered casually all through the city, residential houses built on the
cleared areas might just close to industrial or commercial areas. In such circumstances, residents were hardly spared from the air pollution and noise disturbance. If the shortage in housing was mainly due to the local authorities’ inability in building municipal houses limited by housing acts, this still could be solved by new housing acts in the future. However, the limitations of improvement schemes under housing acts with respects to their scope and subjects were beyond the capability of housing planning strategies.

The Comprehensive Planning Stage Focusing on Reasonable Zoning and Regional Distribution

After the public health and housing planning stages, the quality of residential houses and their structures had been dramatically improved which brought higher living condition and better environment to citizens in Britain. Meanwhile, the governmental intervention toward private properties during planning movement had been accepted by the whole society. All these laid the solid foundation for the further and deeper planning practices which aimed to cope with the chaos caused by the mixing architectures with different functions.

The first “planning” act was passed in 1909 (Housing, Town Planning, Etc., Act, 1909), which started the comprehensive consideration on reasonable zoning all through cities. According to the act, local authorities had to prepare a “planning scheme” for their administrative region. Compared to “improvement schemes” under housing acts, planning schemes could control all the streets, architectures, public spaces, and public facilities within a large area. Most importantly, the planning scheme must “secure proper sanitary conditions, amenity, and convenience in connection with the laying out and use of the land, and of any neighboring lands.” (s. 54) To be specific, if an area was planned to be developed as a residential community, all the buildings on it must satisfy sanitary requirement and suitable layouts. What’s more, this estate couldn’t be next to an industrial district which should only be confined to separated areas. In this sense, “housing reform had gradually been conceived in terms of larger and larger units”. With the deeper and wider treatment toward urban problems, town planning was “a logical extension, in accordance with changing aims and conditions, of earlier legislation concerned with housing and public health.” [4]181 In Birmingham, the city enlarged its boundaries in 1911, and 55% of the enlarged area hadn’t been developed yet, which presented a great opportunity to the town planning. Between 1909 and 1939, the Birmingham Council prepared 9 planning schemes, each of which was with different goals and contents according to their specific locations and resources. In “the Edgbaston, Quinton and Harborne Planning Scheme”, the area was considered “to be best adapted for purely residential purposes”, and scheduled with no factories. In “the East Birmingham Scheme”, as an industrial district already, the area had been “deemed advisable to reserve factory sites”. [11]38 Besides, land within this scheme was reasonably zoned and arranged according to their functions. Three pieces of industrial estate were scheduled in the northwest, middle and southwest of the area, where the main railroads and canals were nearby and it was convenient for transportation. The residential area was separated from the industrial area with open spaces like playing fields and park belts. According to the scheme, “except with the consent of the Corporation no dwelling-houses or buildings other than factories or workshops shall be erected on lands” within or near the residential area. [11]171 It can be seen that the Corporation of Birmingham had solved the problems of functional disorder through reasonable zoning. Citizens could not only live in sanitary houses but also live with amenity and convenience. From this aspect, housing policies were further incorporated into planning movement. Since the pass of Town Planning Act, 1925, the housing and planning acts were separated. Housing acts mainly dealt with the shortage of dwellings and encouraged governments to contribute more in providing adequate dwellings. However, housing policies played a more active and essential part in town planning field.

With the development of regional economy and the emergence of “Conurbation”, regional planning rose in modern Britain. “Conurbation” was created by Patrick Geddes to describe a region comprising a number of cities with close economic connection.[12]34-36 This kind of region would be centered with one big city which was surrounded by some smaller towns. The primary aim of
regional planning was to relax the housing and employment burden of the centre city and disperse them into outer peripheral towns and coutry area. “The Doncaster Regional Planning Scheme” in 1922 was the first regional planning scheme, which aimed to distribute population and industry of Doncaster into its neighboring cites.[13] “The Manchester and District Joint Town Planning Advisory Committee” founded in 1921 also aimed to strengthen the communication of population and industry within the region and with other cities outside the region.[14] By 1938, 138 joint (regional) planning commottes had been founded, and nearly all of local authorites belonged to one of them.[15][170 At the meanwhile, as a special type of regional planning, the construction of satellite cities emerged. After WWI, as the “Home for Heros” campaign raised the standard of working-class houses, the whole nation was determined that there should be rapid building of these new houses, at not more than 12 to the acre. In the central belt of Manchester, houses averaged about 60 to the acre. To satisfy the new standard, no less than 52 000 new houses would be needed within 10 years.[16][145-147 The Council of Manchester found a proper place in the south, the Wythenshawe estate belonging to the Tatton family. The estate was purchased and built into the first satellite city in Britain, Wythenshawe. According to the planning scheme, 25 000 houses accommodating 80 000 residents would be built and about 500 acres were to be reserved for industrial buildings.[17] The housing pressure in Manchester was greatly relieved by Wythenshawe. As regional planning developed into one kind of the macroeconomic policy, housing policies had been incorporated into it and played a more important role than providing adequate and comfortable houses.

Summary
To conclude, the quality and quantity of residential houses directly influenced the physical environment and living conditions of citizens. Housing policies have performed as an essential role for local governments to improve the living standard of citizens and relax social contradictions. Since 1848, when the first public health act was passed, housing policies were included in public health administration and the focus was on raising the sanitary conditions of individual houses. At the housing planning stage, housing policies evolved in their objects and scope. After extensive clearance in slum areas, the layout arrangement of housing groups was controlled through “improvement schemes”. Meanwhile, the rehousing obligation established the fixed principle of state intervention in housing and the municipal responsibility for providing dwellings, which greatly eased the housing shortage. As town planning developed further, housing policies were more closely incorporated into planning policies. After reasonable zoning through “planning schemes”, houses were constructed in high quality, rational structure, and harmonized with surrounding architectures. What’s more, with the rise of regional planning, housing policies had been applied to solve the overpopulated problem of big cities, therefore constituted an essential part of macroeconomic and social policies in modern Britain.

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