



Assessing Aylesbury: What's the true cost of demolishing council estates?

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New evidence has emerged about Southwark Council's decision a decade ago to bulldoze the Aylesbury estate. *Keith Cooper* reports

Rocketing house prices and the need to densify London have transformed hundreds of its post-war estates into prime land for redevelopment. Demolishing and doubling the densities of occupied estates would ease the city's housing crisis significantly, according to unpublished research by Savills, while the principle of densifying estates to create a wave of 'city villages' has been previously championed by the chairman of the government's new infrastructure commission, Andrew Adonis.

But there is also a backlash from those who claim such efforts are 'gentrification' or even 'social cleansing', and argue instead for a less radical programme of estate refurbishment.

So what does the row over one of the most prominent estates in the capital, the Aylesbury, reveal about what is going on? And where should architects stand on the issues involved?

The 2,700-home Aylesbury in Walworth, south-east London, has become a rallying point for protestors such as Architects for Social Housing (ASH), which has protested at events this year including the Stirling Prize and the AJ120 Awards.

The estate, designed by Hans Peter 'Felix' Trenton, was completed in 1977, but by the 80s was viewed as failing. In 2005, Southwark Council – which has also overseen the demolition of the nearby Heygate estate – decided to knock it down.



Just last month, however, architecture professor Jane Rendell (*pictured left*) publicly accused the council of presenting a 'misleading' case to councillors ahead of this 2005 crunch decision. Rendell, who teaches at the Bartlett, is providing pro bono advice to remaining Aylesbury residents, and says she believes demolition will disadvantage and displace them. She is also a leaseholder on another Southwark estate which may also be redeveloped.

Rendell made her accusations during a public inquiry into a compulsory purchase order (CPO) for the

homes of Aylesbury leaseholders who refuse to vacate the next section due be knocked down.

The inquiry, which began in May and resumed last month, analysed reams of research, designs and costings by architects Levitt Bernstein and BPTW, engineer Conisbee and development consultancy Frost Associates. All were commissioned by Southwark to help evaluate and price up refurbishment ahead of its crucial decision.

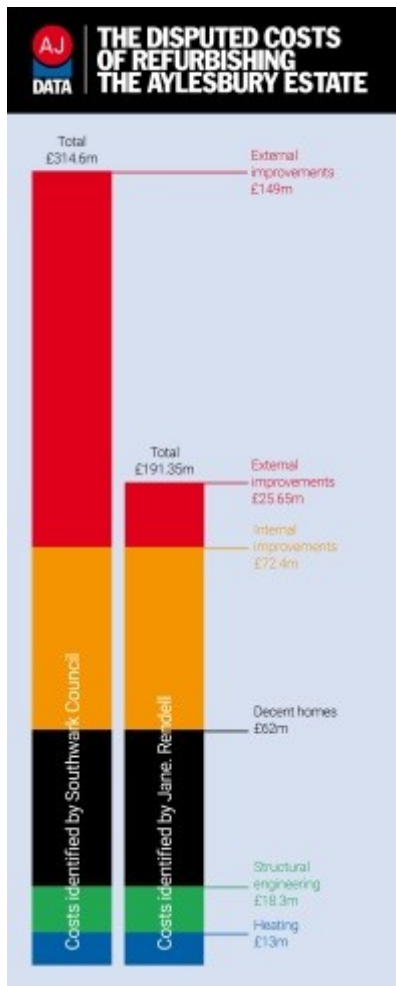
After extensively reviewing these reports, Rendell concluded that this ‘enormous’ amount of expert research had been summarised into a two-page appendix that failed ‘in any way to reflect the volume of work’. She also alleged that Southwark’s evidence for demolition and rebuild in the briefings was a ‘one-page flowchart’ that was ‘wholly inadequate ... to make such an important decision’.

In particular, Rendell challenged what she called the ‘extortionate’ price tag that Southwark attached to refurbishment. She said she found it ‘impossible to track down’ most of the cost for ‘external works’. This cost made up half of the £314 million total for refurbishment (*see box*).

‘Refurbishment might have been seen [by councillors] as a more viable option,’ she told the inquiry. ‘But it wasn’t possible for [Southwark’s] executive to tell from reading the evidence. From my reading, it was misleading.’

For their part, Levitt Bernstein, BPTW and Frost Associates are declining to comment on Rendell’s claims, while Conisbee says it never advises on costs.

Responding this week, Southwark said the £148.9 million figure was ‘conservative’ and had been arrived at after a ‘long and comprehensive investigation’ in 2005. A spokeswoman added: ‘None of the work to refurbish the estate was funded, which is why the council made the decision to regenerate with an external partner. We stand by the report and the decision.’



The authority is now working with housing association Notting Hill on the redevelopment, which aims to create 3,500 homes. While half of these are expected to be ‘affordable’, the new estate will have fewer homes for social rent but more ‘habitable’ rooms in this category. HTA Design is the masterplanner and Mae, Hawkins\Brown and Duggan Morris are designing homes for the next phase.

Speaking about the choice between refurbishment and redevelopment, HTA managing partner Ben Derbyshire says the process required ‘intensive involvement of the affected community, professional input and a political process ... a balance of costs and benefits’.

HTA, he adds, had ‘absolutely no reason to doubt the thoroughness’ of the process, leading to Southwark’s area action plan (AAP) on which its redevelopment brief was based. All architects involved had developed the AAP into the scheme ‘now approved by the council and supported by the majority of residents’.

Yet attempts to rebut Rendell’s evidence have failed to shake her belief that refurbishment remains a viable option for the Aylesbury.

She says architects should understand the ‘consequences of demolition’ and could ‘walk off jobs’ as a last resort if they cannot persuade clients to alter design briefs.

‘Would they want to be pushed out of areas in which they grew up so richer people could move? Or be

forced to pay extra for less quality and less space?’ she asks. ‘If the answer is no, it can hardly be right that they should enforce such conditions on others.’

Rendell’s appeal for architects to resist ‘unethical’ regeneration resonates with protest groups such as ASH, which also helps residents draw up alternatives to plans proposed by their landlords.

‘We should be challenging clients at the very beginning of a brief,’ says architect Geraldine Dening, who co-founded ASH after the estate that she lives in was earmarked for redevelopment. ‘There are alternatives to demolition but if people accept the status quo, nothing will change.’

Claire Bennie, who led development at housing association Peabody until April, says council leaders’ decisions to start from scratch are understandable.

‘They hear tales of dampness and broken lifts, see large costs on the horizon and have a duty to house more people,’ she says.

Architects could intervene more in the run up to redevelopment but not by acting alone, she adds. ‘We must help change the opaque processes by which estate regen decisions are often made. ‘These can be deeply unhelpful and alienating. We should be part of an earlier discussion with clients, councils, and residents to hammer out the issues and agree an equitable cost-benefit methodology.’

For the Aylesbury’s remaining residents, the inquiry into the council’s CPO is a last-ditch attempt to halt the remaining phases of demolition.

For those living in scores of other post-war estates that now face demolition, resistance to this prevailing approach now promises to be tougher than ever.

Resident’s view



Beverley Robinson (*pictured right*) is one of a number of Aylesbury residents opposing the compulsory purchase order. She moved on to the estate in 1988 and fears she would be forced to leave the area – home to many of her friends and family.

Robinson became a leaseholder after purchasing her home under right-to-buy in 2005, the year the estate was earmarked for demolition.

‘I like living in the area, saw it as a good investment and was told the estate was going to be refurbished,’ she told the inquiry.

Unemployed since 2010, she is mortgage free and lives off her savings. She had been offered £117,000

by the council for her flat and given the chance to purchase an equity share in a new one. Robinson, however, fears the council's rehousing policy would require her to plough all but £16,000 of her savings into the property.

Southwark Council said it was reviewing its rehousing policy following feedback from residents.