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Powell, R. orcid.org/0000-0002-8869-8954 (2021) *Against the public interest: power, financialization and PFI housing in England*. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 11 (2). pp. 337-340. ISSN 2043-8206

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620986414>

Powell R. *Against the public interest: Power, financialization and PFI housing in England*. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. 2021;11(2):337-340. Copyright © 2021 The Author(s). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620986414>. Article available under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

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Stuart Hodkinson, *Safe as Houses: Private Greed, Political Negligence and Housing Policy after Grenfell*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019; 272 pp: 9781526141866/9781526129987, £11.99 (pbk).

Against the public interest: power, financialization and PFI housing in England

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Stuart Hodkinson's book *Safe as Houses* extends our understanding of housing privatization and its effects to the contemporary period in dissecting the cataclysmic failures of housing "regeneration" funded through controversial Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) in England. If the 1980 Right to Buy policy marked the beginning of the "eclipse of council housing" (Cole and Furbey, 1994), then PFI housing symbolizes the near complete colonisation of social housing by a finance-led "property machine" (Atkinson and Jacobs, 2020). Rather than the state acting as a filter of financialization it facilitates and is complicit (Aalbers, 2016). The book offers a rigorous empirical account of the PFI process, from inception through to delivery to following the money, revealing the enormous transfer of public funds to private corporations it entails.

Each step through this journey further exposes the way in which financial imperatives and investor returns take precedence over the intended purpose of regeneration: improvements in housing conditions and the well-being of tenants. Many of the tenants in the book benefited little, many suffered immeasurably. Lives were turned upside down and complaints and protests met with a combination of indifference, ignorance, contempt and even intimidation (which Hodkinson himself was subjected to at the hands of Rydon Maintenance Ltd, the main contractor of the tragic Grenfell refurbishment). Hodkinson painstakingly details the flawed logics on which the incredibly complex PFI model is premised, the "living hell" of residents experiencing "regeneration" (often more akin to "degeneration" (Watt, 2020)), the scandalous silencing of tenants and obfuscation tactics of PFI partners, and how a small group of corporate players are able to extract millions in guaranteed profits from the public purse. Above all, Hodkinson offers a robust empirical account of the disastrous management, monitoring and regulation of PFI initiatives which provides compelling evidence for reading the Grenfell tragedy as social murder. The final chapter of the book sets out a vision for ensuring safe and secure homes for all.

The book is an urgent call for action and evidences the need for a systematic reappraisal of the relationship between housing, the state, private finance and tenants if further tragedies are to be avoided. Hodkinson shows how housing has been the subject of a complex, finance-led reconfiguration characterised by a massive power imbalance between tenants and PFI partners. It is impossible to do justice to the text given its range, scope and wealth of empirical material. In this short reflection I spotlight three key areas which Hodkinson has extended and opened up for scrutiny and where others might profitably follow in making sense of increasingly complex and polarized housing systems: deregulation; emotions and resistance; and connecting local injustices to systemic housing processes.

Hodkinson convincingly shows that it is the 'destructive combination of outsourced regeneration and self-regulation responsible for the Grenfell disaster' (p.48). His account of the origins of PFI as "the only game in town" and the rise of "outsourcing on steroids" provides a valuable complement to the work of scholars who have sought to understand the major shifts in contemporary housing systems over the last 40 years (for example Aalbers, 2016; Christophers, 2018; Cole and Furbey, 1994; Rolnik, 2019). Hodkinson's painstaking attention to detail exposes the murky, cost-cutting practice of self-certification and its tragic and catastrophic consequences. This goes well beyond shoddy

workmanship, botched jobs and fiddling contracts in evidencing the systematic negligence and indifference to resident well-being shared across so many PFI partners and contractors: 'I will randomly do an audit on something, like complaints, maybe once a year; depends on what the priorities are, the political priorities, and depends on the costs' (Lambeth's performance monitoring officer, p.168). This admission captures in a nutshell the systematic way in which PFI housing involves the usurping of resident needs and the social goals of estate regeneration by finance and the expectations of investors. The scandalous lack of monitoring and accountability resonates with notions of the centaur state with the increased surveillance, discipline and responsabilization of the urban poor in sharp contrast to the unprecedented freedoms at the top driven by economic deregulation, state retreat and the ascendancy of finance (Wacquant, 2010). Hodkinson makes an important contribution here in empirically connecting these opposing strategies and showing precisely how the deregulation and unfettered financial logics of neoliberal statecraft bear down on the urban poor. Rather than deregulation being a contextual backdrop as part of a narrative of neoliberalism, *Safe as Houses* places deregulation front and centre in articulating the one-sided nature of complex PFI contracts and the many conflicts of interest in their architecture. It captures the spectacular failings that abound from self-regulation in the name of value for money – a regulatory regime that chimes with Aalbers' (2016) concept of "regulated deregulation", which privileges elite interests and conveys greater freedoms to economic agents. This book offers a *template that others might follow in tracing through the everyday practices and consequences of deregulation and who profits from it.*

The distinct lack of care and empathy required to not only sidestep basic health and safety regulations, but to then close channels and governance structures identifying such failings and raising legitimate concerns, is a disturbing finding. Hodkinson takes us, powerfully and empirically, to the everyday manifestations of an asymmetrical housing system in capturing the despair, trauma and pain wrought upon the residents of stigmatised housing estates by those profiting from their "regeneration". The evidence on the experiences and treatment of tenants is at times relentless. The book tells the everyday story of PFI through the accounts of residents, whistleblowers and various stakeholders alongside meeting minutes, newsletters and email communications. This wealth of evidence on institutional incompetence, negligence and systematic evasion of scrutiny is impressively assembled and presented. It evidences the sheer scale of resident neglect, widespread complicity in their attempted silencing, and sensitively and powerfully articulates the emotional costs of PFI. The intrusion into domestic space within homes characterised by security and control pre-regeneration, but sometimes left uninhabitable post-regeneration, is akin to a violence which almost instantaneously, but often over long periods of residents' lives, represents the complete obliteration of any notion of "home" (see also Watt, 2020). Living through regeneration is a test of human endurance for many with some heroic acts of resistance and stoicism presented alongside devastating and traumatic experiences. The case of Edward details the scale of injustice and the flagrant flouting of health and safety laws. His resistance and fight back (over a staggering ten years!) against the "vandalism" bestowed on his home is at once inspirational but also a very stark example of the power imbalance tenants are faced with. The "work" carried out on Edward's home was so bad that it was deemed uninhabitable for his disabled son who was subsequently sectioned under the Mental Health Act. Edward's is but one of far too many stories of the undermining of security and control, the constant anxiety-inducing threat of displacement and dispossession, and the indifference of local authority "landlords" to the injustice and trauma they created for those whose homes and lives they were ostensibly there to improve. *Safe as Houses* skilfully interweaves these experiences with analysis of PFI contracts, financing, accounting, management and profits. In doing so, it points to the pressing need for housing scholars to *capture the relations of finance and*

corporate interests across scales and to integrate analyses of housing policy logics, governance and finance with the social realities of regeneration for tenants.

The field of housing studies has proven particularly profitable in delineating the transformation of the state. Concepts like commodification, marketization, financialization, economic deregulation, state retrenchment, accumulation by dispossession etc. have all been put to use and enriched in application to housing systems and their transformation within “advanced capitalist societies”. Yet these processes can often be somewhat detached from the everyday lives of those on the housing margins, with empirical accounts that clearly connect them to the micro spaces and relations of the concretized built environment often stymied by the complexity of their interactions and operation. *Safe as Houses* offers a valuable intervention here in *situating the daily realities of PFI regeneration within these broader, complex processes.*

The strength of Hodkinson’s analysis is in the detailing of unequal power relations and their devastating consequences across all stages of the PFI process. As well as its galvanising potential for housing activism and its blueprint for urgent action and change, one further important legacy of *Safe as Houses* is its extensive documenting of the way in which PFI housing works against the public interest, with such tragic consequences. Such a powerful and rigorous account of PFI housing and “Grenfell foretold” must surely convince of the need for more a radical, equitable and sustainable housing policy. One that serves the public interest, as opposed to the interests of finance.

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