

Gentrification in Ballymun

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[T]here must always be tenants even for the most infamous pigsties; and in which finally the house owner in his capacity as capitalist has not only the right, but, in view of the competition, to a certain extent also the duty of ruthlessly making as much out of his property in house rent as he possibly can. In such a society the housing shortage is no accident; it is a necessary institution and it can be abolished together with all its effects on health, etc., only if the whole social order from which it springs is fundamentally refashioned.

Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*, 1872¹

Stealing from the public purse

In this article, I argue that the regeneration of Ballymun was an act of class warfare by Dublin City Council and the Irish state – a state that was, and still is, determined to shed its responsibilities towards its citizens in favour of private interests. The Irish state seeks to encourage the accumulation of private property. It does so by undermining the notion of public housing and public services through encouraging what David Marquand terms ‘market mimicry’² and ‘enterprise culture’ within public services. Central to this market mimicry is the state’s approach to social housing, namely the commodification of housing provision in recent decades using Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) as well the sale of public land at discounted prices to private interests. PPPs were a central element in the regeneration of Ballymun and proved to be disastrous for local residents and the public purse but very profitable for private companies.

Marquand argues that PPPs are a market solution that are primarily ideological and part of the ‘rooting out of

the culture of service and citizenship which had become part of the social fabric’.³ In a recent article,⁴ Stewart Smyth points out that, while the UK is moving away from PPPs due to public and trade union campaigns, the Irish government shows no signs of abandoning the model, although there is a certain cooling off, as can be seen in a 2018 Oireachtas report.⁵ The report shows that PPPs will still be used, but mainly for large-scale projects. In fact, it could be argued that the state has moved on to other methods for stealing from the public purse when it comes to housing: selling off public land to private developers and vulture funds; privatising homeless services using Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) to private landlords and private hotel operators; and privatising other public services, like social welfare schemes and public transport routes.

The state continues to feign concern over our housing crisis while actively pursuing neo-liberal policies around housing and rents. The government and local authorities spend millions on private subventions rather than investing in public housing. In cities and towns across Ireland, we have boarded up flats and houses. Designated Traveller housing budgets remain unspent from local authority budgets. Annual social housing builds barely make a dent on the waiting list of 87,000 people, while rents rise above the levels of affordability for most working people. The term ‘social and affordable housing’ gradually replaces the term ‘public housing’ – a bourgeois whitewashing that glosses over the duties of a functioning welfare state with a patina of neo-liberal gloss. Rent control measures are minimal via Rent Protection Zones which are not regulated and easily circumvented by landlords and corporate landlords alike. Direct provision centres are

almost all run by private companies for profit. Migrant workers live in over-crowded rooms in tenement-like conditions.

In short, this is what capitalism does to ordinary people. It treats the working class, the poor and the marginalised as commodities to be exploited at every turn so that vested interests – the ruling classes, developers and vulture funds – can increase their profits. Rents go up; wages stay down. Secure housing and secure rental are no longer even a dream for young and not so young workers, for the disabled, for lone parents, migrants, Travellers and refugees.

In Dublin, at the heart of this class warfare is Dublin City Council, one of our leading slumlords. In April 2018, DCC had at least 530 empty housing units in Dublin city centre alone.⁶ The closer a council flat complex is to a Luas, a DART or a potential ‘gentrification’ project, the more likely it is that it will have ‘voids’ or empty units. A chief example is Dorset Street flats which has over 60% ‘voided’ units in 2019 and where residents are being pressured to move out of the complex. DCC refuses to fix roof leaks or address rodent infestations in the empty units, making living conditions unbearable. This pattern can also be seen in the nearby Constitution Hill flats. Both complexes are on the Luas line, near the Law Courts and in areas designated for gentrification.⁷ Residents are often bullied by DCC into leaving their flats and forced to move away from their families and communities. Bullying is by no means a new tactic by DCC, as we shall see in the account of the regeneration of Ballymun below.

In 2002, Dublin Corporation ‘rebranded’ itself as Dublin City Council. It’s not well known, but Dublin City Council has a motto: ‘Happy the City Whose Citizens Obey.’ But how obedient are we, and how much longer will we tolerate this war on the most basic need of survival – a place to call home?

Slum clearances and the moral high ground

Through its Haussmann in Paris, Bonapartism exploited this tendency tremendously for swindling and private enrichment. [Haussmann was Prefect of the Seine Department in the years 1853–70 and carried on big building alterations in Paris in the interests of the bourgeoisie. He did not fail to profit himself also - Ed.] But the spirit of Haussmann

has also been abroad in London, Manchester and Liverpool, and seems to feel itself just as much at home in Berlin and Vienna. The result is that the workers are forced out of the centre of the towns towards the outskirts; that workers’ dwellings, and small dwellings in general, become rare and expensive and often altogether unobtainable, for under these circumstances the building industry, which is offered a much better field for speculation by more expensive houses, builds workers’ dwellings only by way of exception.

Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*, 1872.

The idea of urban renewals as a form of progress has been popular since the 1800s. Housing and property have been increasingly commodified as capitalism has expanded. In *All that Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman explores capitalism’s fondness for ‘clearing out’ slums.⁸ Examples include the reshaping of New York by Robert Moses. City planners such as Moses openly despised the poor and wanted them moved out of city centres to make way for so-called ‘civilised’ citizens. These planners and their government departments raided public funds and resources and poured profits into the hands of developers and their cronies. The same methods are still in use today in cities like Dublin, London, Barcelona, San Francisco and beyond.

Urban renewal is sold to us as ‘progress’, but, most of the time, redevelopments are not built to last nor are they maintained properly. Again, this is part of how capitalism works – nothing is solid. Progress is not for the working classes, who get moved around cities like pawns with little or no say in their relocations. After World War II, there was a boom in Britain in the building of high-rise tower blocks for public housing. New public housing developments were often built on the margins of cities and abandoned to scarce resources and deficient estate management, with few shops and buses and a lack of housing maintenance.

Underlying all urban renewal is the idea of the poor as ‘undeserving’ and ‘immoral’ and the rich as naturally ‘deserving’ and ‘morally right’. This is how class privilege operates to widen divisions between people and, specifically, between classes. This is the ideology behind Leo Varadkar’s publicity campaign which pitted ‘people who get up early in the morning’ against so-

called ‘welfare cheats’. Meanwhile, public funds are doled out to the cronies of those in power, which is, in effect, corporate welfare. Public money is transferred to the private market via HAP, private direct provision centres and low to zero taxes on vulture funds and property investment companies.

The story of Ballymun, from the original high tower build to its regeneration, demonstrates the insidious methods capitalism uses to force profit from housing – an ongoing cycle of boom and bust. Plans are forced on communities, with token consultations having little effect on the overall plan. The focus is on physical buildings but rarely on real community development, maintenance of buildings or provision of quality amenities, jobs and social supports.

Ballymun: the first Irish high-rise development

In 1963, tenement houses collapsed and were evacuated in areas all over Dublin. In 1964, the Department of Local Government recommended the Ballymun Housing Scheme to the City Council. The vision for Ballymun was ‘an exciting alternative to the squalor of Dublin’s tenements’ from which many of the first residents would come. In reality, it was ‘slum’ clearance which relocated people miles from their communities, shops, buses and amenities.

The original plans for the Ballymun Housing Scheme promised a shopping centre, offices, community meeting rooms, a swimming pool and landscaped parks. Most of these never materialised as they were not included in the contract signed by the Cubitt, Haden, Sisk building consortium in February 1965. Despite the Government’s assertion that Ballymun was a success both in the speed of its construction and in its cost, Dublin Corporation was handed a half-finished housing scheme in 1969. The Corporation had little experience of managing housing estates of Ballymun’s scale and complexity. One of the main problems was lift malfunctions. Dublin Corporation, and the lift maintenance contractors, asserted that many of the malfunctions and breakdowns were due to ‘tenant misuse and vandalism’. Residents insisted that most lift malfunctions were due to ordinary wear and tear and a lack of proper and prompt maintenance and repair.

In the 1970s, a series of rent strikes were organised by the National Association of Tenants’ Organisations

(NATO) in Ballymun to demand that rents be based on household income. The Tenants’ Associations also wanted the right to negotiate with Dublin Corporation on the tenants’ behalf over the issue of rents. In the short-term, NATO was successful and achieved all of its aims. Despite this victory, the community continued to suffer from lack of playgrounds and shops, broken lifts and ill-maintained public spaces. In the 1970s and 1980s, better-off tenants began to leave Ballymun. So began a process of high tenancy turnovers, continuing Corporation neglect and deepening levels of poverty as unemployment worsened in Ireland. By the 1980s, Ballymun had become stigmatised, portrayed in the press as a wasteland and as a literal hell. One headline of the time ran ‘Living in the Heavens can be Hell’.⁹

In 1984, the Government introduced a Surrender Grant Scheme which gave tenants a £5,000 payment if they gave up their corporation home to buy a private home. Almost 100% of families who took advantage of this offer were in employment. The tenants who then moved into the newly vacated public housing tended to be at high risk of poverty. The Surrender Grant brought about a mass exodus from Ballymun which included many of its community activists. The drop-in demand for houses or flats in Ballymun meant that only those most in need, and often the most vulnerable, were likely to accept a tenancy in Ballymun. The Corporation refused to properly maintain or repair the flats or provide amenities that are taken for granted in middle class life: well-maintained public spaces with trees, parks, playgrounds and grocery shops. Ongoing heating problems in the flats were never fixed. Many flats were left empty as people moved onto private homes.

The 1980s in the UK saw the beginnings of the privatisation of public services and public goods like healthcare, education, transport services and industries. Right to Buy schemes and the privatisation of housing increasingly forced people into the private housing market, making them more reliant on rent allowances and subject to rental discrimination. Where the UK leads, Ireland soon follows.

The ‘regeneration’ of Ballymun

In 1996, Dublin Corporation issued proposals for Ballymun which recommended that the flats be demolished rather than refurbished. Dublin Corporation



McDonagh Tower, during a controlled implosion bringing the block down as part of the Ballymun Regeneration project in 2005

officially recognised Ballymun as an area for renewal which qualified for EU funding from the Urban Initiative Fund. In 1997, Dublin Corporation set up a limited company called Ballymun Regeneration Limited (BRL) to develop and implement the regeneration programme. BRL was supported by an Integrated Area Plan (IAP) which enabled access to tax incentives on designated sites under the Urban Renewal Act, 1981. The IAP was approved by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 1998.¹⁰ The funding model was as set out below:

The bulk of funding for the programme is provided through the Vote of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (the Department). A wide range of other agencies and groups, many of which are in receipt of public funding are also involved in the programme. Under arrangements approved by Dublin City Council the proceeds of property transactions are available to BRL for reinvestment in the programme. The programme has also targeted private investment under the 1998 Urban Renewal Scheme.¹¹

BRL acted as an agent of Dublin Corporation and

had seven shareholders who were senior officials of the local authority. It had a 14-member board 'broadly representative of statutory, voluntary and community sectors in the area'. The Comptroller General's report¹² states that BRL did not have 'specific powers to direct other organisations / agencies to meet specific Masterplan objectives. However, BRL funded many local organisations. In 2006, BRL introduced Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for groups receiving funding in excess of €20,000. SLAs stress the identification of 'targets and goals', 'performance' and 'outputs' to 'evaluate the benefits accruing to service users. Such measurements and controls reflect what Marquand calls the 'audit explosion' in public bodies, where managers operate as if they are running private firms in which quantitative measurement replaces qualitative judgement. These measures also allow funders to control organisations and their agendas. The Comptroller reports that, while some community groups welcomed BRL funding, others 'felt that BRL was too dominant, and that the community sector was being marginalised in the regeneration'. Also noted was the fact that BRL 'has a somewhat uneven relationship

with the community and voluntary sector’.

The report stated BRL’s main objectives to be:

- 1 *Implement and monitor the Masterplan and IAP;*
- 2 *Promote inward investment to Ballymun;*
- 3 *Liaise with state and public agencies in relation to economic development in Ballymun and, where possible, coordinate their activities;*
- 4 *Secure adequate resources for the regeneration;*
- 5 *Assist and advise potential investors;*
- 6 *Promote Ballymun as a location for economic activity and investment.*

So, from the outset, BRL made it clear that investors were paramount to their vision, as was a commercial imperative. Nowhere in these main aims are the community and their needs given priority. Investment is seen as a magic wand that will cure all ills. But what did Dublin Corporation and BRL propose as being the main ‘problems’ of Ballymun?

Social exclusion and land disposal

In the introduction to the 1998 BRL Masterplan, Ciaran Murray, BRL’s Managing Director, stated that people living in Ballymun ‘have had more than their fair share of social problems’:

People living in Ballymun have an indomitable spirit, despite years of neglect, high levels of unemployment and a lack of even the most basic facilities and amenities. The area is now well placed to take advantage of the upswing in the economy. The complexity of its social problems, however, will require an inter-departmental Government response if **maximum benefit** is to be gained from the regeneration project.¹³

But to whom did this ‘maximum benefit’ accrue? ‘By the use of particular tax incentives, and the availability of good sites BRL hope to be able to attract appropriate employment, retail, leisure and community development investments from the private sector’.¹⁴ In other words, public land would be sold to private developers in what the Comptroller described as ‘land disposals’.¹⁵ The use of the word ‘disposal’ here is revealing and implies that publicly owned land is literally a waste of space unless exchanged for cash. ‘This allowed for the development of private residential accommodation and commercial and retail activities in the area through the provision of tax relief for related expenditure’. Tax incentives were

made available to Owner Occupiers, Investors and Lessors to encourage private housing and apartments, commercial or industrial property, hotels and student accommodation.¹⁶

Where the Ballymun Masterplan did not outline any of the details relating to property disposal arrangements, the Comptroller’s report briefly outlines the sale of public land, amounting to €118.7 million up to July 2007, most of which (the exact amount is not specified) was put towards the provision of community facilities.¹⁷ Land was sold through a selling agent appointed by a tender competition. In some cases, property rights were transferred, as was the case for the Civic Centre on Ballymun’s Main Street. The site, which was in public ownership, was transferred to a developer under a 200-year lease for a sum of €10.5 million (the property developer is not named).¹⁸ The Civic Centre housed BRL, the HSE, Dublin Corporation and a motor tax office – so public bodies rented space from a private developer, on privately controlled/leased land, that was previously owned publicly.

Having blamed ‘poor public sector management’ for many of Ballymun’s ills, the BRL Masterplan goes on to lay the rest of the blame on its community. It describes a number of Economic Development Constraints. These include the ‘poor image’ Ballymun has due to the ‘motivation and attitudes of the potential workforce’ who are reluctant to seek ‘legitimate work’. Their participation in the ‘black economy’ is seen as a ‘drain on the potential for legitimate trade’. The ‘Dependency Culture’ of this ‘run-down and isolated place’ is blamed on the ‘historical structure of social welfare benefits’ and on the ‘exceptionally high proportion of single mothers with children who have particular difficulties in seeking work’.¹⁹

Having identified the ‘problem’ of single mothers and childcare, does BRL propose public or subsidised childcare? No. One of BRL’s solutions to lack of employment opportunities is to champion the offloading of state activities to the market. Housing management and childcare are seen as potential areas for private business development rather than activities of the state. The relegation of childcare to the private domain, into the commercial arena with little concession other than tax incentives for private operators, is indicative of BRL’s token approach to helping women into employment.

Despite the fact that BRL's Masterplan stated that the majority of the population of Ballymun were women, aged 20–40, rearing children on their own and reliant on social welfare payments, the Masterplan pays scant attention to their needs and never suggests free public childcare nor measures to help them into the workplace.

In contrast, where the state withdraws from the provision of public services for its citizens, it decides to extend its public services to help private commercial interests. BRL pledged 'Developer Support' to help change the stigmatised image of Ballymun (seen as a constraint on inward investment) by supporting companies investing in Ballymun:

Additional to the assistance noted above [with marketing strategies], is the need to keep developers and other firms informed of the opportunities available and of any changes in financial and institutional circumstances with may affect their business.²⁰

This ethos of support for private interests spreads the illusion that they are more efficient than governments – that the 'free market' can provide solutions, if nudged in the right direction, with tax incentives, state subsidies and supports, in effect interfering with the so-called free market to create a welfare state for private profiteers. Citizens become 'users' and 'customers' who must support this inverted welfare system for the rich.

Social mix or class erasure?

This neoliberal ideology was also applied to what BRL called 'sustainable housing'. In effect, this meant creating conditions which favoured a 'social mix' by offering residents choices of tenure – corporation tenancy, shared ownership, co-operative, voluntary housing association, private rented, private ownership – and introducing speculative housing-for-sale sites into the area.

Public housing is seen, by BRL, as being stigmatised with no exploration of why this may be: a public problem to be privatised and improved by encouraging diverse tenure. In its Masterplan, BRL reasserts its commitment to 'increasing the availability of low-cost high-quality housing for purchase as part of the regeneration process'. However, BRL expresses its dissatisfaction with some of those who have already bought out their homes before regeneration began:

Large numbers of houses, particularly some of those in private ownership, are in need of repair. The owners being former tenants of Dublin Corporation, acquired tenure partly through length of tenancy rather than having the wherewithal to acquire and maintain property. Thus, it is, ironically, those properties in private ownership rather than public that are, in some cases, in a greater state of dilapidation.²¹

BRL implied that these property owners were 'deficient' because they did not buy their homes in the 'real' market: they are not true consumers and are hardly worthy of the property they fail to maintain to the standards required by BRL. Standards that were also not achieved by Dublin Corporation itself in its duty to maintain the high-rise towers it built.

BRL's solution to this fecklessness of individuals and inefficient public bodies was the use of 'housing management tools' such as diversity of tenure and local estate management. The private rented sector was mooted as vital in improving the social mix, bringing in students and transitory workers, and also for those 'on social welfare, who are in receipt of Supplementary Welfare Allowance to contribute towards the cost of the rent'.²² In the course of the regeneration programme, however, these welfare recipients will become problematic for BRL and will occasion an extraordinary 'inter-departmental Government response'.

The Comptroller's report confirms that, under BRL's remit of 'social regeneration', one of the key objectives of the regeneration programme was to increase tenure diversity, with a likely final mix of '43% social and 57% private housing'.²³ The Comptroller identified 'one risk' to this tenure diversity objective as being 'the impact of rental transactions':

During the initial phase of private housing development, a large number of tenancies were supported by Rent Supplement. BRL and the Department of Social and Family Affairs agreed a measure to address this. *Occupancy of private housing will need to be continuously monitored to evaluate the achievement of the targeted tenure mix.*²⁴

By 2007, a high proportion of private housing in Ballymun had been let for rentals. 'A feature of the rental market during the initial phase of private housing

development was the number of tenancies which were supported by Rent Supplement'. The Comptroller critiques this failure in creating tenant diversity and comments on the fact that there was a marked segregation between social housing and private housing. 'Housing located along the Main Street is positioned in such a way that residents may have only limited contact with those in new social housing'.²⁵

BRL attempted to remedy the 'problem' of private rented property becoming 'social housing by default' by taking an extraordinary measure referred to in the above quote. In 2008, three public bodies came together and agreed to exclude people reliant on Social Welfare payments and Rent Supplement from renting privately in Ballymun. Following discussions with BRL, the Department of Social and Family Affairs agreed to a proposal that Rent Supplement should only be available in Ballymun with the agreement of the Housing Department of DCC. The purpose of introducing this measure to restrict entitlement in the area was to prevent private sector rented accommodation becoming public housing by default. There were 81 tenants in receipt of Rent Supplement in the Regeneration area in April 2007, which represented 9% of the private housing sector.²⁶

The Comptroller stated that, in interviews conducted for the report, local residents of Ballymun pointed out that this exclusory measure prohibited the adult children of existing tenants, who were in receipt of Rent Supplement, from renting in Ballymun. In effect, they were prevented from living near their families. Despite this, in 2008, the 'measure' was passed into law:

To combat the growing levels of Social Welfare Allowances in this area of significant social housing, Ballymun was designated as a Regeneration Area on the 27th November 2008, under the Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2007 (Section 25(3B)). Under this legislation it is intended to limit the level of Supplementary Welfare Allowances in the Ballymun Regeneration area so as not to undermine national and local government objectives of achieving tenure mix.²⁷

This was and remains an extraordinary measure that enabled legal social exclusion on the basis of class and income – an explicit act of class control and a form of state violence. This legislation shows how the state

can exert social or class control in order to serve the interests of private profit. Before I list the social and financial failures of BRL, I would like to briefly outline some of the other measures of social control employed by BRL and Dublin City Council (as noted earlier, the Corporation rebranded as DCC in 2002) in Ballymun during the regeneration project.

Regeneration and social control

Another aspect of Ballymun regeneration was 'culture washing'. Breaking Ground was the Percent for Arts Scheme (10% of building costs had to be given to art projects). The Breaking Ground manifesto stated that 'in order to attract the private sector into Ballymun, the area must pertain to values of the professional classes'. The document goes on to say that the art scheme can achieve this through the 'aesthetic enhancement of the area and **the education of a social group in line with ruling-class thinking**'.²⁸ It is outside the scope of this article to explore how effective this aim was or how it was manifested in the funded art projects, but it is extraordinary to see such explicit mention of the ruling classes exploiting art to promote their agenda.

BRL also explored the use of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), which were introduced in the UK by Tony Blair in 1998 (discontinued in 2015). BRL produced reports on the possible use of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and also monitored what people put in their green bins using Neighbourhood Wardens.²⁹ They proposed setting up 'day detention centres for offenders'. None of these measures came to fruition, but they were indicative of BRL's approach to the Ballymun community – controlling, carceral and classist.

An attempt was also made by BRL to exclude Travellers from Ballymun by closing down St Margaret's Halting site. Their attempts failed, but the site was, and still is, badly serviced by DCC and suffers frequent power outages as well as water and sewage problems. BRL and DCC frequently ignored consultations with the Travelling community about their needs and refused to provide Traveller-specific housing. In recent years, DCC has failed to spend its allocated Traveller housing budgets in Dublin.

A great number of not-for-profits and private consultants were paid by BRL to write hundreds of reports on how to 'solve' the problems of Ballymun

rather than listen to and invest in the community itself. The use of paid 'experts' and consultants is another way that the state hands public money over to private concerns, as can be seen in any number of failed projects, such as the National Children's Hospital. The state abandons its responsibility for citizens to charities, agencies and 'professionals', i.e. the ruling classes who produce report after report that do nothing to alleviate poverty and its causes – capitalism and the unequal distribution of wealth and resources.

Ballymun regeneration: a litany of failures

The Ballymun Regeneration project failed the Ballymun community but lined the pockets of developers. The plan cost over €1 billion in public monies (original budget €942 million) but failed to deliver several key developments, including a new shopping centre and a Business Development Park. It did nothing to improve local employment rates or alleviate the problems caused by disadvantage and exclusion. I will list just some of the main failures of the Ballymun Regeneration project below:

- **Budgetary overrun:** In 1999, the state approved a budget of €442 million for the Masterplan. The Comptroller, in 2007, estimated 'from information provided by BRL and based on the experience to date, that the total public sector cost of the regeneration programme to completion in 2012 will amount to €942 million. This cost will increase in line with future inflation.' The total cost was over €1 billion from public funds.

- A proposed **Business and Technology Park**, a joint venture between BRL and an unnamed property developer was 'abandoned' because of a 'lack of demand for suburban office space in Dublin'.³⁰

- **'Estimation deficiencies'** included a failure to provide for associated administrative costs. 'The increased costs include administrative and other costs estimated at €101 million which had not been included in the Masterplan'. These costs included Salaries and Administration amounting to €86 million which were 'foreseeable'.³¹

- The estimated cost of public housing of €460 million was €13 million more than BRL's own estimate, yet there was a **reduction of 532 units** in

the original planned 2,820 public housing units.³²

- **The professional fees cost** was underestimated by approximately €1 million.³³

- **Post-tender increases:** All housing projects were procured through tender competitions. In Ballymun, the average post-tender increase was 18% (not including inflation) where nine other Dublin projects had an average of 7% post-tender increase.³⁴

- **Unemployment** remained 'between three and four times the national average' as of 2007.

- **A new shopping centre was not delivered.**

In 2009, Treasury Holdings secured planning permission for Spring Cross, a €800 million development including an 11-screen cinema, bowling alley, library, crèche and restaurants, as well as shops and offices. Treasury intended to build on the site of the dilapidated Ballymun Town Centre, but the site became part of **NAMA's portfolio** before any development began.

- In 2007, **pyrite**, a mineral that causes severe structural defects, was discovered in the foundations of some of the new homes. About €10 million was spent fixing this problem, which was caused by developers seeking to maximise their profits by using cheap materials.

- **The Sports and Leisure Complex had to be taken back into public control.** In 2005, a Sports and Leisure complex was built at a cost of €22.6 million. BRL raised funding for the construction from three sources: proceeds of €14.2 million from the sale of sites; a grant of €4.4 million from the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism; and funding of €4 million from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The centre was handed over to **an unnamed private company, which closed it within a week of opening in July 2005.** BRL provided €0.6 million for operating costs to the original contractor in the period to May 2006, but there is no mention of whether this sum was returned. DCC then took it over again in a public bidding process. A public body had to enter into the private market to put in a tender to run facilities built with public money just to secure a swimming pool for the Ballymun community.

Questions about the transparency of the Comptroller's

Report also have to be asked. Are the figures and ‘facts’ concealing as much as they reveal? Why are all the property developers and associated companies not named in the report along with how much each company received and what exactly each company delivered or failed to deliver?

The one legacy that BRL delivered on was marginalising those on rent supplement to increase private tenancies in Ballymun. This is a main objective of all regeneration projects. To the best of my knowledge, this ban on ‘rent allowance’ (now HAP) is still legal in Ballymun despite protests by locals and Oireachtas questions raised by some political representatives.³⁵

The death of Rachel Peavoy

Rachel Peavoy (30) of Shangan Road, Ballymun, Dublin, was found dead in her flat on January 11th, 2010.³⁶

On 11 January 2010, a young mother of two died in her flat on Shangan Road. The previous day, she had asked her mother to look after her two sons because her flat was so cold. In a letter to DCC shortly before her death, she wrote, ‘I have no heating in my home and was recently told they can’t fix this problem ... everywhere in the flat is damp, windows, walls, clothes, etc.’

Pathologist Anthony Dorman found that Rachel had died from hypothermia. At her inquest, the Coroner recorded her death as ‘misadventure’ despite the fact that a Garda gave evidence that the flat was freezing cold on the night Rachel was found. DCC denied that it turned the heating off in the flats. At the time of her death, the block she lived in was being ‘de-tenanted’ as it was designated for demolition. By 2011, only a handful of families were left in the damp, run-down block. Delays in the construction of replacement housing meant that the remaining tenants were trapped in freezing conditions.³⁷

The inquest heard that Rachel had repeatedly contacted DCC authorities, her lawyer and local politicians, requesting assistance for the lack of any effective heating in her flat. A number of Rachel’s friends and neighbours from the block reported similar experiences. Linda McLoughlin told the inquest that she had complained repeatedly to DCC about the heating in her own flat. Promises made on a visit by a housing inspector came to nothing. She confirmed

that the heating in the Shangan Road block was not operating. The heating was normally turned off in the summer and re-activated in September. In September 2009, the heating never came back on. Ms. McLoughlin told the inquest that she had to use electric heaters in her flat, causing her power bill to soar from around €350 to €1,300 for the same period. She said that Rachel had joked with her that it was warmer outside her flat than inside it just a few days before she died. Ms. McLoughlin also said that a fortnight after Rachel died, DCC switched the heating back on.³⁸

While the death of Rachel Peavoy was recorded as ‘misadventure’, thereby letting DCC off the hook, it remains as fact that a young single mother died of hypothermia *inside* a council flat during an extremely cold January night. While private investors were paid off and bailed out, heating to occupied flats was inadequate or non-existent due to either budgetary limits or deliberate and sustained neglect. Is this not state violence inflicted on the basis of class?

Generating a future

In 2019, many Ballymun residents still suffer from extreme levels of deprivation despite a project that cost over €1 billion. A woman died of hypothermia inside a flat while waiting to be rehoused. The housing needs of Travellers in the area are unmet despite allocated budgets which remain unspent. The law banning HAP recipients from renting private housing in Ballymun remains in place. In Ireland, we officially have 9,987 homeless people.

There were 9,987 people homeless in the week of January 21st–27th 2019 across Ireland. This figure includes adults and children. The number of homeless families has increased by 83% since January 2016. More than one in three people in emergency accommodation is a child. However, this number does not include ‘hidden homelessness’ which refers to people who are living in squats or ‘sofa surfing’ with friends. Furthermore, women and children staying in domestic violence refuges are not included in these homeless emergency accommodation counts. The national figure also does not include people who are sleeping rough.³⁹

As outlined here, private enterprise is not more efficient than public bodies in providing housing and

sustainable communities. In fact, the Irish state and its public bodies can be very efficient when they want to be. It is estimated that 100,000 local authority houses were built in Ireland between 1973 and 1977.⁴⁰ In fact, from the 1930s through to the 1980s the Irish state built rapid, large-scale housing of reasonable quality with affordable rents and secure tenure nationwide. In Dublin, large local authority estates evolved into stable, socially integrated neighbourhoods in areas like Crumlin, Cabra, Ballyfermot and Tallaght West.⁴¹

So can communities fight back against the commodification of housing? Are we powerless against state controls and the mechanisms of privatisation? The answers are yes, we can fight back and no, we are not powerless. Housing ‘crises’ are a deliberate creation of capitalism, and housing is a worldwide problem that has seen a rise in activists fighting back in cities like Barcelona, Berlin and Toronto. In Dublin, Cork and Galway, we have seen thousands take to the streets for the Raise the Roof and National Homeless & Housing Coalition campaigns. All over the world, activists are calling for rent controls and public housing. The fight for recognition of every citizen’s right to housing is one of the most crucial issues of our time, along with climate change. At its most radical, the climate change movement calls for ‘system change’ and a dismantling of capitalism, which has wrought destruction on our environment and on our societies. Historical studies suggest that it takes 3.5% of a population engaged in sustained nonviolent resistance to topple brutal dictatorships.⁴² If we can align our causes to fight for real system change by building strong networks that use sustained nonviolent actions and disruptive campaigns, we can build movements strong enough to stand up to state controls and state violence. We can create a system that cares for all its citizens *and* our environment. With less than twelve years left to *limit* climate change catastrophe we have no other choice but to dismantle the capitalist system and generate a better future.

Notes

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- 31 Ibid., p.30.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., p.24.
- 34 Ibid., p.25.
- 35 Kitty Holland, 'Rent allowance banned in Dublin's Ballymun', *The Irish Times*, 16 June 2014. See also Susan Ryan, 'Ballymun council building occupied over rent allowance ban', *The Journal*, 18 July 2014.
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