



**Matthew Thompson**, *Reconstructing Public Housing: Liverpool's Hidden History of Collective Alternatives*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781789621082 (paper); ISBN: 9781789627404 (ebook)

“If there were to be a revolution in England it would start in Liverpool” (p.27), so states a quote borrowed from Dave Sinclair’s *Dockers: The '95 to '98 Liverpool Lockout* and found in Matthew Thompson’s meticulously written book, *Reconstructing Public Housing: Liverpool's Hidden History of Collective Alternatives*.<sup>1</sup> The radical and working-class traditions of labour union protest, workers’ rights activism, and entrenched community spirit in Liverpool are brought to the foreground in Thompson’s book and it is as much an ode to the city’s grounded and resilient sensibilities as it is an exemplary unpacking of the city’s history of community-based collective action. *Reconstructing Public Housing* is an excellent contemplation on the history of housing and alternative housing modalities in Liverpool which has produced, in its entirety, a finely researched and theoretical contribution to the fields of urban geography, urban planning, and housing studies. Thompson’s precise attention to the minutiae of everyday life at the neighbourhood scale is also to be commended as he delves into the “nuts and bolts” of variegated community-based dynamics in relation to housing needs and alternatives in Liverpool. The book is an ambitious and important account of Liverpool’s history of radical alternatives in housing that has been most apparent through community-based and community-led initiatives in the formation of co-operatives and community land trusts in the city.

Divided into 17 chapters including a prologue and an epilogue, the book is primarily organised in three parts according to particular sets of questions related to the topic of collective alternatives in housing: the “Housing Question”; the “Neighbourhood Question”; and the “Urban Question”. In the introductory chapter, Thompson embarks on an explanation of collective

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<sup>1</sup> An Open Access edition of this book is available on the Liverpool University Press website: <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/books/id/53192/> (last accessed 2 August 2022).

housing alternatives as being an alternative to the state-induced problems of public housing in the UK or “state-regulated capitalism” (p.5), but he also revisits pre-capitalist forms of commons and commoning to embark on a discussion of post-capitalist futures through community-led housing alternatives. In each part of the book, Thompson clearly identifies with Marxist theory but is also unafraid of engaging with post-structuralist theories of “alterity”; discussions on self-organising methods, feminist collectivities, and community economies as seen in the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham and Silvia Federici. Despite these overtures, parts of the book do lean towards more traditional Marxist debates such as the housing question and the urban question and are therefore discussed as such. Before reaching these parts of the book, Thompson posits a question at the start of Chapter 2, “Why Liverpool of All Places?” (p.27). The second chapter is a brilliant account of Liverpool’s radical history of housing with nods to Friedrich Engels’ documentation of oppressive labour conditions in Liverpool and a note that Liverpool was the first British city to produce legislation (in 1842) that would create space and hygiene standards for workers’ housing. Thompson also discusses 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist tensions between municipal plans for “slum clearances” and practices of co-operative housing and other collective actions. The chapter concludes with an excellent account of the contradictions found in Liverpool’s turn-of-the-millennium urban regeneration efforts that, in the context of housing, were most visible in the form of public housing regeneration and a city-wide housing renewal programme that aimed to re-develop local neighbourhoods (and which laid the groundwork for community-based resistance). This important chapter contextualises the unique and subjective elements of Liverpool’s working class and housing histories and provides a helpful framework for the more detailed empirical research that is expanded upon later in the book.

The second part of the book, “The Housing Question” (Chapters 3–6), brings together a review of (neo)Marxist scholarship that critiques the role of housing as commodity and considers the nature of use and exchange value, as well as important and well-trodden theoretical discussions of exploitation and alienation. The chapters in this part are detailed and confidently

written; again, Thompson clearly demonstrates that he has a strong background in Marxist urban theory and engages with it in a thoughtful way. At times, however, the writing verges on being slightly pedantic and removed from the empirical foci of the work and makes the book appear as if it is trying to “do too much”. The very detailed engagement with theoretical debates combined with very specific UK and Liverpool-based empirical research produces frequent leaps between theoretical, historical, and spatial topics and contexts. As such, it requires a dedicated read (and a quiet reading space) to pay careful attention to the writing in this section. At nearly 70 pages, the housing question section could have been made more succinct and a bit less laborious for both author and reader.

The next two parts of the book, the “Neighbourhood Question” and “Urban Question”, are more exciting as they jump into the author’s empirical research and present lively accounts of Liverpool’s housing and neighbourhood histories and contemporary contestations. The “Neighbourhood Question” section (Chapters 7–9) is a beautifully written and thoughtful account of the impact of community-oriented, municipal-led programmes in Liverpool. Thompson discusses the Community Development Projects (late 1960s) that aimed to regenerate more impoverished neighbourhoods without a critical understanding of the structural causes of poverty and other social conditions and without listening to community residents and practitioners living and working in these neighbourhoods. He refers to histories of neighbourhood unrest caused by systemic racism and classism, such as the Toxteth Riots of 1981, and focuses on the Granby neighbourhood, an area that is later discussed in the book as the location of collective action and community-led housing alternatives. It is in this section that Thompson begins to unpack the lineage of collective action, community development, and neighbourhood-based resistance practices in Liverpool. He produces an engaging account of the emergence of community development trusts internationally and in the UK as “[e]arly exemplars of local struggles that successfully campaigned for the transfer of public land and assets into community ownership” (p.139). Specifically, Thompson discusses the interesting legacy of the

Eldonian Community Trust in Liverpool, the UK's largest community-owned housing trust, and political struggles over its formation and community-based governance.

In the "Urban Question" (Chapters 10–12), Thompson turns to the issue of land and, importantly, brings land into a discussion of housing through a conceptual entanglement with commons and commoning. He relies on commons to discuss forms of urban enclosure and dispossession and posits community ownership of land as one antidote to these processes. Here, community land trusts are engaged with as a form of commons (and commoning) where community-ownership of land and collective action are key principles. Chapters 11 and 12 are thoughtful and lovingly written analyses of Liverpool's Granby Community Land Trust and other community land trust initiatives in the city, with attention towards the nuances of community land trust formation and activism. Through carefully presented empirical research, Thompson reminds us that community land trusts and collective actions for housing are complex and multi-faceted, with strong hopes for community control over land and housing but also with their share of internal (within community) and external (multi-scalar governance) struggles. This section, in many ways, is the most important part of the book and offers a strong contribution to the scholarship on commons and to studies of community land trusts and community-owned housing. Thompson's analyses of Liverpool dovetail well with and provide an important addition to UK-based and international research on community land trusts and other collectivised land and housing arrangements.

In the writing of this book, Thompson lays out an ambitious project that delves into broad and long-standing theoretical debates on housing and commons and produces an exacting history of Liverpool's municipal housing and community-led housing processes and struggles. At times, this makes the book feel bogged down by its wide theoretical scope in combination with the granular level of detail, and there are sections of the book that could have been considerably edited and made more succinct. Overall, however, *Reconstructing Public Housing: Liverpool's Hidden History of Collective Alternatives*, is a well-written and carefully researched book that



provides an important academic contribution to local studies of Liverpool, as an urban exemplar for community-led initiatives and resistance, and to broader urban scholarship on urban housing and land, and community-led struggle and hope.

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