

Toynbee Hall & Housing

From Victorian slums to ‘Streets in the Sky’, discover how Toynbee Hall has intervened in housing, a ubiquitous East End problem

Slums to Model Dwellings

The Industrial Revolution brought slum housing to the East End of London. With thousands of workers reliant on living near their industrial workplaces, overcrowded, insanitary housing became rife. Pressures on housing were exacerbated by high numbers of Jewish migrants from Europe coming to escape the pogroms in the later 19th Century. As the Jewish community established itself in the East End, new migrants were reluctant to settle elsewhere. Jewish landlords preyed on this, charging exorbitant rents for substandard housing in the East End. Simultaneously, landlords in other areas refused to rent to Jews.

By 1875, the Government realised slum housing in the East End was in crisis. Their response was the Artisan and Labourers Dwellings Act. It compelled slum landlords to sell their properties to councils, whom it was hoped would replace them with new housing. However, councils were reluctant to invest, and a small number of private companies spearheaded redevelopment.

‘Grey and drab, the people themselves filthy... the rain when it falls is more like grease’¹

Prior to establishing Toynbee Hall, Samuel Barnett co-founded one such company in 1882: the East End Dwellings Company. Along with the Four Percent Dwellings Company, funded by Baron Rothschild and other members of London’s Anglo-Jewry, it was a philanthropic enterprise to house impoverished workers whilst making a small profit.² Notorious areas of the East End such as Flower & Dean Street and Thrall Street in Spitalfields, alleys rife with crime and overcrowding, were flattened. They were replaced with the straight corridors and large courtyards of the ‘model

dwellings’.³ The model dwellings built by these two companies were large and meticulously designed to breed discipline and uniformity. They were not designed to be ‘homely’. Homely equalled expensive, and, more pertinently, such luxury was considered wasted on the East End poor.⁴

The perception that dirtiness and incivility was a cause, not consequence, of poverty was pervasive in Victorian society.



Dunstan House as seen today, constructed by the East End Dwellings Company in 1899. © Toynbee Hall

It even prevailed amongst social reformers. For example, Octavia Hill argued to ‘transplant the poor to healthy and commodious homes... rebuke and repression is needed’ or else the residents would ‘pollute’ their new homes.⁵ This mindset justified the basic nature of model dwellings by implying that giving the poor anything more than basic amenities was pointless due to their inherent personal flaws. The model dwellings were their lot.

Given these attitudes, model dwelling tenants faced strict stipulations. This was also pragmatic: when seeking a small profit, every penny became essential.⁶ Whilst the East End Dwelling Company used women volunteers to collect rent, the Four Percent Dwellings Company employed ‘supers’, men of military and police backgrounds who lived within the buildings to maintain order and collect rent. In both instances, it was believed that without strict management, chaos and immorality would lead to the squalor of the old slums.

¹ J. London, *The People of the Abyss*, [1903, repub. London: Journeyman Press, 1977], 94

² A. Photiadou, *From Slums to Homes: Samuel Barnett and the East End Dwellings Company* [Toynbee Hall, 2014]

³ A. Kershen, *Strangers, Aliens, and Asians; Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis in Spitalfields, 1660-2000*, [London: Routledge, 2005], 60

<http://www.socialhousinghistory.uk/wp/index.php/londons-east-end/>

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32

⁵ Quoted *Ibid.*, 54

⁶ J. White, *Rothschild’s Buildings: Life in an East London Tenement Block, 1887-1920*, [London: Penguin, 2003], 19-21



The diary of social reformer Beatrice Webb, who volunteered as an East End Dwellings Company rent collector, provides further insight into this mindset. She perceived her work as philanthropic, was scrupulous in her duties, diligently bringing tenant concerns to the attention of their landlords. Nevertheless, she also tacitly accepted negative stereotypes. She looked for 'sobriety and trustworthiness' in prospective tenants, and complained of 'rough' tenants who need 'weeding'.

'A certain weird romance with neither beginning nor end; visiting these people in their dingy homes'

Given the 'misery and disease' around her, Webb pitied the tenants; 'they haunt me with their wretched, disorderly lives'. However, she felt guilty over this pity. She knew societal norms dictated model dwellings were the best the poor deserved. Thus, Webb idolised Octavia Hill for being a more devoted 'organiser of men' who was morally unmoved by her work.⁷ What we find, within the model dwellings of the late Victorian era, is a social worker who felt that caring less about the poor would benefit her work.

Toynbee Hall's Early Work

Against the backdrop of the model dwellings, Toynbee Hall's first residents began their first recorded work in relation to housing: inspectors for the Sanitary Aid Committee. This involved visiting tenements, speaking to residents, and urging their landlords to resolve any 'specific nuisances'.⁸ The capability of the Settlement to help with housing issues increased in 1898 with the introduction of the 'Poor Man's Lawyer'. For the poorest in Victorian society, the law was an alien world which served the interests of their employers and landlords. The Poor Man's Lawyer gave them a voice.

'Mr. Vandamm has thrown himself heart and soul into the work, and has carried to a successful issue several cases before the courts'⁹

The Poor Man's Lawyer had over 600 clients in 1903 alone.

⁷ B. Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, [London: Longmans, 1926], 223-229

⁸ *Toynbee Record*, March 1894, [Toynbee Hall Archive], 22-23

⁹ *Ibid.*, March 1899, 91

¹⁰ D. Leat, 'The Rise and Role of the Poor Man's Lawyer', *British Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 2 [1975], 166-181

¹¹ *New Society*, [London, December 1902], 32

¹² *Toynbee Record*, March 1901, [Toynbee Hall Archive], 23

Matrimonial issues were the most common. However, the cases which its first solicitor, Gustaf Roos, represented in court were more frequently employer-worker and landlord-tenant disputes. It was about challenging authority.¹⁰ The Poor Man's Lawyers were newly qualified solicitors with a philanthropic urge who wanted to make a name for themselves; championing David against Goliath was the best way to do so.¹¹



George Vandamm. © Robert Saxton

Three years after the establishment of the Poor Man's Lawyer, the East London Tenant Protection Committee [ELTPC] was formed at a public meeting at Toynbee Hall to 'give legal advice and assistance to tenants who are too poor and too ignorant to protect themselves against illegal exactions'.¹² In its first year alone its solicitor, George Vandamm (father of Broadway photographer Florence Vandamm) fought sixty court cases.¹³ As tenants became increasingly aware of their rights, its caseload grew in the following years. Despite its success, the ELTPC's caseload dropped after a few years. This somewhat indicated its ability to bring rogue landlords to justice.¹⁴ However, its protagonists had also realised fighting endless legal cases perpetuated a broken system by treating its symptoms and placed working-class tenants' fate entirely in the hands of legal professionals, even if some were fighting their corner.

Aware of this, the volunteers at Toynbee Hall propagated radical housing policies such as enforced building on unoccupied land, and improved centre-periphery transport links to enable expansion out of London.¹⁵ These ideas were grounded in their research into poverty and poor housing.

The pioneering 'poverty maps' of Charles Booth mapped the spreading slum housing within East London. Likewise, Toynbee residents C. Russell and H. Lewis tried to determine why the Jewish population lived in such terrible conditions.¹⁶ At the turn of the century, most Londoners were at best

'East London Tenants' Protection Committee', *The Times* [3rd February 1902], 10

¹³ D. Leat, 'Rise and Role of the Poor Man's Lawyer', 175

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 176

¹⁵ *Toynbee Record*, Nov 1899, [Toynbee Hall Archive], 27

Toynbee Record, March 1902, [Toynbee Hall Archive], 14

¹⁶ *The Jew in London*, [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1901]



apathetic to Jewish migrants, and even liberal papers could be anti-Semitic; 'Jews either do not know how to use the latrine, water, and other sanitary accommodation provided, or prefer their own semi-barbarous habits'.¹⁷ East End tenants of substandard housing were blamed for their own strife.

Within this context, the research carried out at Toynbee Hall in the late 19th Century demonstrates the Settlement sought to objectively understand the causes of poor housing, instead of subjectively blaming the personal failings of the tenants.

1905-1939

As the men of Toynbee Hall pedalled radical housing reform, East End overcrowding was curbed by a Government motion; the 1905 Illegal Aliens Act quelled Jewish migration.¹⁸ Demand for housing in the East End subsided and the more successful Jewish families dispersed to London's suburbs. As a result, housing took on lesser importance within Toynbee Hall's work. Whilst the East End still had some of the worst housing conditions in London, Toynbee Hall's interventions were limited to fire-fighting through legal cases. Nevertheless, over the years Toynbee Hall established a strong reputation for its pioneering legal aid.

“Have you never heard of Toynbee Hall”, said a magistrate to a workman. “Their lawyers will give you the soundest advice and it will cost you nothing.”¹⁹

The Settlement's interwar research work showed the problems of the Victorian era had not vanished. In 1929 they noted chronic overcrowding (for example 779 people living in 367 rooms on one street), exorbitant rents, and widespread reluctance to move away from one's workplace.²⁰

Alongside research and legal aid, Toynbee Hall took a major

step in the interwar period, it began to house local people, not just volunteers. Balliol House, renamed Booth House in the late 1920s, and Wadham House were rented at low rates to local people, some who worked or volunteered at Toynbee Hall. Likewise, in 1925, Toynbee Hall established John Benn Hostel, where boys ordered there by the Inner London Juvenile Court lived alongside young volunteers. They all participated in social work with a view to finding 'employment, companions, encouragement to be clean and healthy and educated and self-maintaining'.²¹ The scheme was a success. Newspapers reported you 'could not tell volunteer from criminal' within this 'unpretentious, social, community centre'.²² The hostel ran until the Second World War. Both schemes reflected the Barnetts' vision. They provided an opportunity for residents to improve their lives, whilst simultaneously fostering a cooperative ethos through social work.

The Blitz & Reconstruction

Given the realities of the Blitz, Toynbee Hall's approach to housing changed drastically. The volunteers organised the evacuation of over 1000 East Enders to Bottingdean, West Sussex. For those who stayed, Toynbee Hall helped those who had lost everything by raising money for train fares out of London and establishing temporary shelters. Simultaneously, Toynbee Hall used its influence within the Hackney and Shoreditch Housing Association to ensure single elderly people had adequate housing.²³ Without their intervention, these vulnerable people may have been left homeless.

The Blitz destroyed large areas of East London. Major reconstruction was needed. Even before the Blitz, the possibility of a German bombing campaign was sinisterly mooted by politicians as pretext to restructure the East End. In their rhetoric, the insinuation that the East End was inherently flawed was clear; London City Council spoke of making the East End 'a geographical term, not a social reproach'.²⁴

¹⁷ *East London Observer*, [22nd November 1894]

¹⁸ B. Gainer, *The Alien Invasion: The Origins of the Aliens Act of 1905*, [London: Heineman, 1972], 19-20.

¹⁹ *Annual Report 1925*, 10.

All *Annual Reports* held in Toynbee Hall Archive.

²⁰ *Annual Report 1929*, 9-10

²¹ *Annual Report 1927-1928*, 4-5

²² 'The John Benn Hostel: No Pain, No Gain', *The Observer* [May 25, 1930], 22

'Hostels for Working Boys', *The Manchester Guardian* [23rd February 1927], 8

²³ *Annual Report 1938-1946*, 9-13

A. Briggs & A. McCartney, *Toynbee Hall: The First 100 Years*, [London: Routledge & Paul, 1984], 121

²⁴ P. Garside, 'The significance of post-war London reconstruction: plans for East End industry', *Planning Perspectives*, vol. 12 no. 1 [1997], 25



A always, Toynbee Hall facilitated an informed intervention into contemporary debates, establishing the Stepney Reconstruction Group. It commissioned Denys Munby, a young resident economist, to research and publish *Living in Stepney*. It challenged government plans for reconstruction in East London.²⁵ Succinctly, the government proposed to rebuild damaged industries alongside many flats for their workers. Munby argued this would exacerbate old tensions and create cramped housing. He believed the planners underestimated the population and overestimated the amount of land required for industry. A concentration of low-paying industries in the East End had been a major cause of overcrowding and poverty since the industrial revolution. For Munby, reconstruction was a chance to change this, not re-establish it.²⁶ Munby's research continued Booth's legacy. As Booth had, he used empirical research of the East End to rationally assess housing problems. In contrast, London City Council had a 'neglect' of local realities.²⁷

Munby's plans were not taken on and old problems persisted. Nevertheless, other post-war reforms transformed the Settlement's capacity to intervene in housing. Under Clement Attlee's Labour government, the modern welfare state emerged. Redeveloping substandard housing became an obligation for councils. Millions of houses were built, and this boom continued when the Conservatives returned to power in 1951. This was the hey-day of social housing construction. 'Streets in the sky', futuristic, high-rise homes.²⁸

The Bengali East End

Whilst the products of this brave new era sprung up around the East End, the post-war period was one of metaphorical and literal rebuilding for Toynbee Hall, given the loss of some of its buildings during the Blitz. Its budgets were stretched, and it faced a shortage of social workers.

Meanwhile, the East End was becoming a centre for Bengali migrants. Pre-war, the *Toynbee Record* suspiciously noted the 'devious ways' some of these new migrants entered

London. As the first Jewish migrants had been, early Bengali's were 'sojourners', single men who worked long hours and often live in crowded rooms 'only furnished with beds'. The *Toynbee Record* was concerned that few spoke English and lived insularly. To try and engage with them, the Settlement planned a 'Hindu House' for seventy Indian migrants who would contribute to social work.²⁹ These plans never materialised due to the war.

Come 1950, the men's families had migrated, and sub-letting and overcrowding were endemic within the Bengali community.³⁰ The problem was self-perpetuating. Exploitative landlords used the notion of a tight-knit "community" as a veil for racketeering. Furthermore, any social housing available was far from the East End, those willing to relocate found implicit racism - a 'white barrier' - made accessing these houses problematic, and the minority who did move faced everything from jibes to petrol bombs in less diverse areas.³¹ The 1977 Homelessness Act compelled local authorities to give families priority access to council houses.³² Nevertheless, the 'white barrier' ensured Bengali families received the least desirable local authority stock.

'Many of the newest immigrants, the Bengalis, live in overcrowded slum conditions'³³

Against this backdrop, Toynbee Hall continued working to improve housing in the East End. As in the inter-war period, it provided homes in conjunction with cooperative social work.

²⁵ D. Munby, *Living in Stepney*, [London: Oxford University Press, 1951]

²⁶ Briggs & MaCartney, *Toynbee Hall*, 131

²⁷ 'Planning in Stepney', *The Times*, [25th September 1951], 5

²⁸ B. Wheeler, 'A History of Social Housing', accessed via <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14380936>

²⁹ 'Indians in East London', *Toynbee Outlook*, vol. 4 no. 12 [February 1939, Toynbee Hall Archive], 9-12

³⁰ Kershen, *Strangers, Aliens and Asians*, 210-211

S. Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion in the Bengali East End: A Political History*, [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014], 15

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67

³² Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion in the Bengali East End*, 17

³³ *Annual Report 1981-1982*, 16



In 1970, thirty-six new flats for residential volunteers were opened.³⁴ However, the Settlement also provided



Toynbee Hall Prime Minister Edward Heath opens Evershed House in 1970, from Toynbee Hall's Annual Report for 1970

accommodation for local people. Opened in 1970 by Prime Minister Edward Heath, Evershed House opposite the house homed nearly 400 people, around forty of whom participated in social work.³⁵ The majority were not university graduates, but local people who brought into the Settlement ethos of a cooperative life incorporating charity work. Shortly after, the 'residential family' of Toynbee Hall grew once again, as Sunley House and College Buildings were converted into 18 flats for single elderly people, which opened in 1974.³⁶

The tradition of legal aid also continued. In 1963, a Citizens Advice Bureau got a purpose-built office in the new Gatehouse building at the Settlement. In conjunction with the Legal Advice Centre, it was 'a friendly guide to the mysteries of the law'.³⁷ Housing accounted for around a quarter of its cases. However, evoking its predecessor the Poor Man's Lawyer, the futility of their work was recognised; housing cases were 'tragic'. Volunteers could merely 'plead' for extensions or resettlement as people are evicted.³⁸

'In spite of every effort we are able to do all too little to alleviate the hardships of the homeless and badly housed'³⁹

³⁴ Briggs & McCartney, *Toynbee Hall*, 170

³⁵ *Annual Report 1974*, 24

³⁶ *Annual Report 1971*, 27

³⁷ *Annual Report 1963-1964*, 7

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9, 13

³⁹ *Annual Report 1970*, 20-21

⁴⁰ *Annual Report 1968*, 54

By 1968, the Citizens Advice Bureau had started to recognise the changing community with a specific section for the Indian and Pakistani community, with Toynbee Hall funding and providing workers with the required languages.⁴⁰ By 1981, Toynbee Hall employed a Bengali speaking solicitor.⁴¹ All of these steps empowered migrants.

This work was necessary. Volunteers described an 'Insatiable' desire for free legal aid, but again felt they were a mere drop in the ocean; 'the Plight of the inadequately housed and single homeless continues to tax us and demands speedy nationwide attention'.⁴² Reports from a decade later suggest any reforms were fruitless. By 1982, over half of the legal advice centre's cases were housing related.⁴³ Moreover, three in four people had used either legal aid or the Citizen's Advice Bureau multiple times. 62% were from ethnic minorities. 69% were unemployed.⁴⁴ All were experiencing financial exclusion. Again, volunteers lamented the futility of their efforts; 'the Centre will not achieve any change of lasting nature simply by dealing with problems on an individual basis'.⁴⁵

Toynbee Housing Association

In the 1970s, the Settlement undertook a major scheme to try to move beyond solving 'problems on an individual basis', establishing Toynbee Housing Association [THA]. THA was distinct from the Settlement. Nevertheless, it was administered from Toynbee Hall, and sought 'to create a balanced community... with a strong sense of civic duty' whilst providing social housing.⁴⁶ Its first project, financed by Maidenhead Council, was to relocate 84 East End families

⁴¹ *Annual Report 1981*, 13

⁴² *Annual Report 1971*, 25

Annual Report 1972, 16

⁴³ *Annual Report 1982*, 13

⁴⁴ *Annual Report 1982-83*, 25

⁴⁵ *Islington Community Law Centre Annual Report 1974*, [London, 1975]

⁴⁶ *Annual Report 1966*, 8



to Maidenhead, Kent. Tenants were selected based on their ability to contribute to the community's social welfare.⁴⁷ Shortly after, THA constructed homes to rent in Hertfordshire, acquired properties in Bow, and attempted – yet failed due to insufficient funds – to buy 337 properties from Greater London Council.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, by 1973, THA boasted 529 properties. Moreover, these were communities, not just houses.⁴⁹

THA pursued a different approach to social housing, focusing on people, not numbers. Despite its success, the people of Toynbee Hall still recognised housing required drastic reform. They called for 'compulsory purchase orders' to allow the state to buy unused land at market value, then build themselves or let to developers with incentives to build affordable housing. A year later, they called for the same, with the added demand to centralise building powers due to the reluctance of local governments to build new houses.⁵⁰ When no changes came, THA's 1975 annual report simply lamented 'promises do not build houses', for both Labour and Conservative governments 'have merely tinkered with our housing problems'. Their pessimism was no doubt exacerbated by falling THA stock, with financial constraints forcing the sale of two developments to Greater London Council.

Before the close of the decade, THA had one more success; the Flower & Dean estate. It was the Association's single biggest development. More still, it was in East London, not the surrounding counties, meaning no tenants were forced to relocate. Construction finished in 1982, with the first family moving in the same year.⁵¹ The Flower & Dean estate harked back to the East End's 19th Century past. It bore the name of Flower & Dean Street, Jack the Ripper's infamous haunt. Directly outside the new estate stood an archway from an old Rothschild model dwelling. In its place stood the new development of affordable homes for East Enders which stands to this day.

Present Day

The plans to regenerate the Toynbee Hall estate began in 2013 as a result of the grade II listed building falling into a state of severe disrepair, making it at risk of being lost forever without major restoration work.



The first family in the Flower & Dean Estate.

More broadly, it was recognised that the rest of the estate was no longer fit to serve our community. Therefore, after exploring other avenues (which didn't allow Toynbee Hall to meet the outcomes of the charity), Toynbee Hall's trustees agreed to lease the land to the north and east of the estate to a housing developer, resulting in the creation of 74 homes. 14 are a mix of affordable and social housing, including family homes which are short in the borough. The developer London Square will restore the gardens at the front, which belongs to the council. For the lease of the land, Toynbee Hall received £10m from London Squares.

Further Reading

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J. White, *Rothschild's Buildings: Life in an East London Tenement Block, 1887-1920*, [London: Penguin, 2003]

⁴⁷ *Annual Report 1968*, 32

⁴⁸ *Annual Report 1970*, 20, 24

⁴⁹ *Annual Report 1973*, 21-22

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Annual Report 1973, 19

⁵¹ *Annual Report 1977*, 18-19

