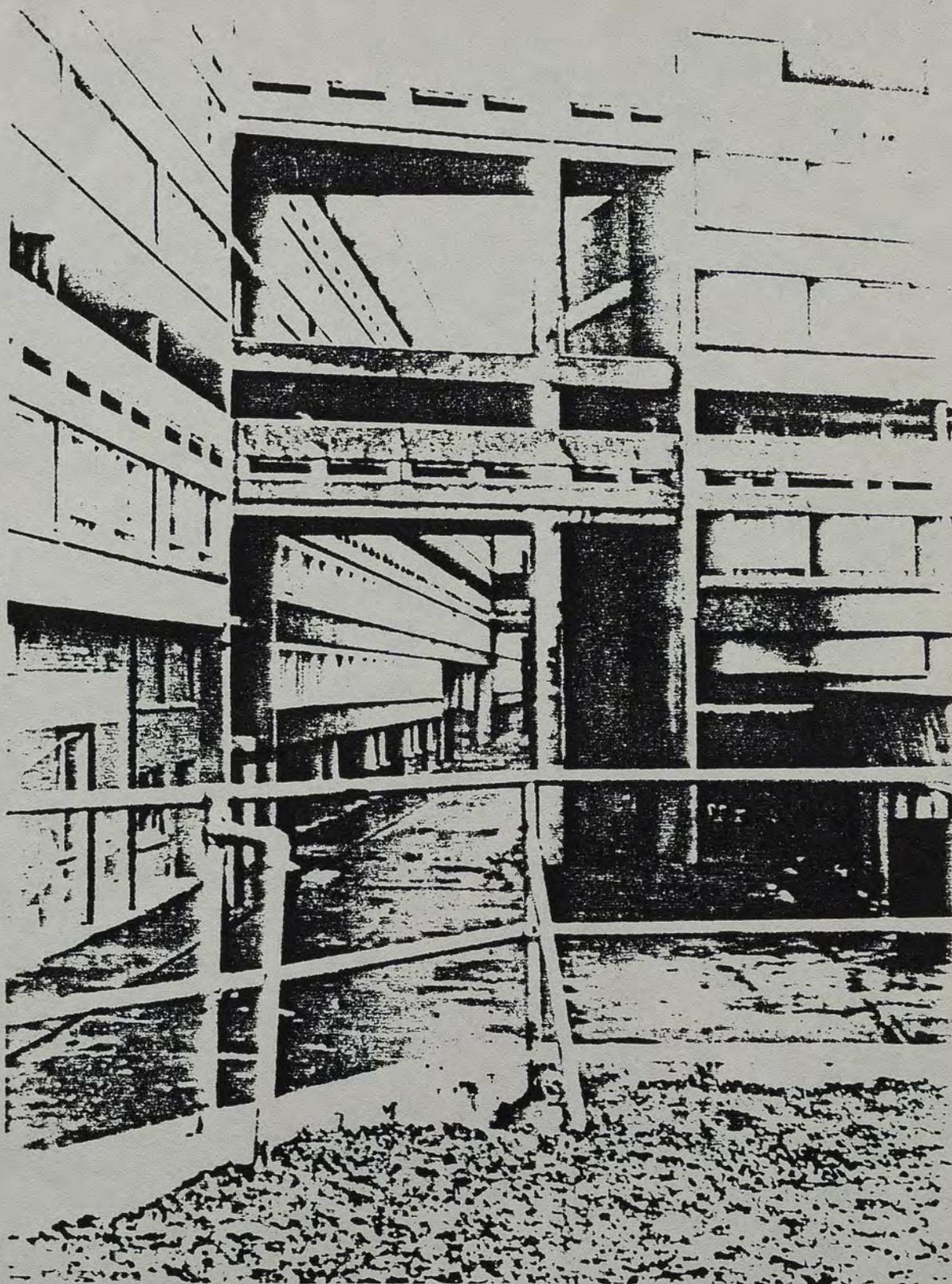


NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2015/51/1463
Creation Date(s):	October 1985
Extent and medium:	7 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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"DIVIS - THE DREADFUL ENCLOSURE"

Draft:

TCPA Policy Statement. Divis Flats Belfast

Directed to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Throughout its history the Town and Country Planning Association has campaigned for humane environmental conditions in which communities can grow and flourish in a dignified manner. The Association's development of the Garden Cities Movement was a direct and principled response to the squalor and overcrowding of 19th century urban life; its promotion of the New Towns movement was a similar response to the city conditions of the mid-20th century, and its recent research into the Inner City demonstrates its continuing concern at the deleterious effects of brutal environments on communities.

It was the TCPA which initiated the concept of Planning Aid in the early seventies and since then its National Planning Aid Unit has travelled the country assisting communities in their struggles for a decent environment.

In recent months the national unit has been investigating conditions in the Divis Flats complex of West Belfast and on the basis of the findings of that investigation the TCPA Executive Committee is issuing this policy statement regarding the future of the complex.

Preamble

The TCPA's National Planning Aid Unit, through its extensive travels, has seen many deplorable living environments, but none which appear more prone than Divis to brutalise a community. It does not surprise the TCPA that Divis has been described by other experts in high-rise development as 'The worst housing in Western Europe'.

It is significant that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (the landlords of Divis) itself acknowledges that the complex is beset by dire environmental problems when it admits '... that is why we have

declared Divis a priority estate...' The Housing Executive's own architectural consultants, commissioned to prepare a major refurbishment scheme, has published a litany of basic constructional faults in the flats '... which involves complete elements of structure being tackled in a comprehensive manner...'

But the people of the Divis community itself - which must be acknowledged as the real 'experts' on the complex - have argued vociferously, and for many years, that no amount of refurbishment will solve the innate problems of the flats. The residents are supported by a wide range of people who are in a position to know directly just what day-to-day existence in Divis can do to a community. The local GP, Dr Hendron, has publicly declared

'I think it is criminal that the Government allows these flats to remain standing. Few of the people of Western Europe have been as socially deprived as the residents of Divis flats. What we have here is men, women and children, thrown together and expected to live in conditions not fit for animals'.

Dr Hendron cites the high incidence of bronchial diseases, and particularly the abnormally high rate of depressive illnesses, which he encounters in the flats, to support his strong views on the matter.

The Bishop of Down & Connor, Dr Cahal Daly, is equally outspoken on the matter;

'Divis is a disgrace to public housing - quite unfit for human habitation. I have to state quite categorically, there is no acceptable solution to the problems of Divis other than the complete demolition of the flats and their replacement by conventional housing. It is time to admit that the problems of Divis are due to basic and incurable structural and planning faults, and the cost of keeping them far outweighs the cost of demolition and replacement'.

Mr John McQuillan of the Institute of Environmental Health Officers, who has recently completed a detailed study into the daily hazards of life in Divis, is even more outspoken,

'The people of Divis have been putting up with conditions which are quite appalling and which belong to the eighteenth century; I would not be surprised to see outbreaks of dysentery. My view is that due to the social and economic conditions it would be better to demolish the entire complex. I can see no future for refurbishment other than cosmetic, Divis is not fit for human habitation given the multiplicity of problems'.

In the main the problems of Divis are those which beset the inhabitants of all system-built mass housing constructed in the sixties and against

which there is now a justifiable outcry. The structure and construction of the flats have resulted in incurable damp-penetration resulting in excessive mould and fungus growth in the flats; the sewage systems and waste-disposal units are inadequate; there is excessive vermin infestation - rats, cockroaches and mice - to some extent caused by the heating systems. The design of the flats is brutal and gives the lie to the grand concepts of the planners and architects concerning 'streets in the sky'.

None of these problems are particularly unique to Divis - they can be found in most of the 'sink' estates in the inner areas of all our cities and play their part in the continuing urban conflict. But the TCPA acknowledges that, in Divis, such problems are excessive and that the Divis community, in addition, has to contend with special problems related to its location. Not only have the residents to put up with the disgraceful 'public housing...unfit for human habitation..' condemned by McQuillan, Dr Hendron and Bishop Daly, they must also endure 24-hour army camera surveillance from the top of Divis Tower, and frequent incursions into the flats by army and police patrols. To the TCPA it is intolerable that the community does not even seem to be allowed to deal with its own deprivations in private.

The problems of Divis have mounted since the complex was first conceived - conceptions of highrise, deck-access living which have proved to be a planning and social disaster in almost all cases. Such fundamental mistakes cannot be ameliorated particularly where, as in Divis, the problems are excessive and compounded.

Even the demolition in recent years of two of the Divis blocks (a project which naturally suited the community) has resulted in the deadly danger of asbestos throughout the complex. The workers removing asbestos (found in large quantities throughout the complex) wore protective clothing but none of the community were protected and, as the resident's newspaper, Divis Bulletin, reported, '... at present every resident walks through asbestos litter; children play with broken asbestos, and it is tracked into every flat in the complex..' The Environmental Health Officer, John McQuillan has reported that,

'The asbestos in Divis is in an extremely hazardous state. Asbestos cement pieces were found on the

ground throughout the complex. I have seen affidavits prepared by officers of the N.I. Housing Executive apportioning blame as to why asbestos pieces are present but no attempt appears to have been made to remove them. We are satisfied that the estate as a whole is in such a condition as to be injurious to health.'

The Divis Residents Association after attending an Asbestos Conference in Glasgow, declared,

'We were always aware of the dangers of asbestos and its removal but this conference ensures that never again will they get away with what happened in Divis. It is too late to prevent the death threat being doubled. Housing Executive workers wear protective clothing, as required by law, to prevent the risk of death from exposure to asbestos fibres. But nobody has issued space-suits to the residents of Divis who are at daily risk from the asbestos scattered around the complex.'

On the evidence presented by its Planning Aid Unit, the TCPA is satisfied that asbestos does, indeed, present a deadly threat to a community which has an exceptionally high percentage of young children within it.

The TCPA's Planning Aid Unit has studied many reports on the Divis complex prepared by independent groups as well as by the resident's committees themselves. These reports all conclude that the fundamental (and growing) problems cannot be resolved by rehabilitation of the existing estate. As one Divis Study Group has written, '..to spend the huge sums of money necessary to eliminate the problems would be to throw good money after bad...'

The TCPA Executive Committee agrees with this argument and condemns any suggestion that a community, which has faced excessive deprivation almost from the start, should be forced to live permanently in an environment which virtually all experts have described as irredeemable.

As we outlined at the beginning of this statement, the Housing Executive itself acknowledges the plight of Divis; in an official press statement in 1980 the Chairman of the Executive pointed out that,

'Conditions in Divis at present are highly unsatisfactory for the tenants. The original design, which seemed right in the sixties, has proved unsuccessful in the light of the experience of the eighties'.

It is clear that the residents saw Divis as unsatisfactory as early as 1974 (if not before) when the Residents Association was formed to campaign against conditions in the complex. It seems clear to the

TCPA that refurbishment of the Divis Flats, no matter how extensive, will not result in any fundamental change in the 'original design' of the complex, a design which the Housing Executive admits is unsatisfactory.

The TCPA is aware that one of the major arguments against complete demolition is that the existing community could not be rehoused in conventional housing on the same site. Even if this were so (and this remains a debatable point largely because it has not been raised to any great extent) it is not really an argument at all: to condemn an entire community to an existence in what is agreed by all as a deplorable environment, rather than to arrange for a majority to have decent homes, is a form of perverted planning logic.

But, in any case, it seems that any such 'problem' could be resolved through negotiation with the Divis Residents Association. In a recent survey this body has established that, excluding the Divis Tower, there are 483 occupied flats out of a total of 528 remaining in the complex. In the survey 34 households expressed a willingness to move to another area, and 43 others said they would move out if they could not be re-housed in the locality. The residents group concluded that,

'That leaves 406 households, and taking into account the amount of waste land in the vicinity, there is plenty of room to rehouse all those who wish to stay'.

The TCPA acknowledges that the replacement of the Divis complex with a new neighbourhood of conventional housing would constitute a major planning problem in terms of density, but considers that the long-term rewards - financial as well as social - justify the effort.

There can be no doubt that a refusal to face the fact that Divis (and similar environments elsewhere) does not work, and cannot work, as a civilised living environment, will only perpetuate a mounting catalogue of problems which will finally deny peaceful solutions.

Conclusions

Having studied the facts the Executive Committee of the Town and Country Planning Association gives its unequivocal support to the Divis Residents Association in its campaign for total demolition of the Divis complex, and a replacement housing scheme for the existing community.

The Executive Committee supports the view of the Residents Association that major rehabilitation of the complex would not only be a waste of public money, but would effectively condemn the community to many further years of existence in an environment which most experts (let alone the community itself) have condemned as socially unacceptable.

The Executive Committee therefore calls on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland urgently to instruct the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to prepare an immediate strategy for phased demolition of the Divis Flats and replacement housing schemes in full consultation with the Divis Residents Association.

In conjunction with this, the Executive Committee calls on the Secretary of State to instruct the Housing Executive immediately to correct the hazardous conditions already pertaining in the complex - particularly with regard to the dangers of asbestos.

The Executive Committee agrees with the view of the Divis residents that,

'Divis never was, and never can be, a place to put down roots. It is no place for a child; no place for the elderly - it is no place for anyone!'