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Housing Aspirations and Obsolescence in Britain: Understanding the Relationship

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Understanding the Relationship

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Aims and Introduction

This paper aims to consider whether there is a significant incipient problem of housing obsolescence in the UK, and if so, what its main dimensions are. Its proposition is that much of the older housing stock is increasingly failing to meet the routine expectations of households. The core of the question is to what extent the relationships between the physical housing ‘offer’ and trends in what people want or expect from their housing is becoming strained. The paper been prepared from diverse literature, but also from the results of about 30 interviews carried out with housing professionals in the three locations in the north of England; Wakefield, York, and Greater Manchester (although analysis of these is at an early stage for this draft).

To be clear, the basis of the concept of obsolescence is a loss of value or utility of an object or product over time. This loss can come about through physical deterioration, but essential to the concept is that newer and better alternatives are available or expected. A paper considering housing obsolescence in an earlier era suggested:

‘Obsolescence is a lessening of use efficiency resulting from the introduction of more desirable systems...at the point where a unit does not possess facilities and amenities which society regards as essential for modern living, the accommodation is considered functionally obsolete’. (Kirby, 1971, p.250).

In many other areas of consumption, such as motor vehicles and consumer electronics, obsolescence is recognised as routine. The constant round of ‘creative destruction’ and ‘incessant renewal’ was identified by Joseph Schumpeter (1975) over 60 years ago as an inherent and (in his view) beneficial feature of a capitalist economy. Some obsolescence may be ‘planned’ that is when non-essential features of design are ‘face-lifted’ and the product presented as something new. However, other incidences of obsolescence represent genuine improvements in product functionality, such as the upstaging of the of the video by the DVD or the introduction of anti-lock brakes for vehicles, which stimulate a consumer reaction.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First there is a consideration of the principles of obsolescence, which provides a framework for later discussion. Second, there is a review of the historical and policy context for the consideration of obsolescence. Third, the paper considers the factors that may be important in obsolescence, reasons why obsolescence is now starting to grow as a problem, focussing on consumption cultures and social trends, changes in housing demand and technological factors. Government policy to raise housing standards, and to manage low demand in housing is also examined as a factor that lies behind incipient obsolescence before some conclusions are drawn.

Understanding Obsolescence

Nutt et al (1976) suggested there were four types of resources that were offered by buildings:

- Physical resources, such as space, services and fabric condition;
- Resources in the form of the uses to which a building could be put, including its capacity for adaptation for new uses,
- Locational resources, such as access to services, jobs etc;
- And financial resources, i.e. their capacity to generate financial returns through, for example, letting or capital appreciation.

To this list could be added a fifth resource, the resource associated with the design and cultural meaning of the building. These resources are not entirely independent of
each other; the fourth resource (financial) in particular is likely to be largely a product of the other three.

On the other side of the equation, there are the expectations of households about what housing should provide. Of course households will place different weightings on housing attributes depending on their own needs and values. But the general tendency has been for expectations to shift upwards over time, especially in a context where wealth and other living standards have increased over the long term. A general hypothesis would be that the market first supplies innovations (for example, separate bedrooms, bathrooms, fitted kitchens, central heating systems, en suite shower rooms) to better off sections of the population. Then the use of these, through a combination of cheaper, later generation versions and moving behaviour, filters down to the mass market. So innovations become aspirational for a wider range of social groups and eventually become routine expectations.

Public policy also plays an important role. While in some consumer fields, policy has little interest in what is consumed this is not the case in housing where there has long been an active role for government. Government for a very long time has defined acceptable standards for existing housing, and it regulates the production of new housing through building regulations and encourages it to take specific forms through the planning system. Also, through development funding mechanisms policy ensures ‘affordable’ housing is built to specific standards. Of course, through these activities, the core aim of policy has been to raise housing quality. However, a side effect is an upward leverage of expectations, therefore contributing to the process of obsolescence, and eventually leading on to further upward shifts in what policy expects housing to deliver.

So, understanding obsolescence is closely tied up the question of mismatches between what is expected from a house and the package of attributes that is offered. However, the tendency for obsolete dwellings actually to become disused or discarded is tied up with market conditions. First, the overall level of income and wealth among households is influential, as there will be significant differences in the ability of individual households to exercise effective demand for improved housing resources.

Second, some characteristics of housing mean that it is generally less sensitive to changing aspirations and expectations than other commodities. In most other consumer areas repairs or upgrading is expensive or impossible, the supply of new and apparently better commodities is plentiful and cheap, and second-hand goods depreciate rapidly to near zero value. In contrast, housing can be repaired and upgraded (within limits) and generally older houses do not lose value because of age per se. So, especially in regions where housing is in short supply, virtually all kinds of houses, regardless of their qualities, continue to attract a demand, and consumers are willing to spend money keeping them habitable and improving them. Even if such ‘reinvestment’ does not always have a direct compensatory payback, the UK experience has been that value of the property almost always goes up. The same may go for market ‘hot spots’ even in regions where there is an overall surplus. In Nutt et al’s terms these positive locational resources may work to overwhelm significant drawbacks with the other resources offered by the house.
An parallel from another area of consumption where shortage of preferred supply is the norm is the automobile market in Cuba, where 1950s pre-revolutionary vehicles famously continue in everyday use. Living in a Victorian terraced house or tenement flat in a tight market in a modern British city is perhaps the equivalent of driving around in a re-sprayed, re-engined and re-upholstered 1950s car. Repairs and upgrading cause it still to be able to be used as transport and give it a respectable appearance. If the design is right it may even have cultural cachet. But this can only partly compensate for inherent shortcomings in comfort, efficiency and performance compared to the routine expectations of modern motorists.

The importance of locational resources to the ‘package’ offered by housing also brings in the question of neighbourhood policy, which since the 1980s has become increasingly enmeshed with housing policy. Processes of obsolescence are also not completely separable from the neighbourhood problems that afflict the least popular areas of housing, which arguably stem significantly from increasingly concentrated poverty (e.g. Page 2000, Lupton, 2004). There is some circularity here though, as it is the operation of the housing market, including the presence of housing that has fallen in popularity and relative price, which helps to concentrate poverty. Those whose incomes that are static or falling cannot afford to move, and those moving in are the ones with few choices in the market.

So, in understanding obsolescence there seem to be four main sets of factors that are relevant. First there is the nature of the housing stock, its physical attributes, adaptability and cultural value. Second there are the expectations of households about what is a socially acceptable housing package, with the observation that expectations have constantly risen through time. Third, there is the question of the influence of local markets; in balanced markets obsolescence may be very evident but in tight markets it may be disguised through supply shortages. Fourth, there is the role of housing and neighbourhood policy: to what extent does policy, on one hand, accentuate trends towards obsolescence or can it, on the other, compensate for shortcomings in the dwelling stock attributes by improving the quality of neighbourhoods?

**Historical and Policy Background**

Obsolescence as a driver of housing policy in Britain has not been apparent since heyday of slum clearance that ended in the early 1970s. Then it was believed that much of the pre-1914 housing stock, especially at the lowest end of the market was obsolete mainly on ‘sanitary’ grounds. Certain house types such as ‘back-to-back’ terraces\(^1\), houses built in courtyards with no road access, ‘single ends’ and ‘room and kitchens\(^2\) were especially regarded as deficient and almost universally the subject of redevelopment plans. But policy towards older private housing from the turn of the 1970s to the late 1990s assumed that the vast majority of it could continue in use indefinitely by ensuring the basic integrity of building elements and by providing modernised amenities, such as kitchens, bathrooms and central heating (for a review see Kintrea and Morgan, 2005).

Current policy on housing quality, the ‘decent homes’ policy in England and the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, continues to embody the same kind of assumptions. Although responses to the imperative to bring all houses up to this standard can include demolition, this is usually occasioned on grounds of the costs of achieving the standard, rather than any sense that dwellings do not match with what is wanted or expected by consumers in a fundamental way.

So, for 30 years since the 1970s, official approaches to housing renewal suggested that most housing could be fixed up, modernised and adapted for new or altered needs and demands. This was supported by the operation of the market. Although there were longstanding problems of poor

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\(^1\) That is a house with windows only on one elevation with a rear wall common to the house behind, facing the other way.

\(^2\) One and two roomed tenement flats in Scotland
conditions in the older housing stock, housing renewal sometimes seemed to be an indefinite, revolving process that the market could take in its stride: if there was obsolescence it was situated, not endemic. For example, Thomas commented that: ‘at some point inconvenience, lack of privacy and inadequate car parking becomes a town house with character in a central location’ (1986, p.38). Indeed the evidence from successive house condition surveys has tended to show an overall improvement in the condition and amenities in older housing (ref), at least against official fitness criteria. Indeed, in recent years it seems that little improvement of this has been a direct result of public intervention because grant aid to older private housing has fallen to a very low level (Kintrea and Morgan, 2005).

Thomas’s point seems to be no longer be relevant in many housing markets. Since ‘low demand’ emerged as a phenomenon of some housing markets of the English Midlands and the North of England in the late 1990s there are an many claims in strategy documents and action plans by local authorities and housing partnerships that action must be taken against housing that is ‘obsolete’. The result of the switch to renewal in the 1970s was that after a long period during which the UK housing stock had undergone significant demolition and reconstruction in response to improvement policy and consumer demands, much of the older housing stock was becoming fossilised.

Obsolete housing used in policy documents is a kind of byword for housing which seems to be beyond saving by means of reasonable physical change or neighbourhood improvements. This is recognised by government at national level in England where the policy contexts are the efforts to bring housing supply and demand into greater balance and to ensure that people have ‘decent places’ to live. The Communities Plan, in respect of low demand and abandonment advises: ‘strategic plans will entail radical and sustained action to replace obsolete housing with modern sustainable accommodation, through demolition and new building or refurbishment’ (ODPM, 2003). Obsolescence is also now starting to feature as an issue in local strategic housing plans.

The qualities on offer from the housing stock are also coming under scrutiny as part of policies to support economic growth, particularly in the north of England under the Northern Way policy (ODPM, 2004). There is a question whether the housing stock in some regions is sufficiently attractive to attract economically active in migrants from other regions or outside the UK (ref)

Yet in these policy documents ‘obsolete housing’ is rarely defined or even described, and there is little sense of what constitutes obsolescence and what factors lie behind it. What is perhaps even more important is that there does not seem to be much forward thinking about obsolescence. Current plans tend to plan to demolish what appears to be already obsolete. However, understanding obsolescence better is necessary in light of emerging strategic priorities to prevent- and not just react to-market disequilibrium in weak urban housing markets (e.g. North West Regional Housing Board, 2003) as the early lessons from the market renewal pathfinders begin to filter through.

There is no shortage of future thinking about housing, at least in relation to new building. The collection of papers commissioned by CABE and RIBA (2004) as Housing Futures 2024 is a good example. Major new leveraged urban housing developments such as the Millennium Communities sponsored by English Partnerships also take a self-consciously future-oriented approach. Such thinking tends to postulate desirable designs for new-build ‘homes for the future’ that will meet emerging environmental, technological and lifestyle needs. The thrust of urban policy at least since the time of the Rogers report (Urban Task Force, 1999) is towards high density, apartment living, with home and work in close proximity, obviating the need for daily car use. It promotes buildings that are
‘high tech’, environmentally friendly, and possessed of high cultural value through bespoke architectural design. There are also social dimensions; a mix of market price housing for sale and affordable housing is promoted on the grounds of social cohesion and inclusion.

However, there remains an unresolved tension between what designers and policy makers favour and what householders, or large sections of them, seem to want (and, it has to be said, what housebuilders typically supply). The alternative future is a version of current development norms, with ‘traditional’, 30-to-the-hectare, two-storey structures in car dependent suburban neighbourhoods, and single tenure owner occupied communities continuing to dominate. In fact even CABE’s own evidence shows that consumer preferences for detached and semi-detached homes in extra-urban or semi-rural settings continue more or less unabated in the face of supposedly more sustainable alternatives (CABE, 2005a; 2005b).

While there is now developing a conventional wisdom of sustainable housing and neighbourhoods along ‘urban renaissance’ lines, a key question is to what extent these ‘expert’ views of what makes for good housing design will prosper. It has to be said that there is a strong element of the ‘people don’t know what’s good for them’ here. Examining the longer term relationships between housing design and society Jeremiah’s historical survey concluded: ‘Setting out the concepts of …an improved life, raising expectations and then frequently failing to deliver, has been a recurring cycle in this history’ (2000, p.207).

For the purposes of this paper perhaps two things matter. One is to counterpoint the active debate about designs for the future with the lack of thinking about the existing housing stock. Since about 85 per cent of the housing stock that will be available in 2021 (at least at current building rates) is already standing (Whitehead, 2004), new building will be only a small part of the future, unless demolition and replacement rates accelerate significantly. Second, whether ‘new urbanism’ or suburban ideals are preferred, neither bears much resemblance to what much of the older housing stock can offer.

**Factors in Obsolescence: The Housing Stock**

There are two sides to the argument that the characteristics of the housing stock are part of the problem of incipience obsolescence. First, there is the qualities of the existing stock, and second there is the perception that what new housing is offering is now changing quite fast.

The UK has the one of the oldest housing stocks in Europe: only 13 per cent of housing has been built since 1985 and almost 41 percent was built before 1945 (Norris and Shiels, 2004). Among 14 pre-accession European Union countries only Denmark appears to have older housing. The UK also stands out internationally as having very low completion and replacement rates for housing; 2003 data puts the UK at the foot of the same list of countries with 3.1 new houses completed per thousand population (ODPM, 2005, Table 112). Although demolitions rose threefold since the mid 1990s to 25,000 in 2001/02, they had fallen back to just under 19,000 in 2003/04, the latest year for which data is available (ODPM 2005, Table 111). The vast majority of these demolished houses appear to be owned by social landlords, rather than the private sector and these numbers seem low in comparison to some estimates of up to 1 million ‘unwanted’ dwellings (Cole et al, 2000). They also mean that the dwelling stock continues to age. Although a new house is sometimes assumed to have a life of about 60 years, not long ago Michael Ball (1996, p.12) estimated that an average dwelling would have to last 4000 years at current replacement rates, and not much has happened since to construction and demolition figures.

There is a greater tendency for houses to be small in the UK, where the average dwelling is 86.9 square metres and has 5.3 rooms. While the overall average size is not the smallest in Europe, certainly UK rooms are smaller than anywhere else (National Agency for Enterprise and Housing, 2003, Tables 2.1 and 2.2). The UK also has the fewest detached houses; only 22 percent of the existing stock is detached (ODPM 2005, Table 117)\(^3\) while no other European country falls below 30 per cent, with the majority over 55 per cent ((National Agency for Enterprise and Housing, 2003, Table 3.3).

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\(^3\) England only
While these data provide pointers to only some of the relevant variables, they do suggest that the risk of obsolescence may be potentially greater in the UK than elsewhere. Surveys run by mortgage lenders and other property interests typically suggest more people want detached houses and bungalows, and larger houses, than are available within the housing stock. (Propertyfinder, 2005; Alliance and Leicester, 2002).

One of the key reasons that perhaps explains why housing has not until recently typically suffered from the obsolescence problems of other commodities is that innovation in house building in the UK has been extraordinarily lacking (Ball, 1996; Nicol and Golland, 2004). The shortage of building land and the ease of selling just about anything that can be built (see Barker, 2004) are part, but not the whole, explanation. The typical package that house builders have offered - 3 bedrooms, living room, kitchen and bathroom - and the space available are not all that much different from what was offered 100 years ago.

Indeed for many owners of older houses, the house building industry for a long time has not offered anything better than they already have, except for the quality of newness itself. Indeed among a significant number of buyers, including most the middle class and the elite from the Prime Minister downwards the preference is for older property. According to the ODPM (2003) only 36 per cent of house buyers would consider a new house. Therefore the tendency for markets to sell innovation to the rich that then trickles down to the mainstream has not been particularly apparent in the house building industry. However, there is a sense now that the balance is tipping towards newer housing in the lower parts of the private market.

The pre-1914 terraced house is the standard ‘offer’ in the lower part of the housing market in many locations in the north of England where we carried out our research. In some locations it is virtually all that is available. A group of development and strategy staff interviewed in Manchester came up with a list of why terraced houses were in many locations no longer always desirable. These were, the small size of the houses and their rooms, the fact that they were built hard on the street, the lack of parking, the meagre back yards, the poor quality back alleys ('run down; full of rubbish; insecure'), and the lack of green space. Other interviewees also mentioned steep stairs and the compromised internal layouts that had been the result of earlier modernisations to insert kitchens and bathrooms, and the very high maintenance costs associated with old property. One of the Manchester group commented:

‘We used to renovate them- the kitchens and bathrooms. The other options are not that many...do we think about demolishing more of them? Or can we remodel the area to compensate for the disadvantages?’ (Local authority staff interview, Manchester)

New houses are now changing quite fast and if government has its way, will change even faster in the future. If innovation in housebuilding extends there is a clear possibility that more existing homes will become obsolete more quickly as the attributes gap between new and older housing opens up. While older housing types that have a high cultural value may continue to be in demand, demand may shrink for more mundane housing at the lower end bottom and the middle of the market. New housing is distinguishing itself from older property now in two main ways; suburban housing is increasingly offering more features which sets it apart form the older housing stock, and second there has been a reinvention of the urban flat.

Although new suburban houses are routinely criticised by the design lobby and on broad sustainability grounds by the official Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment in England (CABE, 2005) (see also Leishman et al 2004), even at very modest positions in the market, suburban houses they already offer features that are largely absent in older urban houses.

During interviews there was a long list of features of new housing which were qualitatively different from older housing:

- En suite shower rooms, in addition to the main bathroom
- Utility rooms (i.e. dedicated spaces to house washing machines, dryers, freezers etc.)
- Patio doors
- ‘Decks’ and garden areas (‘an outdoor space that they can call their own’ (RSL Housing Service Manager, Manchester)
- dining kitchens
- A second toilet (thanks to building regulations designed to increase disabled accessibility (see Imrie 2003) (‘Quite normal’, RSL Housing Services Manager, York)
- Off street parking

Double glazing and central heating were also mentioned but it was always recognised that, unlike most of the list above, these has already become expectations rather than aspirations, and are good examples of the trickle down of former luxury items.

Also, through cul-de-sac layouts, if not explicit gating, new suburban housing offers a degree of retreat from the public realm, which is valued by residents (see Atkinson, 2005) and is not available in traditional urban housing forms such as terraces and tenements.

Figure 1 here

The other part of the new build market is the urban flat, mainly built on central city brownfield land and aimed at a different customer group. Typical new urban flats offer outdoor living space on balconies, open plan living indoors, lifts and covered private parking. Partly due to government encouragement, they increasingly sell on the basis of their individual architectural design, offering an attractive modernity in tune with technologically oriented lifestyles. They also offer immediate access to city centre jobs, services, shopping and cultural and leisure opportunities, so are more convenient than the older housing stock that is usually situated in inner urban rings rather than city centres. This urban style is now also moving to suburban locations as at least some city centres become saturated (Allen and Blandy, 2004).

As well as these current changes, there is also the prospect that new homes will become more technologically advanced. This was not an issue very much identified by the interviewees but futurists believe that technology will come to play a bigger part in most peoples’ lives, especially ICT-information and communications technology- seen as particularly relevant to the built environment. The most important issue here is perhaps one of location with access to ICT becoming necessary to enable ‘live-work lifestyles’ (Gillespie and Rutherford, 2004). Therefore it is anticipated by commentators that there will be a falling demand for locations that have a ‘poverty of connections’ (Demos, 1997), and a growth of ‘network ghettos’ (Graham and Marvin, 2001) or what elsewhere has been called the ‘black holes of the information society’ (Castells, 1996-98). Meanwhile the better off will be able to choose their locations without so much reference to commuting needs and physically disconnect themselves from urban life, if required. The tendency for companies to offer ‘bundled services’ of broadband, and other telecommunications such as home security services, utility metering and energy management may accentuate this (Graham and Marvin, 2001). The other potential development is ‘smart homes’ which include advanced security systems, automation and remote control of heating, lighting, appliances, doors and windows.

Some of the interviewees were, however, very aware also of the rising importance of environmental features in new housing, although this is perhaps more likely to the result of exposure to some of the more advanced housing association developments and to designs commissioned by individuals as there are few homes produced by the development industry which sell on their environmental features. Some of this, too, came on the back of rapidly rising energy costs at the time of the research in 2006.

Overall, it appears to be increasingly the case that the package on offer from housebuilders, more by incrementalism than clear strategy on their behalf, is becoming qualitatively different to that which is available in the older housing stock.

The clear danger is that we are at a threshold after which living in some kinds of older housing will no longer be acceptable. During interviews, especially with those who were responsible for social housing, there was a lot of comment that in order for social housing in the future to be acceptable it should incorporate the features that were increasingly seen as standard in the private sector.

One interviewee summed this up:
aspirations in social housing have tended to reflect what is available in that sector. Older tenants are less demanding. But we’ll become the housing of the last choice if we don’t have the right amenities’ (RSL Chief Executive A, Greater Manchester)

And similarly:

‘What we provide must be dependent ultimately on what the market provides. If the market provides it – are we asking if our product is competitive- are the services what people want?’ (RSL Development Manager, Greater Manchester).

Factors In Obsolescence: The Changing Expectations of Households

Market Segmentation

As discussed above, obsolescence will only occur if the new and improved products are affordable to the mainstream. Currently, rising affluence, increasing numbers of two earner households, the shifting of more households out of poverty, financial inheritances from earlier generations of home owners and continuing low mortgage rates are all tendencies which are moving demand up market. There is certain inevitability that the UK’s current relative economic success will raise housing aspirations and contribute to more and faster housing obsolescence.

But the picture is much more complicated than a general ratcheting up of expectations. Analysts of low demand and pressured markets alike suggest demand is becoming increasingly complex and segmented between households between households. This is not just about fewer households in some locations and regions and more in others, but the emergence of new demand factors that mean that the fit between households and property is under strain (see Murie 2002). Considering one local housing market in the greater Manchester area one interviewee considered:

‘This is a very complex market situation, a series of products is what is needed, younger people want smaller self contained properties, Asian people want larger accommodation, new dynamics are created by new in migrants. For the traditional market, yes, there some of it obsolete, but for the new markets, not necessarily so’ (RSL Chief Executive B, Greater Manchester)

From the literature a number of other trends in household’s expectations of their housing can be discerned:

- Smaller, more affluent households in general demand different kinds of living spaces -fewer rooms but at least the same floor area.
- At the same time, larger and extended families among at least some BME groups mean that in some places bigger homes with more rooms are wanted.
- ‘Concertina households’ that expand and contract at different times of the week or month as a result of relationship breakdowns and co-parenting arrangements, and weekly commuting
- High rates of migration into the UK also raise the prospect that a wider variety of house types and styles are required as changing cultural preferences dilute demand for traditional British housing styles.
- Short termism: a notable group of households who are transient within their homes and neighbourhoods and who value ease of use and low maintenance.
- Demands for more internal space: inside the home space demands are driven by the complex social life of many households and the ownership of increasing amounts of ‘stuff’- witness the rise of specialist storage companies to cope with the overspill, and the spaces designated as garages for storage.
• Demands for parking: Vehicle ownership rates and number of vehicles per household continue to rise, and ownership rates do not seem to be limited by a lack of parking space (CABE, 2005b). This drives a demand for somewhere to park in crowded urban streets and puts a premium on off-street, and particularly ‘in-curtilage parking’, for reasons of security. As numerous disputes over parking spaces attest, a lot of car owners believe they should have a right to park in front of or near their house. (Transport policy has so far done little to stem car ownership, which seems likely to remain high even if car use falls).

• Many types of households now also expect to have some outdoor living space, for eating, entertaining sunbathing, etc. with the concept of the ‘outdoor room’ becoming popular.

_Housing as an Object of Consumption_

An underlying explanation for obsolescence is the rise of housing as an object of consumption (e.g. Bramley et al 2004; Firth and Zoglovitch, 2004). Whereas in the past the state played a significant role in housing production and distribution, and housing choices for households were heavily led by needs, there are now also significant cultural influences at play, and many more possibilities for choice.

It can be fairly readily recognised that the overall design of housing is strongly influenced by the cultural milieu (see Chui, 2004). Designs that breach limits are unacceptable or culturally unsustainable. The issue that arises is how and why acceptable housing becomes unacceptable through time.

Significant insights into why and how patterns of consumption develop and change in relation to the home have been generated by Elizabeth Shove and her co-authors (e.g. Shove, 2003; Shove and Hand, 2003; Chappells and Shove, 2004). Focussing on seemingly mundane technologies such as freezers, showers and kitchens, their contribution is to see demand for and the use of particular goods being socially constructed from the relationship that exists between the consumer (people) and the object of consumption (things). In this they draw on ideas generated in the field called ‘social studies of technology’ originated by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon in France in the early 1990s.

Shove and Hand (2003) identify four explanations for changes in consumption in relation to the home. One of these relates to social trends such as gender relations and employment patterns that affect how homes are used. Of the three more definitely cultural explanations, first there is a desire for newness. This is not simply about a desire for new things to replace what is worn out, but also because new things promise new functions or better functionality (and of course manufactures are often engaged in strategies to persuade consumers that they need things or functions that they did not have before).

Second, they recognise that one of the roles of housing is to provide self-identity, a place where ‘we can be the person we would like to be’ (Porteous and Smith, 2001).
Of all possible arenas for self-identity housing is one of the most tangible, and one where people spend a lot of their time and money. This is reflected well in the many TV programmes about house buying and interior and garden design that, while easily dismissed as trivia, do reflect an important terrain for satisfaction in a consumerist world. But of course what brings satisfaction is tied up with changing ideas of what is desirable and fashionable. This means that housing is caught up in the ‘tides and eddies of cultural distinction’, and that ‘the restlessness of society is manifested in the details of … design and décor’ (Shove and Hand, 2003, p.3).

Restlessness is led by the wealthy, who can afford to have variously (and most likely simultaneously) their ‘new urbanist’ city centre apartments, their ‘farmhouses’, and homes abroad to suit and reflect their lifestyles. But it resonates down the social scale so that even those who have little or no market power, such as social housing tenants, articulate increasing demands for housing that reflects their preferred (or imagined) lifestyle and identity, as well as their needs.

This was certainly something that was readily identified by many interviewees as key to understanding rising expectations. They variously mentioned:

‘the drivers and pressures of ideal homes shown in the media and TV especially’ (RSL Chief Executive C, Greater Manchester)

And in another interview:

‘The images from TV programmes and magazines are uppermost in their minds. They generate interest… it’s a status thing’ (RSL Head of Regeneration, Greater Manchester)

The third element of the cultural approach to obsolescence is that there is a relationship between elements of the home and the behaviour of the people in it. So change is not just about new possessions replacing old ones but also about desired changes in the way things are done. In their study intended to better understand why British households replace kitchens so frequently, they found that some households, straightforwardly stressed the importance of having new possessions such as a breakfast table or a dishwasher. Other households, however, were dissatisfied because of deficiencies of ‘performance’, that is dissatisfied about the kinds of activities and ways of life which could be pursued, or they imagined could be pursued, in their kitchens.

Expectations and aspirations of these households were based on their image of what future household life would be like, for example highly organised, clutter-free living in a rationally-designed kitchen, or a household which enjoyed fine dining. So new kitchens were commissioned as much because they offered a promise of new ways of living, rather than just the possibility of having new possessions. But these kinds of expectations of ‘performance’ were themselves often based on the ways of living indicated (or ‘scripted’) by the physical entity. They comment that: ‘product development and design innovations have implications for what people expect and for how they conceptualise what is normal and necessary’ (Shove and Hand, 2003, p.11).
This kind of cultural analysis has not been applied to houses as entities, but it has a high degree of relevance to the question of obsolescence. In considering whether an unacknowledged part of the UK housing stock is obsolete, the question is in part whether the existing stock has the ability to accommodate the possessions that people see as essential to a fulfilled life. It was notable in the Shove and Hand (2003) study that those expressing dissatisfaction with missing possessions in relation to their kitchens were disproportionately those who lived in houses where space was deficient, mainly terraced housing.

But it is also a matter whether existing houses offer scope to accommodate the continually changing images of domestic life, which, although there may be many variants, are themselves shaped by forms and designs of housing. Some of these images might be dismissed as fantasies, for example the belief that a new kitchen will transform culinary skills or the ability to sit around a new breakfast bar will bring a new integration to family life. However, the contribution of the study of consumption is to show how images form and are influential in real situations as consumers attempt to match possession (of consumer goods, or perhaps of particular house types or designs) with desired ‘performance’, that is how they see themselves as living. It also raises the possibility that during a period of faster housing change, for example when new, more desirable products are made available, the gap between possession and desired performance for residents of the older housing stock is only going to widen.

Individualism and the Retreat from Community

Changing expectations among households are not confined to the dwelling but also extend to its social setting. It also seem likely that a factor in obsolescence is the lack of fit between available dwelling forms and desired patterns of social linkages at the local level. While government continues to stress the desirability of building communities, and in particular beliefs that beneficial social inclusion can come through the promotion of mixed communities at street block or estate level this tends to fly in the face of changes in people’s behaviour.

In some places there is an increasing divergence in lifestyles, patterns of consumption, household types, ethnicity, language, and religion between households living in the same blocks or streets, plus high levels of residential mobility. Even where individuals are drawn from broadly the same social, ethnic and generational groups there is a tendency towards individualism in the neighbourhood. A recent report by CABE (2005b) on new housing underlines how living in the same estate does not necessarily means that residents have anything to do with each other. There is a long-term tendency for local relationships to matter less and for people’s social and economic life to operate at the city, national or international level through diverse networks. This was recognised 40 years ago (Weber, 1964), and has been commented on by major theorists such as Giddens (1990) and Fukuyama (1999). Atkinson (2006) has observed the increasing tendency for those who can exercise choices to withdraw from exposure to the public realm. The growing use of telecommunications rather than face-to-face contact has also increased this tendency according to, for example, Graham and Marvin, 2001.

This arguably means strong links between neighbours, which were also, fostered in common workplaces or though local institutions such as the church are increasingly a
thing of the past. Instead, residents are often largely indifferent to each other, and social life takes place elsewhere, away from the neighbourhood (e.g. Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000). In cases where there are neighbours who are positively antisocial this may lead to the dislocation found in the most difficult neighbourhoods. However, even where extreme forms of social breakdown are not apparent there is still often a desire to avoid forms of housing that involve active co-operation between neighbours.

The other element that goes with individualism is a concern for security. The more residents are detached in space, time and social life from their neighbourhoods and homes, the more they are concerned with security, both of the individual dwelling and of the limited spaces outwith the home within which they might move.

These tendencies certainly enhance preferences for individualised housing forms, particularly semi-detached and detached houses that obviate the need for cooperation between neighbours and enhance the sense of safety in the face of unknown external parties. Dwelling forms that require active, mutually negotiated cooperation over issues such as repairs, personal privacy, noise, parking spaces, and upkeep of common and semi-private areas seem to be avoided. CABE quotes a participant in a focus group on this theme:

‘We need our gardens with fences, so we have our own safety. We need security. We don’t have communities now’ (2005a, p.15).

Even in highly pressurised markets in England there is a clear aversion to living in flats, even by first time buyers, many of whom face severe problems of affordability (Platt et al, 2004). This was reiterated very clearly but most of the housing sector interviewees in the north of England case study locations. In the social rented sector flats were everywhere less popular; in the private sector, even in a pressured market such as York, it was reported that flats were harder to sell.

There are also implications for the desired form of streets. The cul-de-sac, generally despised by urban designers and many contemporary planning policy makers on the grounds of promoting their vision of inclusive communities, is a street form that minimises through traffic. Favouring it is not just a matter of apparent road safety, which may be important to families with children, but also because it means that there are no casual passers by, posing a risk of criminality.

The alternative to individualistic forms of consumption is to conduct relationships with neighbours though third party managing agents. CABE, discussing high-density housing, comments that it ‘requires ongoing management at block and neighbourhood level if standards are to be maintained’ (2005c, p.17). Yet at the lower end of the market, the service charges partly designed to provide a managed response to the necessity of co-operation were a significant part of the reason for unpopularity of flats according to our interviewees.

The most extreme form of formalised contractual obligations is found in gated communities, which are on the increase in Britain (e.g. Atkinson et al, 2004). Gating gives rise to resistance by those who believe in a democratic, open society where the city should belong to all of its citizens and in particular see it as one of a panoply of
measure for the better off to exert their power over, and control, the poor (e.g. see Davis, 1990).

These trends pose several problems for existing older housing neighbourhoods. They were designed when a sense of community was taken for granted. Management schemes which make it possible to live under more individualised conditions are not usually in place (except the most difficult neighbourhoods which may be subject to neighbourhood warden or other similar initiatives, typically indicating a profound ‘liveability’ failure). It also requires additional public costs compared to living in a neighbourhood that needs no such management. Despite the proliferation of neighbourhood warden schemes, which are mainly funded out of targeted regeneration spending, it seems impossible that these can be reproduced in all high-density neighbourhoods in the country. As for private management, while traditionally, residents in upmarket housing schemes with common areas and facilities have been willing to pay for it, more modest income home owners pushing the barrier of affordability and thinking of future saleability generally try to avoid them.

Changes in Government Policy

Finally, at least four strands of government policy have the potential to encourage the obsolescence of existing housing. These are actions to bring supply and demand into balance, measures to improve the quality of new homes, measures designed to improve the economy in lagging regions, and new interventions aimed at improving housing conditions.

First, actions following the Barker report (Barker, 2004) are designed to ease shortfalls, which, if successful will allow more households to exercise choice rather than be constrained to buy anything that is affordable. In low demand areas of England, for example, within the housing renewal pathfinders, faith is placed in demolition and new, higher quality housing to revive failed markets. This has become controversial as various interest groups and commentators line up to condemn clearances on a range of social, economic and environmental grounds (Power, 2005). But the faster better alternatives are made available, not least through public sector leveraged market restructuring activities, the quicker obsolescence may also crystallise. This phenomenon is already well known in council built estates where demand for houses improved in the early 1990s has already softened in the face of better ‘new build’ alternatives.

Second, while the emphasis in the period up to the mid 1990s was to leave housing production to the market, recently there has been more intervention. Through planning guidance and building regulations and the signals provided to RSLs through funding and regulation, government supports the modernisation of the housebuilding industry with the aim of achieving better quality and higher environmental standards, and greater cost effectiveness (Carmona, 2000??). It has also put an emphasis on improving the quality of architectural design in housing, for example, by sponsoring CABE (in England) and Architecture and Design Scotland. Many of the innovations being delivered by housebuilders now are the result of new building regulations concerning, for example, energy efficiency (now one of the big differences between new and older homes) and ‘lifetime homes’ standards.

Third, in the older housing stock, elements of the Housing Act, 2004 for England and the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 tend to add further pressure on what older houses can deliver. Sellers packs in England and ‘single surveys’ in Scotland are designed to raise awareness about housing conditions and amenities, and so poorer quality homes may be increasingly avoided or command unsustainably
low prices. Licensing of HMOs may lead to poorer properties being closed and falling into disuse and the housing health and safety rating system (England) further raises the standards which older houses are expected to meet.

Finally, there are signs elements of regional policy are on the ascendant in England. In particular, the ‘Northern Way’ (ODPM, 2003) is looking to stimulate the economies of the north though, for example, infrastructural development and contributions to building a knowledge economy.

Implications

While demands vary between household types, life stage and according to what people can afford, there seem to be some common factors that run across all this variability. Among the public, there is an overwhelming preference for detached and semi detached houses. So far, the kinds of housing described as obsolete and unpopular include some pre-1914 terraced property, various kinds of flats, especially walk-up flats and council-built high-rise, as well as various kinds of twentieth century estate houses (Murie, 2002; interviews 2006).

In England, controversy is brewing over the future of the traditional terraced house, especially in reaction to demolition plans. Its supporters believe that terraced housing is well built, flexible, popular and environmentally sustainable. All it needs, they say, is better area management and environmental upgrading (Power, 2005) plus minimal capital investment. Its detractors believe that at least some forms of terraced housing are socially and culturally unsustainable because they do not offer the qualities in house that are increasingly in demand. This applies especially to the smaller types of housing that are built hard on the pavement, and where there is little choice in the local housing market. In particular, the rooms are too small, kitchens and bathrooms -added to the original plans- are minimal, there is insufficient privacy, the layouts offer little flexibility, steep stairs offer a challenge to the less able, and concrete back yards opening onto under maintained back lanes. And the 15-foot frontages hardly offer space to park one car, let alone the two or more that are a feature of working households (Kintrea, 2005). In the interviews that we did there were two RSL chief executives who believed that housing stock limitations could be almost wholly overcome by better housing and neighbourhood management, but the majority outwith the York case study believed that more and faster demolition was necessary.

In Scotland, the pre 1919 tenement flat was the bete noir of the post war housing campaigners before it was rescued as a concept in the 1980s in a new, stone-cleaned and often internally rebuilt form (Robertson, 19??). Compared to the English terraced house, room sizes are usually bigger (e.g. dining kitchens are the norm) and the number of rooms smaller, therefore appealing more to single- and two-person households. It also has to be said that none of Scotland’s pre-1919 neighbourhoods has experienced the intensity of the low demand problem of some English housing markets in the 1990s, although this may be a factor of a generally higher rate of social housing and a lagging adjustment to a market dominated housing system rather than a consequence of the inherent strengths of the neighbourhoods. However, the traditional tenement carries significant disadvantages, not least the failure of mechanisms to ensure adequate management of common spaces within and outside the buildings (Robertson, 2007), and the lack of a ‘front and back door’, which consumers are increasingly seeing as central to their idea of a real home, for reasons of privacy and security, discussed above.

Although studies of suburbs are rare, at least one has identified significant stress; with housing that no longer reflects housing expectations and population structures change in some areas (Gwilliam et al, 1999).

As part of the fieldwork interviews were carried out in York, a high demand area where the popularity of terraced housing, in many respects identical to that in other Northern England low demand markets, was notable. Here there was certainly recognition, as elsewhere, that consumer expectations were inflating. However, there was no association between obsolescence of the older housing stock and unpopularity and low demand. One interviewee maintained:

‘Is there a problem? No- there’s not a lot of hard evidence that suggests to us that low demand will come’ (Strategy Officer, York)
Physical factors in obsolescence were somewhat mitigated by the generally high quality and attractive town settings of much of the older housing stock, which is often situated in relatively small scale neighbourhoods which offer other housing choices nearby, so contrasting with the more monolithic neighbourhoods of the former more solidly industrial towns of the north of England. However, the strong housing market, driven by the location of York in a growing region adjacent to Leeds, a hugely expanding University, and the attractiveness of living in a historical city was a more important disguiser of the symptoms of obsolescence; ‘people are buying into the area, not the house type’ (Strategy Officer, York).

To get a foot on the ladder of home ownership in York meant buying a pre 1914-terraced house, a small flat, or an ex-council property. One of our interviewees was a recent first time buyer of a terraced house. He commented:

‘If I’d have stayed in [name of home town] I wouldn’t have bought a terrace. You have to reduce your aspirations a bit. It’s exciting moving into a new house- but there could be a tiny bit more space’ (RSL Development Officer, York).

Other interviewees submitted that the hot market led to a lack of innovation- anything in the market could be sold- and a large number of small flats which had a dubious long tem future.

From the York experience, it would seem complacent to write off the idea of obsolescence; there was a sense in which outcomes in the housing market were a compromise, which people would put up with as long as housing, was in short supply.

In looking to the future it would make sense to consider whether the current housing stock can continue to deliver acceptable 21st century homes. If it cannot, there are serious implications for housing policy, for housing investment needs, for land use planning and for the management of local housing systems. Obsolescence may mean more abandonment of structurally sound properties that meet all the criteria for ‘decent homes’ and put at risk the success of regeneration and market renewal strategies. It will certainly mean more demolition, with all that implies for costs and disruption. At the same time, there may be more pressure on land release, even in those areas of the UK where household growth is modest as there is a switch away from traditionally acceptable housing.

Another approach is to think more radically about older housing stock might be transformed for new needs, an approach favoured, for example, by the Sustainable Development Commission. The leading example here is the Urban Splash project at Langworthy, Salford, to provide 'upside down' terraces which shift bedrooms to the ground floor and provide open plan living at first floor level, with a new mezzanine area in the roof space. Instead of individual back yards, wall to ceiling glazing at the rears of the houses looks onto communal landscaped gardens. However, such schemes are technically difficult, very costly, require streets of empty houses as the basis for the project and not obviously suitable for families. It does not seem likely that they will be become widespread.

This is a paper that is designed to raise questions rather than provide answers. It suggests that there is an emerging problem for housing policy and local housing markets which has a complex set of economic, social, cultural and housing market origins. This most obviously affects locations with weaker housing markets, but is not completely absent in higher demand areas. Generally, the interviews that were undertaken mostly provide support for the idea of a widening gap between what the housing stock supplies and what people’s expectations of housing are. However, there was not much sense that RSLs and housing strategy managers were thinking much into the future about what kind of housing would be acceptable or what kinds of housing was now obsolescing. Neither is the importance of some of the trends discussed here completely clear. To take this forward it would be helpful to do more research directly with households, especially those active in the housing market.
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