

Create Streets

We can help you make better places

contact@createstreets.com

www.createstreets.com

Alice in wonderland

In 2014 James Wildblood and Nicholas Boys Smith interviewed Professor Alice Coleman whose controversial 1985 study, Utopia on Trial, infuriated the architectural establishment and helped change housing policy in the 1980s

In the mid-1980s Margaret Thatcher invited a geographer to Number 10 to discuss some rather startling findings on post-war housing estates. Professor Alice Coleman had recently published a book in which she and a small team had analysed all 4,099 council blocks then standing in the London boroughs of Southwark and Tower Hamlets, grading their prominent design features against levels of vandalism, graffiti and litter. It was a colossal undertaking, but of a scale to which Coleman was well used, having been director of the Second Land Utilisation Survey of Britain during the 1960s, for which a small army of volunteers mapped the whole country into 64 different use classifications. Coleman personally mapped 1,500 square miles herself.

Professor Coleman took the famous Thatcher grilling in her stride. Now 91 and living in Dulwich, she recalled: 'She asked me a lot of questions which was very good because it showed she'd really read the book'.

The book, Utopia on Trial, won Coleman many visceral enemies. For, couched in academic caveats and cautions, the results and conclusions of her studies were explosive. The post-war multi-storey utopia that the modernist disciples of Le Corbusier had created, and which Government planning and state agencies had actively promoted and funded were proved to be not just no better than the streets of houses and low rise flats it had demolished. It was dramatically worse. Litter, graffiti, vandalism and fouling were exponentially more prevalent in high rise estates than in streets of houses – far more so than differences in population density could explain. Professor Coleman's team also found very clear connections between anti-social behaviour and the number of dwellings per entrance, the amount of semi-private space, the number of dwellings per block, the number of storeys per block and the presence of overhead walkways. Nor did people like living in the new utopias. There were nearly four times as many spontaneous negative comments as positive ones collected by the researchers.

Critics of her findings were furious, especially architects who had created the 'utopias' and civil servants who had subsidised them with taxpayers' money on the basis that they would be fit for purpose for over 60 years. (Many survived for fewer than 30.) She was dismissed as an 'architectural determinist.' But she was careful not to be. "Even in the best housing there may be people who chose to behave badly, and even in the worst there are people who maintain impeccable standards", she said. "Bad design does not determine anything, but it increases the odds against which people have to struggle to maintain civilised standards".

At the government department responsible for housing at the time, arrogant civil servants dismissed Coleman work and her warnings. Not so Thatcher. Coleman recalls being questioned intently by the Prime Minister. The appointment at Number Ten was a meeting of scientific minds. Some architects had attacked Coleman's

statistics 'but I had taught statistics' she smiles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Prime Minister was much more readily persuaded by the working class girl who knew her numbers than her high-minded but less empirically-grounded critics.

Margaret Thatcher wrote in her memoirs; 'I was a great admirer of the work of Professor Alice Coleman and I had her made an advisor to the Department of the Environment, to their dismay.' The Prime Minister created the Design Improvement Controlled Experiment (DICE) programme with a £50 million budget to act on Coleman's findings. It set about making various physical changes to the most problematic estates such as removing overhead walkways and creating private gardens for ground-floor dwellings out of underused communal space. Each Estate was mapped four times. (Coleman still keeps the colour-coded maps piled beside her sofa). Local people were then polled. 'The lowest score we got was 86 percent' she recalls. 'The highest was 98.'

Results from an associated estate renewal (the Mozart Estate in Westminster) showed a 55 percent drop in burglaries following the DICE treatment. The Secretary of State (Nicholas Ridley) was a big supporter. Coleman remembers him as 'very good' and 'to the point.' He was planning to extend her approach across the country. All was going well. 'I was Alice in Wonderland' she recalls.

But the fall of Margaret Thatcher brought Michael Heseltine back to the Department. The results, for estate renewal, were dire. The civil servants successfully reasserted themselves and Heseltine declined to extend DICE which was then allowed to wither and die. Coleman remains frustrated that there was not the opportunity to finish the job which had begun so well.

At 91 Coleman remains a formidable force. The fruits of a keenly inquiring mind and productive professional life are evident all around the room, ranging from a unique keyboard developed to write a phonic version of the alphabet that Coleman has developed herself, to stacks of large glossy colour plates of her exhaustive land utilisation survey. Only 15 percent was ever printed. The rest is in her dining room or (carefully stored under blue tarpaulin) outside on the terrace. It is rather alarming to think that the only copy of one of the most accurate surveys of the UK ever conducted is stored at partial risk to the elements in suburban London. Her memory is strikingly sharp and fast – and wide ranging. She talks with ease of the distant past: her childhood in Kent, her obsessive practicing of exam questions every morning, of her father who won a Distinguished Conduct Medal as a gunner on the Somme and of how her parents were "great supporters of Winston Churchill in the 1930s.'

But she is also at home in the present. She despairs of what is being built in London now ('A lot of the things Boris said seemed quite good but lately he seems to have gone to the other extreme') and of current estate regenerations. Indeed she is a forceful critic of the whole planning system. The length of her perspective permits her to countenance a world - or at least a Britain - without much of a planning system at all, as was the case for over a quarter of her life. She sees the basic evils in urban design - anonymity and sameness - still marring the outcomes of the town planning system.

She complains that the insertion of a planning authority between property purchaser and builder disrupted the reciprocal relationship of buyer and seller. Her observation is borne out by data from the Halifax, which shows the rate of value appreciation of properties 95 years and older since 1983 is more than double that of properties built after 1960. She believes that particular planning issues could be dealt perfectly well

with clear unambiguous rules, citing the Restriction of Ribbon Development Act 1935 as a good example.

The planning landscape has changed in many ways since the 1960s. The concept of defensible space is well acknowledged and there is neither the budget nor inclination to fashion complicated low-density utopias. However planning, she believes, still exerts a vice-grip on the provision of new homes, sometimes distorting priorities away from the relatively straightforward concept of what people want, to considerations that actively put pressure on the ability to create neighbourhoods of streets. So where once confused semi-public and little-used open space was embraced as a key component of an ideological utopia, today dingy and heavily overlooked courtyards can masquerade as 'garden squares' and 'amenity space'. The results are the same, and just as they were not immediately apparent to the developers and residents of the 1960s utopias, they may take a decade to transpire. Alice Coleman watches the world cheerfully and with remarkable precision from her Dulwich home but she wonders why this generation is repeating the mistakes of her own.