CHANGE AND CONTINUITY
IN THE ELITE NEIGHBOURHOOD
OF KENSINGTON

Ilaria Pulini
Goldsmiths, University of London
Phd thesis

Submitted November 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisors, Dr Emma Jackson and Professor Michaela Benson, whose knowledge and experience guided me throughout this project. They provided invaluable support and encouragement and I am truly grateful for their infinite patience.

I also would like to thank my upgrade examiners, Dr. Alex Rhys-Taylor and Professor Les Back, whose comments, questions, and suggestions provided further guidance and feedback to my research project. I am also grateful to Maggie Studholme, for the painstaking care she put in proofreading the final draft of this thesis.

A special thank goes to all of those who shared their stories as Kensington residents with me. Their feedback and opinion played a decisive role for the understanding of the social make-up of an elite neighbourhood.

And my biggest thanks go to my two sons, Giovanni and Ludovico, for the support they have granted me throughout this challenging endeavour.

Ethical approval of the research was obtained on June 4th, 2018

ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the paucity of social research on the elite neighbourhoods of Central London through an ethnography of Kensington. As a wealthy area located in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Kensington has recently attracted sociological interest due to the unprecedented growth of urban inequalities in this part of London, where super-rich areas contrast strikingly with socially disadvantaged surroundings. In this thesis, I argue that the characterisation of Kensington as an elite area is grounded in a multifaceted social process that has been largely unexplored and which has been going on for many years, beginning long before the financialisaton of the London housing market following the 2008 crisis. I contend that to understand the social make-up of an elite neighbourhood fully, we need to trace change and continuity over the longue durée, combining ethnography and archival research to investigate the interaction between place and people over time. Drawing on a conceptualisation of neighbourhood as a socially constructed space shaped by the practices of its inhabitants, this research explores Kensington over the longue durée to investigate the entanglement between the built environment and the process of social reproduction over time. Inspired by Bourdieu, the study emphasises the significance of the 'field' of 'dwelling' in generating distinctions among residents. Dwelling habits reflect wealth disparities and encompass differences in culture, lifestyle, sensibilities and household types. Through an analysis of dwelling practices, the study examines how 'belonging' in an elite neighbourhood intersects with issues of class, mobility and transnationalism, shedding light on the multifaceted process of neighbourhood formation. Ultimately, through an in-depth exploration of Kensington across time and space, this research contributes sociological insights into elites and their role in contemporary urban inequalities.

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the research

Kensington, renowned as one of most affluent residential areas in central London, is distinguished by the presence of opulent homes worth millions of pounds. The astronomical property values and immense wealth of its inhabitants have significantly shaped its reputation as an exclusive enclave for a wealthy elite.

The sociological literature on the super-rich has extensively highlighted how the central London property market skyrocketed as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis which attracted a transnational wealth elite, who invested in luxury properties as a safe deposit box (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2016; Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Fernandez et al., 2016; Knowles, 2022; Minton, 2017), unsettling a pre-exisiting middle- and upper middle- class residential population.

However, as a transnational property owner in Kensington since 2009, I found it challenging to classify myself as a wealthy multimillionaire. In reality, my lifestyle is quite 'ordinary',[1] apart from the investment I made in my small flat. Similarly, my neighbours at 10 Cheniston Gardens appeared quite 'normal' to me, living in regular flats and engaged in everyday occupations. In other words, the ordinary social environment of Cheniston Gardens did not seem to fit into the representation of Kensington as the quintessential elite neighbourhood conveyed by scholars and media commentators. Cheniston Gardens became the focus of my MA research (Pulini, 2015), and subsequently, two chapters in edited books (Pulini, 2019; 2022). In those works, I highlighted how the ordinary character of this street compared to other areas of Kensington is the outcome of past residential choices and events embedded within the materiality of the buildings.

In this thesis, I build upon the methods I used to study a single street and extend the research to encompass the entire neighbourhood of Kensington with an approach over the longue durée. Such an approach represents a new development in neighbourhood studies. It emphasises the dialectical continuum between the past and the present, providing valuable insights into processes of neighbourhood change. It employs a combination of ethnography and archival research to uncover the entanglement of social change with the transformation of the built environment, thus emphasising the critical role of temporality in interpreting present-day urban social dynamics.

An approach over the longue durée proved crucial to address the core questions that underlie my research: 'How does a diachronic perspective contribute to existing understandings of elite neighbourhoods'? To what extent can a focus on past social and residential trajectories shed light on the process of luxification (Graham et al., 2015) of the built environment in elite

[1] Only later on, while progressing with my research, did I broaden my understanding of 'ordinary' as a socio-economic category (see Chapter Five).

neighbourhoods, which recent sociological literature (e.g. Burrows and Knowles, 2019) tends to associate with the financialisaton of the housing market triggered by the 2008 financial crisis?

Studying Kensington over the longue durée has contributed to uncovering the dynamics of the formation of the neighbourhood as a place for the elites, revealing contingent and unique residental patterns that have been reworked and reproduced over time by residents, generation after generation. The analysis of such dynamics provides clues that seem to contradict the assumption that the characterisation of Kensington as an elite neighbourhood is a recent phenomenon connected to the arrival of transnational wealthy investors following the 2008 financial crisis. On the contrary, analysis of sectors of the neighbourhood with an approach in the longue durée reveals that the distinction between the 'super wealthy' and the 'ordinary wealthy' can be traced back to the 60s, when new social actors began to move into Kensington, triggering a process of class 'replacement' in a predominantly middle and upper middle class neighbourhood.

The research setting

The Kensington neighbourhood, located in west central London, covers an area of approximately 3 square kilometres and largely overlaps with the W8 postcode district. It is one of the seven neighbourhoods, including North Kensington, Notting Hill, Holland Park, Earl's Court, South Kensington and Chelsea, that together form the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) (Fig. 1).

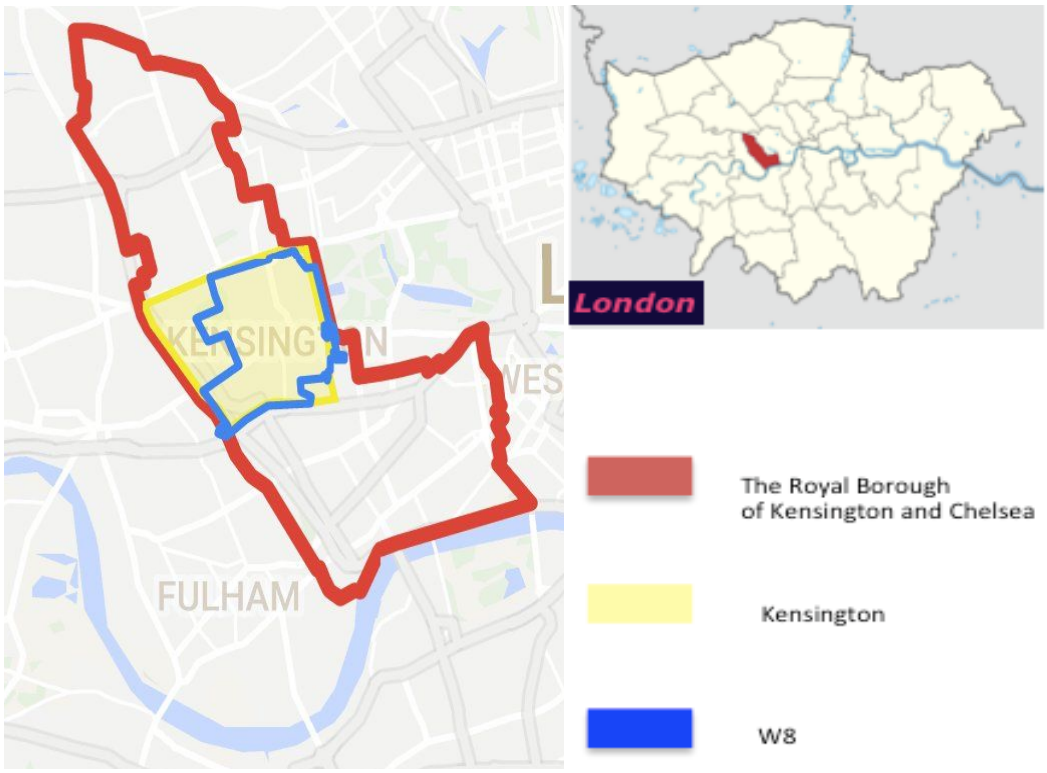


Fig. 1. Location of Kensington in the city's geography.

Having been a country settlement since the Middle Ages, Kensington had acquired popularity among the aristocracy by the late 17th century, when an existing manor was converted into a royal palace. During the 19th century, as Victorian London rapidly expanded, Kensington and the surrounding territories underwent transformation into residential suburbs that eventually merged with the modern city. Despite the extensive damage caused by World War II, Kensington's urban layout still predominantly showcases Victorian architecture, cleverly and discreetly blending with modern and contemporary additions and redevelopments.

High Street Kensington, a bustling thoroughfare situated at the heart of the neighbourhood, serves as a focal point for public activity. The High Street is lined with shops and commercial establishments, particularly near the underground station. At the intersection of High Street Kensington and Kensington Church Street, the prominent Art Deco architecture of Barkers' department store, now home to the American food chain Whole Foods, stands out against the skyline. Its modernist silhouette contrasts with the towering spire of St Mary Abbots, London's tallest bell tower, just across the street (Fig. 2). Nearby, the Borough Town Hall, a substantial low-rise contemporary building, further enhances the public character of this central area.

Fig. 2. High Street Kensington at the crossroads with Kensington Church Street with Barker's building (left) and the church of St Mary Abbots. Images by author.

Just as the River Thames divides the city, High Street Kensington divides the neighbourhood into two halves. The slight difference in elevation of Campden Hill, which gradually slopes upwards from the High Street towards the north, accentuates the distinction between the northern and southern sectors. Cheniston Gardens, where I live, is located just south of High Street Kensington,

a short distance from the tube station. Within a few stops on the underground or a quick bus ride, I can easily reach Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square to the east or enjoy a leisurely walk along the Thames in Chiswick to the west. Traveling to the City or Southwark by tube takes a maximum of twenty-five minutes.

From Cheniston Gardens, the entire neighbourhood is easily accessible on foot. Like many residents, I am drawn to the northern sector, where Kensington Gardens and Holland Park offer expansive public green spaces. Both parks attract runners, mothers with prams, dog walkers and visitors throughout the day. Families with children can often be found interacting with squirrels and enjoying the company of ducks, swans and other birds around Kensington Gardens' circular pond or Holland Park's Japanese Garden.

A peaceful ten-minute walk north through either park leads me to Notting Hill. While strolling, I can sense the exclusive ambiance surrounding the parks, which were once the private grounds of prestigious manors. Kensington Palace became a royal residence in the late 17th century, and its gardens were opened to the public only in the 19th century. Holland Park was originally the garden of an early Jacobean country house later known as Holland House. When it sustained severe bomb damage during World War II, the council acquired the land and transformed the garden into a public park.

The grandeur and magnificence of the Victorian properties surrounding the parks reflect the luxurious atmosphere that permeates these areas of Kensington. Kensington Palace Gardens, a semi-private road running alongside Kensington Palace towards Notting Hill, has restricted access, allowing only cars with special permits to pass through, while discouraging pedestrians from taking pictures. Often referred to in the media as 'Billionaires' Row', the name of this street hints at the astronomical value of the properties. In reality, most of the properties that line the street house foreign consulates and embassies, and only a few belong to magnates and celebrities.

In contrast, the grand mansions in the Holland Park area exude a less ostentatious, more secluded, and rarefied sense of luxury. The streets are exceptionally quiet throughout the day, with minimal signs of human presence, except for occasional sounds of construction work going on behind scaffolding. These clusters of grand mansions seem to exist in an almost surreal world. While walking along these immaculate Victorian streets, one is unlikely to encounter anyone apart from a few fragile elderly residents navigating their daily routines.

As an alternative to strolling through the parks, I can reach Notting Hill from Kensington via two main roads: Kensington Church Street and Campden Hill Road. Kensington Church Street is dotted with a diverse array of retail and antique shops, restaurants and cafes, and a significant number of buses. On the other hand, Campden Hill Road is primarily residential, with only a few shops concentrated at either end of the road.

Walking along Campden Hill Road provides a different experience compared to the quiet streets bordering the parks. Not only is Campden Hill Road a busy thoroughfare, but its built

environment also exhibits distinctive characteristics that set it apart from other areas of Kensington. What catches the eye are the varied architectural styles and heights of the buildings. Rows of modest-sized Victorian terraces intermingle with high-rise blocks, including Edwardian and modernist apartments, as well as more recent flats. The slope of the hill further accentuates the height of these structures, giving them an appearance reminiscent of towering fortresses. While high-rise blocks in the styles of Campden Hill can also be found along High Street Kensington and Kensington Church Street, they are absent in the southern sector of the neighbourhood, where low-rise architecture predominates. However, there are a few exceptions, including the high-rise Victorian and modern buildings concentrated at the southern edge of Kensington and along Cromwell Road, which marks the border with Earl's Court.

Navigating the southern sector is relatively straightforward when following the main traffic routes connecting the High Street to Cromwell Road. However, exploring the side streets can be quite complicated. In my attempts to reach Cromwell Road while avoiding busy thoroughfares, I often find myself entangled in an intricate network of Victorian alleys, mews and terraces filled with dead ends, turnarounds, and hidden 'secret' passages unknown to Google Maps. Only a pedestrian familiar with the area can navigate this labyrinthine urban layout. These subtle barriers, which make it challenging for walkers unfamiliar with the area to traverse, serve as invisible markers separating residential areas in this part of Kensington. Unlike the northern sectors, there are no public green spaces south of the High Street. However, the area boasts one of the highest concentrations of private garden squares in London. I visit these squares annually during the open day in June when they are accessible to the public. For the rest of the year, the cast-iron fences prevent entry, allowing only glimpses from the outside.

Behind their uniform appearances, most of Kensington's Victorian houses are luxury residences for the super-rich. Many of these seemingly modest-sized buildings conceal extensive multi-story underground spaces beneath the house and back garden. However, unless one notices the makes of the cars parked outside, it is difficult for an observer to discern the luxurious lifestyles of the residents just by looking at the exterior of these houses. The repetitive architectural patterns of the Victorian facades act as brick curtains, concealing the activities occurring behind the scenes, as on a theatrical stage.

This landscape of luxury permeates the entirety of Kensington's urban environment and extends uninterrupted into the neighbouring areas of South Kensington, Chelsea and Notting Hill. However, upon closer inspection, one can discern a parallel residential pattern consisting of ordinary flats and modest lodgings, which starkly contrast with the lavish homes of multimillionaires. These ordinary dwellings are typically situated along the main thoroughfares or in proximity to the underground station, locations made less desirable by noise and traffic. Haphazardly written numbers on the doorbells of shabby terraced houses (Fig. 3) indicate multiple occupancy. Cheniston Gardens, where I reside, is one of these less desirable locations in affluent Kensington.

Similarly, stratospherically priced penthouses may coexist within the same building as cramped studios and bedsits.

Fig. 3. Shabby doorbells hinting at cheap multiple occupancy in Cheniston Gardens. Images by author.

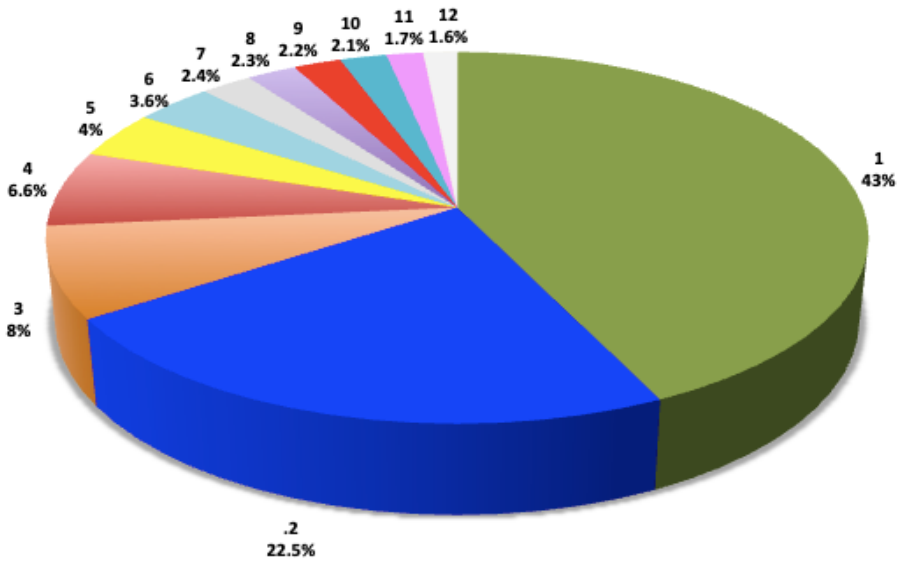
According to the 2011 census records, there are over twenty thousand dwellings in Kensington. Whole houses account for 20% of the total, while flats, maisonettes or apartments make up the remaining 80%. In terms of tenure, 45% are owned properties, 45% are privately rented, and the remaining 10% are social-rented properties. The average price per square meter in Kensington, sourced from the UK House Price Index for 2021, is £28,509, nearly ten times higher than the national average (£2,936).

This residential configuration, ranging from highly expensive properties to more affordable dwellings, is reflected in the population, which comprises individuals with high levels of education and prestigious professions. According to the 2011 census records, Kensington is home to a population of 37,000 usual[2] residents. Over 60% of these individuals hold a university qualification or higher. The National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) reveals a high concentration of large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations (7.6%),

[2] A usual resident is anyone who on Census Day, 27 March 2011, was in the UK and had stayed or intended to stay in the UK for a period of 12 months or more or had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK and intended to be outside the UK for less than 12 months (Source Nomis, official census and labour market statistics, https://www.nomisweb.co.uk).

nearly three times higher than in Greater London (2.6%). According to the Mosaic population segmentation based on postcodes, W8 is the hub for the super-rich, housing approximately 58% of 'Global Power Brokers' (Burrows et al., 2017: 196, table 3). These individuals are described as 'wealthy and ambitious high-flyers, predominantly residing in the finest urban flats', intertwined with the 'Serious Money' segment, consisting of 'families with considerable wealth living in large, exclusive detached houses where money seems to be no object' (*ibid.*)

The census records also highlight the numerous global connections between Kensington and the wider world. Residents of different nationalities, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds live in close proximity throughout the neighbourhood. A single street or even a single building can house people from a wide variety of backgrounds and of different nationalities. In Cheniston Gardens and its immediate surroundings, the 2011 census reported thirty-one different languages spoken. When examining the neighbourhood's population through the lens of country of origin, it becomes apparent that in 2011, 57% of its residents were born outside the UK and Ireland (Fig. 4). Among these, individuals born in European countries comprise the greatest proportion (22%), with a majority hailing from France (5.4%), Italy (2.6%), Germany (1.7%) and Spain (1.7%). The remaining 35% of the population born outside the UK and Ireland represent the rest of the world, with significant numbers coming from North America, the Middle East, East Asia (China) and Southeast Asia.



1. UK and Ireland	4. Middle East	7. Australasia	10. South and Eastern Africa
2. Europe	5. South East Asia	8. Southern Asia	11. North Africa
3. North America	6. East Asia	9. South America	12. Others

Fig 4. Kensington's residents by place of birth (source ONS, 2011 Census).

In recent years, the number of EU-born individuals in Kensington has significantly declined due to the combined effects of Brexit and the Covid pandemic. The 2021 census records reveal that the number of usual residents has fallen by more than 4000 compared to the 2011 census.

Although specific data-sets on nationality and country of birth are not yet available at the time of writing, a comparison with national trends suggests that this population decline is largely due to a fall in the number of EU nationals (Migration Observatory, 2022).

However, the objective of this thesis is to go beyond the numbers and trends provided by quantitative data, focusing the investigation on how people belong to the neighbourhood and participate in the process of neighbourhood-making. Kensington, like any urban environment, is a complex tapestry of different socioeconomic groups, cultures and backgrounds. While luxury and wealth are undeniably prominent features of the neighbourhood, Kensington is also home to individuals from diverse walks of life who contribute to the multifaceted character of the area

Research outline

The structure of this thesis is divided into two parts. Part One provides an overview of the sociological literature relevant to the research (Chapter One) and explains the methodology underlying my approach to studying an elite neighbourhood (Chapter Two). Part Two presents and analyses the research findings by organising them into four chapters (Chapters Three to Six).

The literature review (Chapter One) begins with an overview of the sociology of elites, from its early conceptualisations (Giddens, 1974a) to the recent interest in geodemographic classification systems as tools for studying elite neighbourhoods (Webber and Burrows, 2016). In the next section of the chapter, I situate my research in a conceptualisation of neighbourhood as the place where people's practices, tastes and habits unfold (Lefebvre, 1991; 2002). Within this framework, I consider how Bourdieu's theory provides the tools to observe and describe class distinctions (Bourdieu,1984), taking into account the robust stream of research on neighbourhood making and belonging opened up by Tim Butler and Mike Savage (Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005). In the second part of the literature review, I introduce the theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins my approach in the longue durée, providing evidence of its connection with historical and anthropological research (Braudel, 1958; Ingold 1993; Tilley, 2017). Furthermore, focusing on anthropological research that emphasizes the agency of material forms (Gell, 1998; Miller, 2001, 2008; Tilley, 2006), I highlight the interplay between the social and physical environment in the process of neighbourhood change.

Chapter Two outlines the qualitative methods I used in my research to analyse a neighbourhood in the longue durée. The research involved street observation and mapping and encounters with residents, as well as archival research on maps, censuses and planning records.

Throughout the investigation, a multi-scalar approach was maintained, allowing me to shift the focus from the entire neighbourhood to smaller sectors, even down to a single building. Small-scale investigation allowed exploration of the stories of the buildings and their dwellers and the relationships between neighbours. Mapping the built environment and linking the residents to their dwellings was crucial to the study of the residential patterns and social dynamics of the neighbourhood. Street mapping was combined with views from above to discover places that a sensory experience at street level could not detect. The sensory and phenomenological components of this multidimensional mapping converged into a comprehensive 'deep map' of the built environment (Least-Heat Moon,1991; Pearson and Shanks, 2001: 144), with five distinct dwelling types.

Chapter Three examines the changes and continuities in Kensington's residential patterns, starting from the 19th-century urbanisation that transformed it from a fashionable country settlement into a middle-class suburb. This chapter explores the transformation and re-use of dwellings originally intended for Victorian families. Using records from Booth's map of poverty (Booth, 1902), censuses, electoral registers and planning applications, the research describes the transformation that accompanied social change, from a Victorian residential pattern embodied by the family home to other types of dwelling, such as apartments and bedsitters. The final section of the chapter describes the incremental process of residential environment 'luxification' (Graham, 2015) over the past fifty to sixty years and its connection to the financialisation of the property market. By interweaving the stories of the buildings with the residents' narratives, the chapter also explores the extent to which gentrification occurred, highlighting similarities and differences between Kensington and other areas of inner London (Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Butler and Lees, 2006; Butler and Robson, 2003; Glass, 1960, 1964).

Chapters Four and Five explore the research carried out in neighbourhood sectors that differ in character, dwelling types and socio-economic make-up. The two chapters work as a pair, complementing each other by providing insights into how residents relate to and practice place.

Chapter Four is an ethnography conducted in three of the most exclusive areas of Kensington: Holland Park, the Phillimore Estate and the area around Victoria Road. These rarefied elite enclaves, dominated by the super-rich, predominantly consist of single-family houses with mega-basements. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1985) concept of place as a social field in which individuals define their position in society, in this chapter I explore how the individuals who choose to reside in elite environments relate to their place of residence and their neighbours. Furthermore, by considering the recurring theme of the 'village' that emerges from residents' narratives, I investigate how it contributes to shaping the identity of place as an elite enclave (Atkinson, 2006; Benson and Jackson, 2012; Watt, 2009).

In Chapter Five, I move away from the rarefied atmosphere of the elite enclaves to focus on parts of Kensington - Campden Hill, Cheniston Gardens, Gregory Place and Lexham Gardens

Mews -characterised by a more mixed residential environment, where the 'ordinary wealthy' (Cunningham and Savage, 2015; Savage et al., 2013) prevail over the super-rich, and single-family houses are the exception rather than the norm amid converted flats, apartments, cottages, and mews. In this type of surroundings, length of stay plays a significant role in terms of distinctions between residents. Long-term middle-class homeowners coexist with short-term tenants, students, Airbnb lodgers and a diminishing low-income population residing in bedsitters. In the chapter I analyse how neighbourhood relationships reflect frictions and alliances between these groups.

In Chapter Six, I analyse how transnational flows and trajectories intersect with Kensington's social patterns, focusing on how residents engage with narratives about mobilities, otherness and difference, and how such narratives resonate within their personal biographies in the longue durée. Utilising the notions of cosmopolitan belonging (Jones and Jackson, 2014) and embedding (Ryan and Mulholland, 2015) this chapter delves into the diverse methods through which the inhabitants of Kensington envision, navigate and enact their national identifications, affiliations and orientations, highlighting the way such dynamics are closely intertwined with both class-based identities and the process of neighbourhood-making in an elite neighbourhood.

In the conclusion to the thesis, I sum up the added value of a qualitative approach focused on the longue durée for an understanding of neighbourhoods, highlighting how it fosters a deeper concern with the role of time, in both the process of neighbourhood-making and the life-course of individual identities, recognising the diversity and variety of experiences within the neighbourhood. Concurrently, I emphasise how a focus on classed identities and residential patterns over time shows how distinctions within elite neighbourhoods do not necessarily mean power relationships based on wealth. On the contrary, they might revolve around distinct lifestyles, tastes, dislikes and peculiarities associated with differences in social and cultural background, age and gender.

PART ONE - LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER ONE – ELITE NEIGHBOURHOODS AS FIELD OF ENQUIRY

The study of London's residential neighbourhoods has been a topic of sociological interest for many years. Since pioneering studies by Peter Willmott and Michael Young on Bethnal Green explored the neighbourhood in terms of feelings of togetherness, mutual bonds and social cohesion (Young and Wilmott 1957; Willmott, 1963; Wilmott and Young, 1960) the sociological literature on London neighbourhoods has developed along distinct lines. The concepts of neighbourhood and community have provided the backdrop to exploring multicultural urban landscapes as lived social arenas (Back, 2009). Qualitative research was developed in connection with a conceptualisation of neighbourhood as a place where people's practices, tastes and habits unfold (Lefebvre, 1991, 2002) and class distinctions are generated by people's practices in place (Bourdieu,1984). Neighbourhood research has also addressed social changes associated with gentrification (Butler and Robson, 2003; Glass,1960, 1964) and super-gentrification (Butler and Lees, 2006) in inner London boroughs.

Against this robust backdrop of studies on London neighbourhoods, the relative lack, until recently, of sociological research on wealthy neighbourhoods, stands out quite strikingly. In fact, It was only with the increase in economic and social inequality in the 21st century that the study of elites became a compelling topic in urban studies.

A surge of sociological interest in London elites was particularly notable after the 2008 financial crisis, when the property market was hit by an increasing influx of foreign capital from a wealthy global elite (Atkinson, 2020; Atkinson et al., 2017a; Dorling, 2014b; Kenzie and Atkinson, 2019; Paris, 2016). The need for a better understanding of the geography of London elites became the core of the 'Life in Alpha Territories' project, aimed to map the elite neighouthoods combining data collected via geodemographic information systems with qualitative localised research (Atkinson et al., 2017b; Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Glucksberg, 2016b; Knowles, 2017a, 2017b, 2022; Webber and Burrows, 2016).

The majority of these studies conceptualise elite neighbourhoods as the outcome of a recent phenomenon, that affected in the same way the whole of central London residential neighbourhhods, triggering friction between a pre-existing class of ordinary wealthy residents and super-rich newcomers (Burrows and Knowles, 2019).

In this thesis, I take a critical stance towards such an all-encompassing explanation of the London elite neighbourhoods by framing my ethnography of Kensington within an approach over the longue durée. Such an approach entails an understanding of the social make-up of a neighbourhood as the outcome of a unique and site-specific narrative which is embodied in the interplay between generations of residents and the built environment over time. By incorporating a temporal dimension in the study of a neighbourhood, an approach over the longue durée establishes a connection between the contemporary residential patterns and the ongoing process of neighbourhood change. From this point of view, time becomes a crucial factor in shaping the patterns and rhythms of the neighbourhood.

In this chapter, after an overview of the literature upon which I ground my neighbourhood research, I introduce the theoretical and conceptual framework of my approach over the longue durée (Braudel 1958; Ingold, 1993; Tilley 2016)., describing its multiple links with anthropology, geography and social history.

The place of elites in the sociology of class

The characterisation of Kensington as an elite neighbourhood has probably contributed to the paucity of social research on this area. In fact, the study of elites has been overlooked within the sociology of class for many years, and there are two main reasons for this lack of attention, both deeply rooted in the ways elites have been conceptualised over time.

A first aspect concerns issues of access to this social group. These issues were raised fifty years ago by Laura Nader, who urged social researchers to 'study up' (Nader, 1972). Nader pointed out that the difficulties in studying 'the powerful' cannot be solely attributed to the alleged inaccessibility of their private sphere, but also depend on researchers' propensity to direct their attention to the 'less powerful', either because they feel more comfortable with the 'underdog' or because they consider research on wealthy people as 'less worthy than exploring the lives of those on the margins' (Nader, 1972: 301-309; see also Aguiar and Schneider, 2012; Beaverstock et al., 2004: 402).

The second reason for this long-standing disregard of the study of the elites is connected to the way 'those at the top' have been conceptualised as a social category. In the long tradition of British sociology of class, those at the very top –the aristocrats and landed gentries - have been traditionally seen as a separate world, cut off from the triadic system based on the lower, middle and upper classes.

The invisibility of the wealthiest sectors in the social arena was emphasised by the introduction of class systems based on occupational categories (Goldthorpe, 1980, 1987; Marshall et al.,1988), which were widely applied to quantitative studies based on national sample surveys. These classifications were effective in analysing large-scale phenomena such as the growth of the middle classes and the shrinking of the working class, but they did not spot the 'few' at the top, who

were indeed ‘too few’ to be noticed (Savage and Williams, 2008: 2-3). From this point of view, it is revealing, and to some degree paradoxical, that an exhaustive publication on social inequality such as that of Butler and Watt (2007) does not even mention the elites.

On the other hand, elites have long been the subject of investigation in a separate field of studies, grounded on theories that were developed during the first decades of the twentieth century (Mosca, 1896; 1923; Pareto, 1916). Since their outset, elite studies were not concerned with class analysis and social inequalities, but rather were focused on issues of wealth, power and authority in connection with economic and political institutions (Cannadine,1996; Fidler, 1981; Lansley, 2006; Rubinstein, 1977; Sampson, 2004; Scott, 1982; 1990; 1996; Thomas,1959; Urry and Wakeford, 1973).

Anthony Giddens, who focused on the elites in his early work on the dynamics of power, described the 1974 work he co-edited with Philip Stanworth, *Elites and power in British Society,* as an ‘initial exploration of what ‘remarkably [was] almost uncharted territory’’, aimed at filling a gap in the sociological landscape that had remained largely neglected (Giddens, 1974: ix). Giddens suggested that a tension within British sociology, stemming from the clash between ‘elite theory’ and ‘class theory’, particularly as formulated by Marxist scholars, may have contributed to the gap in elite research (*ibid.:* ix-xi).

From a Marxian point of view, class differentiation based on labour relations is the major axis around which society is ordered, and class struggles are the driving force behind processes of social transformation. On the other hand, elite theory, as conceived by Mosca and Pareto and further developed by Charles Wright Mills (1956), involves an a priori differentiation between the ruling elite and the masses, who do not participate in the process by which they are governed, implicitly denying dynamics of change and class struggle. This conceptual and analytical dichotomy between the concepts of class and elite prompted Giddens to encourage the study of elites.

Several studies have made significant contributions to understanding the changes at the top of British society in the twentieth century. For instance, in the work cited above, Stanworth and Giddens (1974) examined the rise of the industrial managerial element alongside the decline of the traditional aristocracy. Additionally, the emergence of a new financial elite, distinct from the old establishment, has been analysed in connection with the expansion of the City (Savage and Williams, 2008). These studies primarily focus on economic, financial and political networks of power, as well as factors such as business kinship, friendship, family background, education and transnational connections (Murray and Scott, 2012; Sklair, 2001). While they provide detailed information on the assets, profits, earnings and biographical details of the wealthy, they lack insight into their residential patterns.

However, the limited sociological interest in studying the residential choices of elites cannot be solely attributed to a lack of focus on their role within social class dynamics. It also reflects a broader attitude, developed in the context of the globalisation debate, that regards the geography of

elites as disconnected from specific places. Influential theorists from various academic specialisms have endorsed this perspective and provided the theoretical and conceptual framework for studying elites through the lens of global mobility (Appadurai, 1990; Bauman, 1998, 2000; Castells, 1996; Featherstone and Lash,1995; Urry, 2000, 2007; Watt and Smets, 2014). According to these studies, elites are seen as fleeting and elusive hyper-mobile subjects connected by virtual networks and capital flows in a borderless world. The focus is on their transnational lifestyles of excess, with their residential location being secondary. In the context of this 'mobility paradigm' (Urry, 2000, 2007), Bauman (2000) refers to the super-rich as the 'new cosmopolitans', highlighting a social divide between the 'fast subjects' who reside in transnational spaces and the 'slow subjects' whose lives remain localised and parochial. Bauman describes the spaces of the 'fast world' as glamorous zones that are disconnected from the majority of the world's population.

In summary, while studies have examined the changing dynamics of elites in British society, they have predominantly focused on economic, financial and political aspects, overlooking insights into their residential patterns. This limited sociological interest in the residential choices of elites can be attributed, in part, to a perception that the geography of elites is detached from specific places, emphasising their transnational mobility and lifestyles of excess.

London elites rediscovered

A call for 'studying up', investigating elites and the places where they live, was made in 2004 by Beaverstock, Hubbard and Short. They argued that 'such studies might meaningfully explore those affluent parts of world cities (like Chelsea and Kensington in London) where the super-rich may reside' (Beaverstock et al., 2004: 406).

In British sociology, Mike Savage and Karel Williams in their co-edited work *Remembering Elites* (2008) advocated a revival of interest in elites. While their work focused on a re-conceptualisation of this sector of British society, it did not explicitly refer to residential dynamics. However, it did offer an updated examination of the new types of London-based elites that had emerged from unprecedented innovation in the financial markets.

In hindsight, the publication of *Remembering Elites* in 2008 can be seen as a prescient warning of the turmoil that hit the financial sector that year, leading to a disproportionate increase in inequality in the city of London. This was due to the influx of foreign capital invested in the London property market by a wealthy global elite (Atkinson, 2020; Atkinson et al., 2017a; Dorling, 2014b; Kenzie and Atkinson, 2019; Paris, 2016; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). As urban inequalities continued to grow, numerous social studies reported the emergence of a plutocratic city where the raw money-power of a global financial elite dictated the social, political and symbolic landscapes of the urban (Atkinson et al., 2016; 2017b; Bowie, 2017; Dorling, 2014a, 2014b; Edwards, 2016; Harvey, 2012; Hay and Muller, 2012; Lees et al., 2016; Minton, 2017; Piketty, 2014; Savage et al.,

2015).

Alongside the growing interest in elites, scholars began to explore how the London elites engage with their residential surroundings (Atkinson, 2018) and how they connect spatially to the city landscape (Atkinson, 2016; Atkinson et al., 2017a; Atkinson and Ho, 2020; Ho and Atkinson, 2017). The luxurious residential lifestyles of the west central London elites began to be explored in connection with the excavation of basements to create extensions used for leisure and fitness purposes (Atkinson, 2020; Baldwin et al., 2019; Burrows et al., 2022; Garrett, 2020; Webber and Burrows, 2016). Researchers from Newcastle University (Baldwin et al., 2019) highlighted how basement extensions not only maximised profits from investments in areas with exorbitant land values but also catered to the 'secessionary' tendencies of many wealthy elites who preferred a luxurious underground lifestyle to the transparency of high-rise glass towers.

Social researchers also began examining the residential neighbourhoods of Central London pointing out how foreign investors were gradually displacing the rich British establishment, who in turn were displacing others from inner London to suburban areas. This domino effect put pressure on housing and prices throughout the country (Atkinson at al., 2017b; Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Cunningham and Savage, 2017; Glucksberg et al., 2015; Glucksberg, 2016a; Minton, 2017; Webber and Burrows, 2016).

As the discourse on urban inequality gained importance, sociologists felt a growing need for a way to classify elites. Various terms have been used to identify this social group, such as 'plutocrats' (Freeland 2012; Knowles 2017a), 'plutocrat-wealthy' (Dorling, 2014a; 2014b; Piketty 2014), 'super-rich' (Atkinson, 2016; Atkinson et al., 2017b; Beaverstock et al., 2004; 2013; Burrows, 2013; Featherstone, 2014; Forrest et al., 2017a; 2017b; Hay, 2013; Hay and Beaverstock, 2016; Hay and Muller, 2012; Koh et al., 2016); 'wealth elite' (Fernandez et al., 2016; Savage, 2014; 2015); 'the wealthy' (Rowlingson and McKay, 2012), often used interchangeably with 'elite' (Abbink and Salverda, 2013; Birchnell and Caletrio, 2014; Bourdieu, 1984; Glucksberg, 2016b; Koh and Wissink, 2017; Rubinstein, 1977; Savage and Williams, 2008; Scott, 2008; Stanworth and Giddens,1974).

Efforts have been made to classify elites based on wealth distribution, including categories like 'millionaires', 'centa-millionaires' and 'billionaires' (McCarthy, 2015). Another classification, based on the World Wealth Reports by the Capgemini and RBC Wealth Management, distinguishes 'high net worth' (HNW) individuals with $1 million or more of investable assets and 'ultra-high net worth' (UHNW) individuals with fortunes of at least $30 million. Following Piketty's 2014 analysis of the distribution of wealth, other studies (Forrest et al., 2017a; Hay and Beaverstock, 2016) identified the super-rich as the top '1 per cent' of the global population, who own about half the world's wealth, and the top '0.1 per cent' who possess fortunes in the order of 10 million Euros on average (Piketty, 2014: 438).

However, a classification of elites based solely on wealth is problematic, as perceptions of

wealth (or of what counts as wealthy) may vary across different locations (Forrest et al., 2017a; Glucksberg, 2016a; Paris, 2013; 2016). In London, for example, skyrocketing house prices have turned middle-class individuals who bought properties in Central London boroughs decades ago into 'millionaires without cash'.[3] Their residential wealth, although relatively small in the global context, carries social capital that goes beyond mere economic assets and affects their perception and their position in society. Central London prime locations still feature millionaires or multimillionaires with lifestyles distinct from those found in other parts of the city or country.

Building upon the result of the BBC Great British Class Survey (GBCS), Savage and colleagues propose a comprehensive understanding of elites as a class. This definition encompasses not only the 'super-wealthy' or the '1 percent', as suggested by Piketty (2014), but also includes the 'ordinary wealthy' who represent a significantly larger proportion of the population. Savage estimates this group to be around 6 percent of the population (Savage et al., 2013; 2015). Based on this classification, Cunningham and Savage focus on the geographical distribution of London elites and tentatively assign them to specific areas of the city based on their professional backgrounds, including the business, cultural and legal sectors. In this context, they associate the 'western heartlands of London, centred on Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea' with 'the business Elite, the largest and most affluent sector of the London Elite' (Cunningham and Savage, 2015: 342, 2017).

The need for a better understanding of the geographical distribution of London elites was also at the core of systematic research on those areas of Central London known in the language of geo-demographers as the *alpha territory,* where the most exclusive enclaves are likely to be found. The 'Life in Alpha Territories' project, conducted between 2013 and 2015, aimed to map the residential choices of the London elite based on their consumption behaviour, using the MOSAIC consumer classification system (Atkinson et al., 2016; Burrows, 2013; 2016; Glucksberg, 2016a; Webber and Burrows, 2018). The subsequent launch of the 'Serious Money: a tour through plutocratic London' project in 2017 highlighted the increasing importance for urban sociologists of analysing the spatial patterns of the London elites (Knowles, 2022).

The study of 'alpha territories' employed a mixed approach combining quantitative data from the Mosaic algorithm with qualitative localised research. However, only a few studies to date have added ethnographic insight to the broader picture derived from quantitative data (Atkinson et al., 2017b; Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Glucksberg, 2016b; Knowles, 2017a, 2017b, 2022; Webber and Burrows, 2016).

Regarding Kensington specifically, the lack of insight into elite residential patterns has been further exacerbated by a semantic ambiguity associated with the name of Kensington. In fact, the name Kensington is commonly used to refer both to the borough (RBKC) and to the neighbourhood

[3] This term was used by one of the participants in my study to refer to one of his neighbours whose flat had more than tripled its value since purchase.

of Kensington, which represents less than one-third of the borough territory. This discrepancy in how the name Kensington is used has caused confusion in sociological literature, as the whole borough has been mistakenly regarded as a neighbourhood of the super-rich, without considering the distribution of wealth among its different sectors (Atkinson, 2017; Hamnett, 2003; Savage et al., 2015).

It was only after the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 that the extent of inequality within the RBKC became widely known. That tragic event exposed the extreme level of poverty in the northern sectors of the borough. Since then, both sociologists and media commentators have emphasised the significant social and economic disparities in the RBKC, juxtaposing the poor living conditions in North Kensington with the luxurious lifestyles of Kensington (Atkinson, 2017). Evidence of this socio-economic divide was derived from a comparison of deprivation indices across different sectors of the borough, which revealed that northern sectors of the borough rank among the top ten percent of deprived areas in England, while Kensington falls among the least deprived ten percent (MacLeod, 2018; and Fig. 5). Consequently, the RBKC has come to be seen as a territory characterised by the extreme polarisation of inequalities, with only selected neighbourhoods, including Kensington, serving as enclaves for elites.

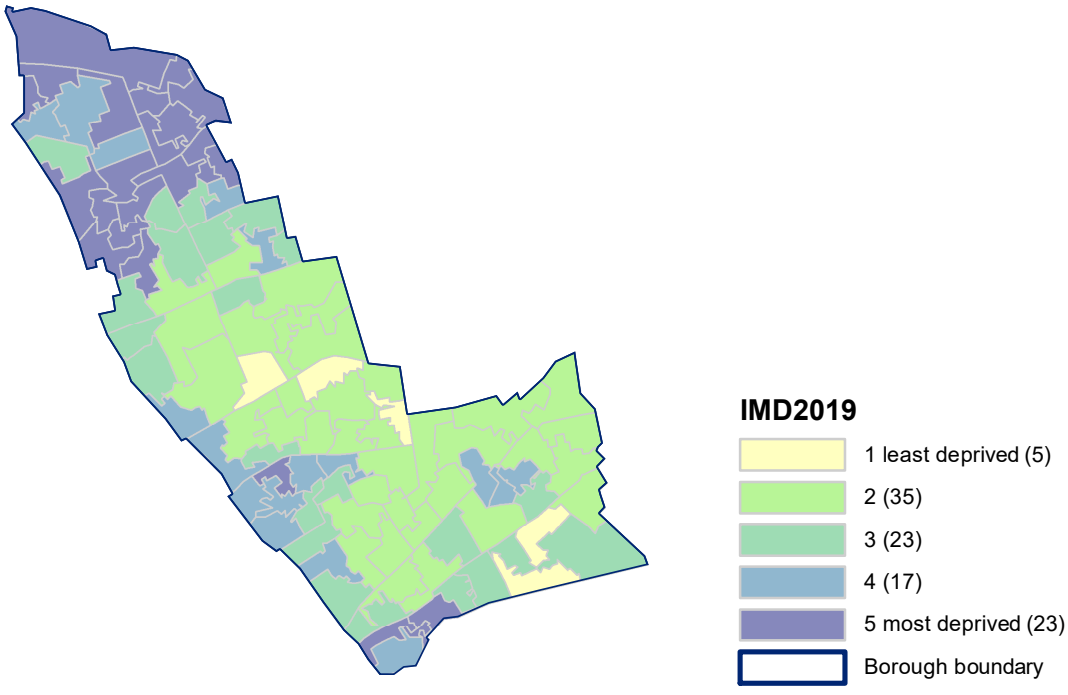


Fig. 5. Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019, Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) by nationally ranked quintiles (Source: Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government).

However, despite this shift in the understanding of the social geography of the borough,

residential and social patterns in Kensington remain largely unexplored. Our knowledge of this elite neighbourhood in west central London is primarily derived from quantitative data, whether from socio-economic classifications based on censuses and surveys, or from consumer classification system algorithms. Despite the call for qualitative research on elite residential neighbourhoods by the sociologists working on the alpha territory, only two qualitative research studies, albeit only partially focused on Kensington, have been published (Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Knowles, 2022).

Conceptualising neighbourhoods in terms of place and class

In my ethnography of Kensington I draw upon a rich body of literature that employs a qualitative approach to study class dynamics in localised contexts. This line of research is rooted in the conceptualisations of space and class formulated by French social theorists Henry Lefebvre and Pierre Bourdieu, which have significantly influenced British sociology.

Within the frame of his radical and unorthodox Marxist approach (Purcell, 2013), Lefebvre explains 'the urban' as a place where inhabitants engage each other in meaningful connections, mainly focusing on how these processes operate in the production of large-scale urban spaces, reproducing capitalist society. Against this conceptual background, Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space*, published in 1974, lays out a socio-spatial theory that claims a dialectical connection between space and social relations (Lefebvre, 1991). At the core of this theory is the idea that space is not merely a natural, material void waiting to be filled with content. For Lefebvre, space is socially produced rather than given: 'groups, classes, or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves or recognise one another as 'subjects' unless they generate (or produce) a space '(Lefebvre, 1991: 416). In this perspective a neighbourhood is both a product and a process of social activity through which social groups identify themselves.

Doreen Massey's work on urban geography, particularly her 1991 *A Global Sense of Place*, further contributes to understanding neighbourhoods as products of social processes. Anchored like Lefebvre to a Marxist approach, Massey reckons that the dynamics of capital feed into the making of place. However, she conceives space as a 'sphere of multiplicity' where distinct trajectories coexist (Massey, 1991, 2005, 2007). Massey also emphasises the multiple connections between a place and other locations and how these connections shape the character of a neighbourhood. She introduces the concept of a 'progressive sense of place,' which offers a multi-scalar and relational perspective on the nature of places (Massey, 2005: 9). According to this perspective, social, cultural and economic relations extend beyond the local scale and encompass the global. Suzanne Hall adopts a similar approach in her ethnography of a street in south central London, exploring the global perspective of place-making (Hall, 2012).

While the cultural dimension of space gained prominence within the social sciences, Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical approach challenged the established class systems based on occupational

hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990). In his work *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu introduces the concept of 'capital' to encompass qualities, values, attributes and dispositions that contribute to generating class distinctions. Bourdieu's understanding of class is relational, as it arises from the interactions between different forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) and their legitimation. He introduces the notion of a 'field' as a social or thematic space where distinct activities occur (Bourdieu, 1984: 58; 226-256). In these fields, individuals play specific roles and employ strategies to distinguish themselves from others. Bourdieu argues that 'distinction' works effectively through oppositions, as people often define themselves by what they are not rather than what they are (Bourdieu, 1984: 33). Tastes often manifest as distastes, with individuals expressing their own preferences by rejecting those of others (*ibid.*).

The interplay between class and space has been a central focus of sociological studies that analyse the dynamics of class and place-making in urban contexts. Bourdieu's concepts and Lefebvre's and Massey's conceptualisations of space and place have informed this line of research.

Since the 2000s, a significant body of work spearheaded by Mike Savage and colleagues has applied a Bourdieusian approach to class analysis (Bennett et al., 2009; Devine et al., 2005; Savage et al., 2013; 2015). This approach has focused attention on the role of culture in everyday life and the formation of identities and subjectivities (Skeggs,1997, 2004).

The entanglement between class and space is exemplified by the genesis of *Globalisation and Belonging* (Savage et al., 2005), where a Bourdieusian approach to the study of class is anchored to a specific locale. In this context, Mike Savage introduces the core concept of 'elective belonging', to explain how people tend to cluster together with people 'like themselves' (Savage et al., 2005: 9). In elite contexts, elective belonging has been explored in connection with exclusionary residential practices which take the physical form of 'gated communities' or other boundaries of various types (Atkinson and Blandy, 2006; Atkinson and Ho, 2020; Ho and Atkinson, 2017; Law 2004).

Adding to the notion of elective belonging, Paul Watt has proposed the concept of 'selective belonging' (Watt, 2009, 2010). Selective belonging provides a further tool for the analysis of the way in which exclusivity of class and housing-tenure can be maintained through symbolic boundaries within the same neighbourhood (Watt, 2009). Such boundary-making has taken several forms in sociological literature, including what Bourdieu (1991: 239) called 'the power of naming' (Watt, 2009), as a means of distinction among the residents of a neighbourhood.

The conceptualisation of space and class, influenced by the ideas of Lefebvre and Bourdieu, along with the notion of 'belonging' (Savage et al., 2005), has been central to a robust stream of sociological studies examining the dynamics of class and place-making in urban environments. However, studies specifically focused on elites remain remarkably few in number.

Regarding London, an important Bourdieusian insight into an elite neighbourhood was provided by Loretta Lees and Tim Butler in their study of the North London neighbourhood of

Barnsbury (Butler and Lees, 2006). In the early 1990s, a new social group consisting of super-wealthy professionals gradually transformed a previously gentrified middle-class neighbourhood into an exclusive elite residential area. Through their Bourdieusian lens, the authors emphasise how the newcomers' investment in the neighbourhood is not only economic but also cultural and symbolic.

While Bourdieusian studies of the London elite are rare, extensive academic work has been carried out on middle-class neighbourhoods, particularly in research projects coordinated by Tim Butler since the late 1990s. In their book *London Calling: The Middle Classes and the Remaking of Inner London*, co-authored with Gary Robson, Butler identified four key areas of investigation – housing, occupation, education and consumption – to examine how different social groups strategically operate across these domains in various neighbourhoods, highlighting the fundamental role of cultural reproduction in class formation (Butler and Robson, 2003).

This perspective was developed further in a comparative study of middle-class neighbourhoods in Paris and London, conducted by a French-British research team (Bacque et al., 2015). Adopting a qualitative approach, the British researchers involved in this collective work (Michaela Benson, Gary Bridge, Tim Butler and Emma Jackson) have provided theoretical and analytical insight into the study of class dynamics in London's neighbourhoods. Drawing upon previous arguments that territorial relations are relevant to the social identities of the middle classes (Bridge, 2003; Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al.,2005), their work focuses on the evidence from a range of different neighbourhood contexts showing that the relationship between place and class identity is highly interactive and transactional, and social practices in place are conditioned by not only the process of neighbourhood-making but also by the relations to surrounding neighbourhoods, according to a pattern described by Paul Watt (2009) as 'selective belonging' (Bacque et al., 2015: 2-3). Inspired by Lefebvre, these studies take seriously the significance of the production of space through everyday practices and representations. However, they differ from Lefebvre's holistic approach to the city as the product of capitalism by examining how the production of space takes place at a smaller scale and how such process rolls out in the different neighbourhoods (Bacque et al., 2015: 3). At the same time, these studies engage with Bourdieu's ideas of class distinctions and with the works these ideas have inspired within British sociology (Bridge, 2003, 2006; Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005), showing how the neighbourhood context reveals a range of class trajectories and neighbourhood activities based on distinctions between social groups. This body of literature has served as a source of inspiration and a reference point for analysing the social context of Kensington.

Following a conceptualisation of neighbourhood as 'field' where class distinctions unfold (Benson, 2014), my research positions Kensington as the 'field' where class identity is legitimised through the interaction between different forms of capital. Employing a multi-scalar approach to place, it simultaneously examines distinct 'fields,' encompassing not only the entire neighbourhood

but also specific residential sectors, streets, and individual buildings. These distinct 'fields' provide the socio-spatial backdrops against which I analyse the relationship between residential practices, place-making, and belonging (Benson, 2014; Benson and Jackson, 2013, 2017; Jackson and Benson, 2014). By examining material and symbolic struggles among residents, as well as the preferences and aversions expressed in their narratives, I gather evidence to analyse how the process of class formation unfolds in the neighbourhood through the interplay of different types of capital (Benson and Jackson, 2017; Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 1997, 2004).

Simultaneously, I investigate class distinctions in relation to various identity dimensions, including age and generation gaps (Benson and Jackson, 2017; Ryan et al., 2021), ethnicity (Hall, 2012; Jackson and Benson, 2014), gender (Skeggs, 2004), and education (Bacque et al., 2015; Benson et al., 2015; Butler and Robson, 2003).

Furthermore, within the framework of Massey's conceptualisation of place as the product of interrelations 'from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny' (Massey, 2005: 9), I explore the relationship between the neighbourhood and the wider world, drawing on research focused on issues of transnational mobility and embedding in place (Andreotti et al., 2015; Benson, 2009; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014; Elliott and Urry, 2010; Mulholland and Ryan, 2014, 2022; Ryan and Mulholland, 2015).

This vast body of research that investigates neighbourhood-making, class dynamics, and belonging through the lens of Bourdieu's analytical framework, is used in my research as a reference to analyse how class dynamics in Kensington unfold according to distinct patterns in different areas of the neighbourhood. The interplay between time and place in the process of neighbourhood-making and class reproduction is further analysed in the next section of this literature review.

A diachronic perspective in the study of neighbourhoods

Within sociology, the past has been traditionally dealt with as a background framework of 'grand narratives' of social development, but it has been generally neglected as a tool for the analysis of social contexts (Savage 2009), although history surely contributes to sociological theory.

Bourdieu's conceptual framework provides a case in point to support this argument. The past has been central to Bourdieu's work since his early ethnographical studies (Hobsbawm 2007). Some studies have highlighted this aspect of his work and how he deploys his key concepts of habitus, fields, cultural and social capital using a distinctly historicist epistemology organized around the ideas of conjuncture, contingency, and discontinuity (Bennett 2005; Bridge, 2001; Gorski 2013; Hobsbawm 2007; Steinmetz 2011). In particular, the notion of habitus, and the idea of its acquisition through tradition and education, calls upon the presence of the past in the present, activated by the process of transmission of tastes and habits from one generation to another or during the course of an individual lifetime.

An appreciation of the past as part of the ongoing process of neighbourhood change can be also

observed within gentrification studies (Butler and Lees, 2006; Glass, 1964). As Ruth Glass noted in her pioneering study on gentrification in inner London:

> All societies and all large cities have multiple patterns of differentiation: and there are always multiple factors, *old and new,* which determine such patterns … At any hour, London in 1963 shows the juxtaposition of *new and old* both in the fabric and in the structure of society … (Glass, 1964: xiii-xvii; my emphasis).

A call for a diachronic approach to the study of urban space came from the historical sociologists of the early 1990s, who advocated a dialogue between history and sociology on the grounds of the shared disciplinary interest in human agency (Kendrick et al.,1990). It is in this context that Rosemary Mellor situates her idea of urban change based on the concept of 'transitions", periods where there is a decisive change from one set of conditions to another, followed by periods of continuity (*ibid.).* What is significant in Mellor's approach is the focus on the past in the present:

> Visibly cities embody history. Previous generations' investment strategies, […] are there, encumbrances to movement or rational use of space […]. There is a constant accommodation to the artifacts of the past […] requiring ongoing calculation. In another sense history is ever there - in the streets frequented as daily routine, in memories of past incidents, moments in personal history (Mellor, 1990: 122).

Mellor's interest in urban change can be traced back to her experience as town planner when she presumably acquired 'the attention to the *constant accommodation to the artifacts of the past requiring ongoing calculation'* [emphasis added] that is typical of those who get directly involved with the materiality of the built environment and the production of urban space. Mellor's perspective reminds us of the approach of Kevin Lynch, another urban planner and academic, who in his *What Time is This Place*? (1972), theorizes how the physical environment captures and refigures temporal processes. Like Mellor, Lynch investigates the nature of "transition" and "change'' in the environment (Lynch 1972: 163-189) and introduces the concepts of "layering" and "temporal collage" to describe "the visible accumulation of overlapping traces from successive periods, each trace modifying and being modified by the new additions, to produce something like a collage of time" (ibid.: 171).

Massey's work *Spatial Division of Labour* was crucial for the conceptualization of time in the production of localities: "local areas […] are the products of long and varied histories. Different activities and forms of social organization have come and gone, established their dominance, lingered on and later died away". In Massey's idea of urban geography, it is the combined and uneven nature of these layers of events that produces the locality (Massey, 1984:117). On the ground of such a conceptualization of time and space she endorses the use of history and traditions 'to help make the present' and to strengthen the identity of place in battles over development and conservation, because, she argues, place identities 'are very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* those histories are told and which history turns out to be dominant (Massey 1995: 186-87, emphasis in original).

Among the studies of neighbourhoods carried out in a diachronic perspective, the works by Talja Blokland and Monica Degen (Blokland, 2003; Degen, 2017, 2018) provide valuable conceptual and analytical inspiration for my research. Blokland's study of a Rotterdam neighbourhood examines how change and continuity affect different social categories (age, gender, ethnicity, education) and explores the reconfiguration of urban bonds alongside the changing character of the neighbourhood. Degen's research delves into the multiple temporalities underlying urban transformations in Barcelona in the course of more than a decade.

The collection of memories from residents serves as a research strategy in various studies aiming to reconstruct the social life of a neighbourhood or a community over time. Examples include Jerry White's work on Rothschild Buildings in Spitalfields (White, 1980), Doreen Massey's ethnography of the council estate in Manchester where she grew up (Massey, 2000), Allison Blunt's study on Christodora House in New York (Blunt, 2008), and her work on diasporic communities (Blunt, 2003; Blunt and Bonnerjee, 2013), Lisa McKenzie's research on St Ann's estate in Nottingham (McKenzie, 2015), the work on the Highgate residential neighbourhood by Webber and Burrows (2016), and the study of super-gentrification in Barnsbury by Butler and Lees (2006).

The multiple temporalities inscribed in a neighbourhood are described by Julia Bennett (2014) in terms of multiple social relationships stretching between past, present and future generations. The entanglement between past, present and future is explored by Bennett through the metaphor of place as a Maussan gift (Mauss, 1954) passed from one generation of a community to the next. Place as a symbolic gift creates a tangible relationship between generations through time (Bennett, 2014).

Developing an approach over the longue durée

My research rests upon the idea of a dialectical continuum between past and present that is reflected by the materiality of the built environment and its transformation over time. So a home embodies in its essence the traces of the multiple adaptations and adjustments that have occurred in the course of consecutive occupations by generations of residents. The coexistence of the past within the present generates an inherent tension between the long duration of the buildings and the transient experiences of those who have lived within their walls (Miller, 2010: 94-95). The materiality of the stones survives and at the same time incorporates and reworks a multiplicity of practices belonging to the past.

Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis explain the entanglement between space and time in the urban landscape by drawing upon the metaphor of 'porosity':

> [Porosity] is the inexhaustible law of life in [the] city, reappearing everywhere. [It explains] how building and action inter-penetrate, in the courtyards, arcades and stairways […]. The stamp of the definitive is avoided, no situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its "thus and not otherwise". This is how architecture …comes into being … One can scarcely discern where building is still in progress and where dilapidation has already set in." (Benjamin and Lacis, 1978: 166-8).

Porosity allows the footprints of the past to be contained within the present. This idea links to de Certeau's argument that beneath the 'clear text of the planned and readable city' lies another metaphorical space, characterised by 'the presence of absences' (de Certeau, 1984: 107): "There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can invoke or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in" (*ibid*.: 108). According to de Certeau, the places where people live reflect what is no longer there.

De Certeau's idea of a past hidden beneath the present goes beyond the visual experience and includes the materiality of things, because 'objects' - as he puts it - 'have hollow places in which a past sleeps' (de Certeau, 1984: 107). In other words, the materiality of the buildings becomes the vehicle that makes the activities performed by past dwellers emerge to the surface, highlighting the entanglement between the built environment and those who live in it. In his *Building, Dwelling, Thinking,* Heidegger explores such an entanglement arguing that the way we dwell is the way we "are in the world" (Heidegger, 2003), For Heidegger, the relation between people and space takes on the form of dwelling A building is part of a community which it enables to experience a mutual sense of the present, forged by a known historical past and a predicted future (*ibid.).* So 'dwelling' represents the '*trait d'union* between the body and the architectural forms' (Buchli, 2013: 133). As Amin and Thrift (2002: 9) argue, it stands 'at the intermesh between the stone and the flesh'.

A sensibility towards the multiple temporalities inscribed in the materiality of the built environment can be traced in the approach to the study of landscape implemented by Tim Ingold and Chris Tilley within material culture studies (Ingold, 1993; Tilley, 2017). Although they do not refer specifically to urban landscapes, conceptually their idea of landscape as a 'life-world' is not distinct from the representation of a neighbourhood. Both the natural landscape and the neighbourhood are in fact places populated and acted upon by humans who perform activities in an embodied interaction with the material world. From this point of view a neighbourhood, exactly like a landscape, is 'constituted as an enduring record of - and testimony to - the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it and in doing so have left there something of themselves' (Ingold, 1993:152).

In Tilley's approach the idea of a temporality of landscape is related to a phenomenological perception of the environment where 'we are always surrounded by things of the past that in fact are constitutive of our present' (Tilley, 2017: 6). To highlight the emphasis on long-term patterns implied by an approach focused on temporality Tilley adopts the concept of 'longue durée' drawn from the general perspective of the *Annales* school of historiography (ibid.: 5-12).

The notion of temporality embraced by Ingold and Tilley is not chronometric (a series of calendar dates) or historical (a series of events in succession), as time does not work as an external agent, but it is embedded in the material world. The material world can be either a pebbled heathland as it is Tilley's object of investigation, or a 'taskscape' produced by the actions of the humans who dwell in it, as in Ingold; but it can also be the built environment of a neighbourhood, with its streets, buildings and material things, and generations of humans who have interacted with it. Perceiving a landscape [or an

urban neighbourhood]' implies 'engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past […] and enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who over the generations have moved around in it and played their part in its formation' (Ingold, 1993:152). From this point of view, landscapes, as well as neighbourhoods, tell, or rather are stories embodied in the materiality of place.

The focus on material culture - whether it is buildings, domestic interiors, or home possessions - is crucial in my research on Kensington. Bricks, windows, and rooms can in fact speak of present and past generations who have lived in Kensington, hinting at people's preferences, lifestyles, and aspirations and at the many ways in which social relationships and diversity have been manifested.

Such an approach to the study of the materiality of the objects, whether they are buildings or home possessions, involves the acknowledgment that objects, like human subjects have an agency (Gell,1998). Bachelard has demonstrated this by taking us on a journey, from cellar to attic, to show how our perceptions of the home shape our thoughts, memories, and dreams (Bachelard 1964). The agency of an object goes beyond its power to evoke memories, involving as it does an agency comparable to the action needed to create that very object. In other words, things create people as much as people make them (Tilley, 1999: 76). From this point of view, material forms have a life, and they work to reproduce or transform the social contexts in which they act. An object interacts with the people who gaze upon it, use it, and possess it. Adding to the metaphor of objects as 'living things', objects have 'biographies' and it is the researcher's task to investigate and collect them. Things have a social life (Appadurai, 1986) including trajectories and transactions that can be symbolic and ritualised. Objects can also speak about people and have a biographical significance. They can become tools for investigating the stories of the people with whom they are intertwined (Miller, 2001; 2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2010; Tilley, 2006; see also Atkinson and Jacobs, 2016; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Hoskins, 1998; Lloyd and Vasta, 2017; Pink, 2004).

Conclusion

Having situated my research on Kensington within the context of elite studies, in this literature review I have identified the limitations of the theoretical and analytical approaches within this field to understand the social dynamics of a residential neighbourhood. Even when the geography of the alpha territory became a topic of sociological interest against the background of the increasing urban inequalities (Webber an Burrows, 2016), the approach to the London elites remained predominantly anchored to generalisations and abstractions.

Departing from quantitative abstractions and generalisations associated with the notion of elite neighbourhood, in this study I have adopted a qualitative approach aiming at exploring the contingent and circumstantial social dynamics that emerge from the interactions of individuals within a specific place. To accomplish this goal, I have drawn upon a rich body of literature that studies class dynamics in localised contexts. This line of research is rooted in the conceptualisations of space and class opened by French social theorists Henry Lefebvre (1991)

and Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who have significantly influenced British sociology. The studies I have grounded my qualitative approach upon argue that place is relevant to social identity (Bridge, 2003, 2006; Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005). Focusing on evidence from a range of different neighbourhood contexts, they demonstrate that the relationship between place and class identity is highly interactive and transactional. Social practices are generated not only by the process of place-making within one neighbourhood, but also by the contrast between neighbourhoods (Bacque et al., 2015; Benson, 2014; Benson and Jackson, 2013, 2017; Jackson and Benson, 2014; Watt 2009). This body of literature highlights how neighbourhoods reveal a range of class trajectories and activities based on distinctions between social groups. Following a conceptualisation of neighbourhood as a 'field' where class distinctions unfold (Benson, 2014; Bourdieu, 1985), they analyse the relationship between residential practices, place-making and belonging, highlighting how class identity is legitimised through the interaction between different forms of capital. At the same time, they investigate class distinctions concerning various identity dimensions and personal attitudes, including age and generation gaps as well as education. I have also introduced the concept of cosmopolitanism (Jones and Jackson, 2014) and embedding (Mulholland and Ryan, 2014, 2022; Ryan and Mulholland, 2015) as a conceptual tool to explore the relationship between transnational mobility, place and identity.

In the second part of the literature review, I have highlighted the temporal dimension that underlies the urban (Glass,1964: Lynch, 1972; Mellor, 1990; Massey, 1984) and made a case for the analysis of neighbourhoods in a diachronic perspective (Braudel, 1958; Tilley, 2017) in sociological research on neighbourhoods (Degen, 2018). In this regard, I have provided reference to some notable studies in the sociological literature that research neighbourhoods over time (Bennett, 2014; Blokland, 2003; Blunt, 2003; Blunt et al., 2012; Blunt and Bonnerjee, 2013; Bonnett and Alexander, 2012; Degen, 2017, 2018; McKenzie, 2015; Webber and Burrows, 2016; White,1980).

In the concluding section I have focused on the diachronic perspective of my research and on the theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins my approach over the longue durée to the study of Kensington. The idea that there is a dialectical continuum between past and present reflected by the materiality of the built environment is linked to material culture studies that enphasise the agency of material forms (de Certeau, 1984; Gell, 1998; Miller, 2001; 2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2010; Tilley, 1999, 2006). Likewise, it is in the realm of anthropological research, and notably in the approach of Tilley and Ingold to the study of landscape that I ground my approach over the longue durée to the study of an urban neighbourhood.

CHAPTER TWO - RESEARCH METHODS AND PRACTICES

In my research on Kensington, I have embraced a qualitative approach over the longue durée (Braudel, 1958; Tilley, 1917). Thus I have addressed the two core questions that underlie my research:

- How does taking a qualitative approach over the longue durée contribute to existing understandings of an elite neighbourhood?
- To what extent can a focus on past social and residential trajectories shed light on the process of luxification (Graham et al., 2015) of the built environment in elite neighbourhoods, which recent sociological literature (e.g. Burrows and Knowles, 2019) tends to regard as the outcome of the financialisaton of the housing market triggered by the 2008 financial crisis?

The empirical methodology adopted to explore continuity and change in social patterns over time combined archival research, observation of street life and the built environment and interviews with residents. This approach to studying a neighbourhood was tested in my MA dissertation, in the analysis of a single street (Pulini, 2015, 2019, 2022). For this thesis, I applied the same methodology at a multi-scalar level, including (i) a broader level, encompassing the entire neighbourhood, and (ii) a more finely grained level, focusing on specifically selected areas. The research consisted of two complementary phases: (i) neighbourhood exploration and (ii) encounters with residents.

Neighbourhood exploration aimed to capture the urban rhythms and create a comprehensive understanding of the built environment. This phase was achieved through various practices, including walking, observing street life, conducting ‘online tours’ and collecting data from documentary sources. Analysing the built environment played a pivotal role in my examination of residential trends and social dynamics within the neighbourhood. Housing choices reflect personal and social identities, the life paths of individuals and households, and diverse ways of engaging with the locale. A multi-dimensional mapping combining sensory street-level experiences with aerial perspectives led to a comprehensive ‘deep map’ where five categories of dwellings encapsulate the ongoing process of transformation of the built environment: 1) single-family houses, 2) converted flats, 3) apartments, 4) modern flats, and 5) cottages and mews. This classification of dwellings is the outcome of an ethnography grounded in place. It differs radically from the association between the type of building and consumption habits produced by the algorithm that stands behind the logic of the alpha territories in the social profiles provided by Acorn or Mosaic (Burrows et al., 2017; Webber and Burrows, 2016, 2018).

The second phase of the research included 37 in-depth conversations with residents. At this stage, the information and knowledge gathered from exploring and mapping the neighbourhood

served as a foundation for analysing people's narratives and the diverse ways in which they contribute to the process of neighbourhood formation.

In the final sections of this chapter, I discuss the implications arising from my dual role as both researcher and resident. I reflect on reflexivity and positionality, considering how my perspective may have influenced the research process and findings. Additionally, I address the ethical issues associated with this qualitative research approach.

Ultimately, by taking a qualitative approach over the longue durée to this research on Kensington, I intend also to contribute to an in-depth approach to the study of neighbourhoods in general and propose a new way to analyse situated elites. Such an approach entails conceptualising the built environment as an ongoing process that changes and evolves through a dialectic relationship with its inhabitants. Understanding such a process and the aspects of social change embedded in it is crucial to tackling differences and similarities in the social make-up of elite neighbourhoods.

Walking

Neighbourhood exploration was based on extensive walks along the streets of Kensington, observing, 'sensing' and identifying the characteristics of the built environment and the routes taken by residents through the network of streets, public spaces and buildings. This part of the research entailed 36 walks, carried out over a territory of approximately 4 square miles, during the months of March-April 2019. Each walk covered a limited sector of 5 streets on average and lasted approximately five hours.

My walking strategy, in which perception and imagination prevailed, drew on the methodological tradition of flânerie (Benjamin, 1979) and 'rhythmanalysis' (Lefebvre, 2004) and from the practices of the psychogeographers of the city of London (Sinclair, 2002, 2006, 2009; Mieville, 2012; Wright, 1991; see also Coverley, 2010). Within the social sciences, this approach connects to a broad stream of research that highlights the significant role of embodied sensory experiences in the study of place (Back, 2007; Back and Puwar, 2012; Degen, 2008; Degen and Rose, 2012; Harris, 2007; Ingold, 2011; Ingold and Vergunst, 2008; Low, 2017; Pink, 2015; Rhys Taylor, 2013, 2017; Tilley, 1994, 2010, 2012; Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 2017).

Using the entire repertoire of senses to detect sounds, noises or smells was fundamental for a thoroughly embodied experience of the environment. Variations in tone and intensity, as well as their absence may hint at different ways of living or socialising in a neighbourhood or suggest activities concealed from view. However, a sensory experience in Kensington was challenging, as the sensory lure of a residential area is more difficult to grasp than that of a market street (Rhys-Taylor, 2013, 2017) or a high street (Hall, 2012). Residential streets lack the vibrancy of human relations that are encountered in areas where social interaction takes place more publicly. They are, to some extent, 'sanitised', and smells and tastes hide behind closed doors.

Movement plays a crucial role in the perception of the environment. Observing while walking along Kensington's streets, I could 'capture' and 'store' the environment, activating a process that Erving Goffman's study of walking (1971: 6-7) described as 'scanning'. Such a dynamic practice was complemented in my research methodology by static observation from selected standpoints, where I could grab the 'rhythms' of the place. As Henri Lefebvre explains in his phenomenological description of the rhythms of the Parisian rue de Rambuteau:

> in order […] to analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them […]. Simultaneously inside and outside. A balcony does the job admirably, in relation to the street […], one dominates the road and passers-by. In the absence you could content yourself with a window … (Lefebvre, 2004: 27-28).

Whether it took place from a window, as from my top floor flat in Cheniston Gardens, or just from the doorstep of a house, my street observation was extensive and sustained, aimed at catching repetition and difference in the rhythms of the everyday spectacle of the street. Such an engaged practice enables the observer to scrutinise the repertoire of repetitive and unconscious 'tactics' used by residents while moving around the neighbourhood and 'poaching on the territory of others', disclosing the realm of routines that are part and parcel of their 'practice of everyday life' (de Certeau, 1984; de Certeau et al., 1998; Lefebvre, 2002; Edensor, 2010; James and Hetherington, 2012).

This emphasis on perception and phenomenology was paramount in my walking experience. While strolling around Kensington, I let my body find its way along and across the network of streets, eyes and ears open and alert to any little clue, like an amateur 'detective', to quote Walter Benjamin's description of the attitude of the *flâneur* inspecting the city streets (Benjamin, 1999: 442).

Walking along the streets of Kensington, I could perceive the neighbourhood from different angles, identifying connections and fractures among places. Observing tiny and insignificant details was crucial for providing hints about the organisation and use of residential space. Doorbells and floating aerial cables gave clues about the number of household units and the state of repair of a building. Ground floor and basement interiors visible from the street, windowsills, balconies, curtains and lighted chandeliers hanging from stuccoed ceilings hinted at habits and lifestyles. However, the facades of the buildings functioned as brick curtains, hiding the backdrops concealed behind them. The more we observe, the more we realise our understanding is superficial and incomplete. No matter how detailed a walk is, an unavoidable frustration arises regarding the finiteness of the experience.

To address this frustration and expand my knowledge of the built environment, I combined street observation with 'views from above' using Google Maps' geo-referenced system. Aerial views are increasingly an everyday experience in our perception of the urban landscape. To some extent, they have lost the aura of exclusiveness and panoptical control that characterises many famous

‘views from above’ in sociology (Back and Keith, 2014: 15-21; Dorrian and Pousin, 2013; Graham, 2015: 623; Latour and Hermant, 1998; Lefebvre, 2004: 27-37). Recently, in their call for a volumetric understanding of urban change Jackson et al. (2021) proposed to frame aerial views within the context of ‘an embodied and multi-sensory approach to researching urban spaces’ which goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between street level, where the ‘localised flaneur’ can activate all the senses in a phenomenological engagement with real urban life, and the detached view from above (Jackson et al., 2021: 503). Despite the virtuality of the context, observing a built environment from above after walking through it is a sensory and phenomenological experience. Sitting in front of my laptop, I let my body float above the streets where my footprints had just disappeared. Gazing upon Kensington from above, I felt like Wendy flying hand in hand with Peter Pan upon the Victorian skyline. The environment perceived during the walk was re-activated while ‘flying’ above it.

Both experiences - walking and flying – blended together, giving rise to a phantasmagorical landscape in which the linearity of the house facades came to terms with the amplitude of flying over their surface. In such a composite view, the materiality perceived from the street reconnected with what lies behind the buildings’ prospects. The ‘views from above’ revealed a world of a hidden and often chaotic brick and greenery assemblages: rear extensions, gardens, terraces, courtyards and playgrounds. These messy backdrops are the precarious outcome of a ‘landscape on the move’ where dwellers adjust to an existing environment, challenging its ostensible stability with their unceasing activity of neighbourhood-making.

Mapping the built environment

The sensory and phenomenological component of my street explorations converged into a comprehensive map of the built environment. Mapping the built environment and exploring the link between the residents and their dwellings is crucial to the study of the residential patterns and social dynamics of a neighbourhood. Different residential choices reflect personal and social identities, life trajectories of individuals and households, and different ways of belonging to place.

At first glance, the architecture of Kensington’s residential streets has a broad Victorian imprint that conveys a homogeneous look to the whole neighbourhood, where the network of streets, squares, crescents, gardens and mews has remained substantially the same since the urbanisation of this part of London in the 19th century. However, going beyond the first impression, a closer look revealed that the structural, architectural and functional features of the buildings had already begun to be modified even in Victorian times. Demolitions and re-constructions were more substantial than what could be discerned at first sight, whether they occurred by choice or accident. The prevailing compulsion to fill any unbuilt space, in front of, behind, below and between houses, was, and still is, the leading principle of most renovation work in the area.

The outcome of this continuous process of transformation can be summarised in five dwelling

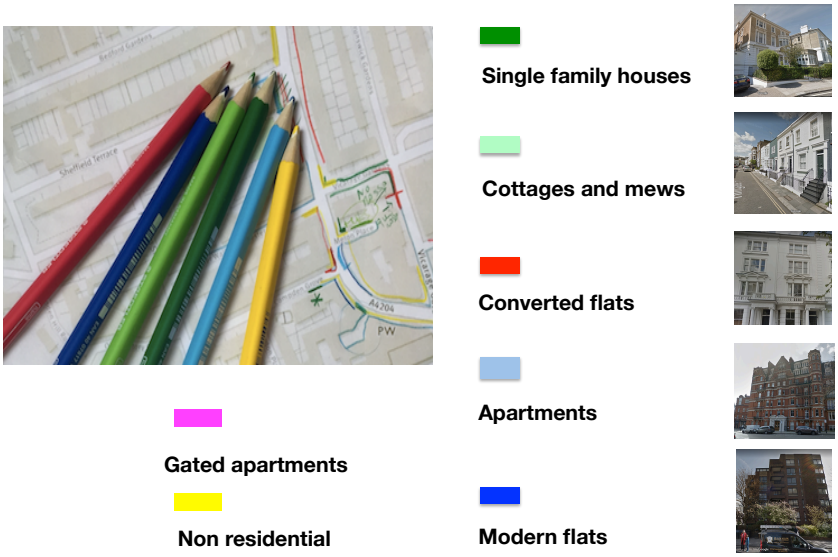
types that represent the residential configurations existing today in Kensington:
Single-family houses. These were the backbone of the Victorian expansion into the western suburbs. This type of dwelling was originally designed to accommodate a family and live-in domestic staff. Whether detached, semi-detached or terraced, and irrespective of their size, Victorian single-family houses are arranged over three to five floors and a basement. Their standardised architectural design reflects fixed hierarchies in the allocation and use of space in the Victorian home. In the basement there was the kitchen and other storage space. The ground and first floors were used as living spaces: a dining room and a parlour room on the ground floor, a drawing room on the first floor. Further up, one or two floors were occupied by the family's bedrooms and bathroom. The top floor was the sleeping area for the domestic staff. The façade reflected the hierarchies of the internal space: the first two floors, where the family socialised and received their guests, had higher ceilings, larger windows and more imposing and ornate architectural features, including bay windows, porches with stuccoed columns and balconies framed with cast iron balustrades. The size and shape of the houses varied from slender three to four storey terraces to imposing grand mansions. Variations in style were emphasised by different building materials - from the creamy London stock brick to the red terracotta - and by the character of the finishing, which originally included variegated stained glass and colourful terracotta tiles on doorsteps. In the present cityscape, the Victorian flair for colours has given way to an immaculate, white-washed style that represents a peculiar contemporary reinterpretation of period traits.
Converted flats. These are the result of the subdivision of Victorian family homes. In most cases conversion entailed an extension to the rear of the buildings to fit bathrooms and toilets on all floors and to create extra space for new bedrooms. Converted flats of large size and exceptional floor to ceiling height can be found in Cornwall Gardens and Lexham Gardens, two garden squares with imposing terraced houses on Kensington's south-eastern border. Converted flats of remarkable size also exist in the sought-after surroundings of Holland Park and Kensington Gardens, interspersed within single-family grand mansions. However, most of Kensington's converted flats are relatively small, their size constrained by the 'squeezed up' architectural form of the original Victorian home. Their conversion entailed in most cases extensions to the rear of the buildings to fit bathrooms and toilets on all floors and to create extra space.
Apartments. Apartments started appearing towards the end of the Victorian age and became iconic of a new modern lifestyle during the Edwardian era. The introduction of lifts allowed developers to build high-rise mansions of six, seven or even eight floors that would not previously have been possible even to imagine in Kensington. These high-rise constructions deeply impacted the urban skyline, conflicting with the pre-existing Victorian single-family dwellings in many areas of Kensington. From the interwar period, new smaller modernist apartments became popular. Quite a few modernist blocks of apartments are aligned along the northern side of High Street Kensington towards Holland Park and in the lower sector of Kensington Church Street.

Modern flats. More flats have been added to Kensington's residential landscape since the aftermath of World War II, including a few council estates located on the western fringes of the neighbourhood, as well as the Tor Garden Estate, which was developed on a bombed site right at the core of the neighbourhood.
Cottages and mews. Mews houses are a unique feature of Kensington's residential landscape. Originally serving as stables and carriage houses for the grand Victorian houses on the main streets, many of these buildings have been converted into charming residential dwellings. Mews houses are typically two stories high, with a ground floor that once housed the horses and carriages and upper floors that served as accommodation for the stable staff. Today, these buildings have been transformed into desirable homes. Cottages are enclaves of small size buildings used in the past for various purpose, from lodgings for lower-class people, or to cater for the middle and upper classes living in the area, or as artists' studios. Among the buildings classified as cottages I have also included small terraced single-family units that were built in the decades following World War II.

During the walks I observed and compared features of the built environment, searching for recurring patterns and discontinuities. While observing the features of a building, my eyes scrutinised a whole set of variables ranging from the location, age of the building (period or modern), and state of repair to the presence or absence of gardens. To understand whether a Victorian house is used as a single family or is divided into flats I checked doorbells, the presence of communal waste bins and type of access (in a private home the front garden is secluded and protected and the gate securely closed). These, and other small details about the overall condition of a building offer important clues to the way it is used.

To organise the findings, a combination of paper mapping and digital tools was employed. The results of street mapping were transferred to a custom map using My Maps, a platform integrated with Google Maps (Figs. 6 and 7). This digital rendering allowed for a comprehensive visualisation of the residential environment and facilitated sharing the map online.[4]

[4] The map can be accessed at https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1r9DX1KSxKW7zjn443mZOzU2Dv8k&usp=sharing



Figs. 6 and 7. Paper mapping and digital mapping.

Aerial views provided by Google Maps were utilised to gain a better understanding of what lay behind the facades of the buildings. Additionally, historical sources such as old maps, photographs, residents' censuses, electoral registers and planning applications were consulted to supplement the analysis and provide insights into changes that had occurred over time.

By integrating past and present information, the map of Kensington's built environment becomes a 'deep map' (Fisher Fishkin, 2011: 3; Least-Heat Moon,1991; Pearson and Shanks, 2001: 144; Roberts, 2016). The concept of a 'deep map', derived from cultural geography, refers to a map that encompasses multiple layers of events, texts and phenomena. It serves as a

palimpsest, where different versions and interpretations coexist, combining topographical and architectural evidence with the fragmentary and speculative aspects of local residents' lives throughout history. This deep map offers a rich and multidimensional understanding of Kensington's residential environment, intertwining facts and places in a comprehensive depiction.

The deep map generated by my research provides an overview of the distribution of the different building types across the neighbourhood. It shows areas where the same type prevails but also discontinuities and ruptures from one area to another or within the same area.

The residential patterns highlighted by the map guided the selection of areas from which to conduct more finely-grained investigation and in-depth interviews with residents (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. The seven Kensington areas where in-depth investigation was carried out.

Holland Park, Phillimore Gardens and the Victoria Road area were selected because they show two different styles of single-family houses, the first characterised by large mansions (Holland Park and Phillimore Gardens) and the second by relatively small dwellings (Victoria Road area). Cheniston Gardens is an example of Victorian terraced houses converted into flats. The slope of Campden Hill Road and its surroundings were chosen for the tight concentration of different building types, from converted flats to single-family houses, apartments, flats and ex-council houses; Gregory Place cottages behind St Mary Abbots and Lexham Gardens Mews were chosen because they provide examples of small size dwellings.

By focusing on these specific areas with varied building types, the research could delve deeper into the nuances of a neighbourhood's residential dynamics and gain valuable insights from interviews with residents living in these different types of dwellings.

Exploring the archives

Documentary sources are crucial in studying residential and social patterns from a temporal perspective. In my research I used textual and visual documents accessible in public archives and libraries or online.

Primary sources of information for the period at the turn of the 20th century were Charles Booth's maps of London (Booth, 1891, 1902). Booth's maps were conceived to investigate the distribution of poverty across London, as the title of his work declared, and to show how the lower classes spatially articulated with the middle and upper classes across the urban landscape. The notebook entries provided by Booth's inspectors, now in the archive of the London School of Economics (https://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks), include invaluable observations on the social environment, reflecting Booth's preference for ethnographic methods over statistics:

> As to the methods of enquiry I think I should say that the statistical methods was needed to give bearing to the results of personal observation and personal observation to give life to statistics. It is to me not so much verification – the figures or the facts may be correct enough in themselves but they mislead from want of due proportion or from luck of colour' (letter from C. Booth to B. Webb [27 July 1886], Booths Papers, LSE Archive).

Booth classifies inner London streets using different colours according to the social status of the residents. According to his maps, two main social classes prevailed in Kensington by the turn of the 20th century: the upper and upper-middle class (coded in yellow) and the middle class (coded in red). More finely-grained differences in affluence and social status are highlighted on the map with different shades and hues of yellow and red.

For the interwar period, I examined the survey cards of the New Survey of London Life and Labour in the archive of the London School of Economics (London School of Economics, 1930). This survey was a significant endeavour carried out across 38 London boroughs in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Llewellyn-Smith, 1929). One hundred and eighty-one interviewers carried out the survey under the supervision of the social investigator Hubert Llewellyn-Smith and the statistician Arthur Lyon Bowley. Conceived as a follow-up to Booth's work, the new survey aimed to study the working class. Given this primary focus, the investigators soon dropped the idea of including middle-class households in the survey, leaving empty the survey cards already prepared with the names of streets classified as middle-class. However, the high number of empty middle-class cards compared to the few working-class addresses provides an indirect clue to Kensington's socio-spatial composition in the late 20s.

Demographic archives were accessed through *Ancestry* and *Find my past* online platforms (http://www.ancestry.co.uk; http://www.findmypast.co.uk). These include census registers (accessible until 1911 when I was conducting my research), the 1939 England register, and electoral registers. These sources provided accurate insights into the social composition of the households. Historical and current planning applications were also referred to and were available from the digital archive of the RBKC (https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/planning/searches/).

Combining demographic data with the RBKC planning portal information was fundamental to finely-grained research in the focus areas. I first tested this methodology in my MA dissertation, where I investigated the variations in occupation density of every house in Cheniston Gardens over more than a century, combining data collected from censuses, electoral registers, building control records and direct observation (Pulini, 2015, 2019).

Finally, a substantial body of research on Kensington's architectural and urban development was provided by the *Survey of London* in two volumes dedicated to the areas to the north and south of High Street Kensington respectively (Sheppard, 1973; Hobhouse, 1986). An updated version of these publications curated by the 'British History Online Project' is available online. Although it largely ignores post-WWII architecture, the survey is exceptionally detailed in contextualising Kensington built environment. In addition to this, a vast array of topographical and visual resources on Kensington was accessible at the Kensington Central Library and the British Library (http://www.oldmapsonline.org; http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ index.html; https://rbkclocalstudies. wordpress.com). Visual documents allowed me to travel back in time, overlapping topographical maps of different periods, or comparing old pictures with current views of the urban setting.

Quantitative datasets

Quantitative sources were 'triangulated' with my fieldwork and documentary research providing a background against which to contextualise the findings about Kensington's population. In this regard, I considered two main sets of data: (i) population statistics released by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and (ii) data provided by consumer classification systems based on postcodes.

ONS data were obtained from the national censuses carried out every ten years. In my research, I used the statistics retrieved from the 2011 census, which might prove quite outdated, as they do not reflect the changes occurred to the neighbourhood after Brexit and the Covid pandemic, but in the event were adequate for the task.

To get population statistics, I used NOMIS, the official Labour Market Statistics provided by ONS (https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/ward2011/ contents.aspx). Population statistics on Kensington as a neighbourhood do not exist, but I managed to reach a close approximation by combining the statistics for four electoral wards, Holland, Campden, Abingdon and Queen's Gate,

whose areas joined together roughly correspond to the extension of Kensington (Fig. 9). Analysing data at the neighbourhood scale also made possible a comparison between Kensington and other neighbourhoods within the RBKC, identifying disparities and inequalities.

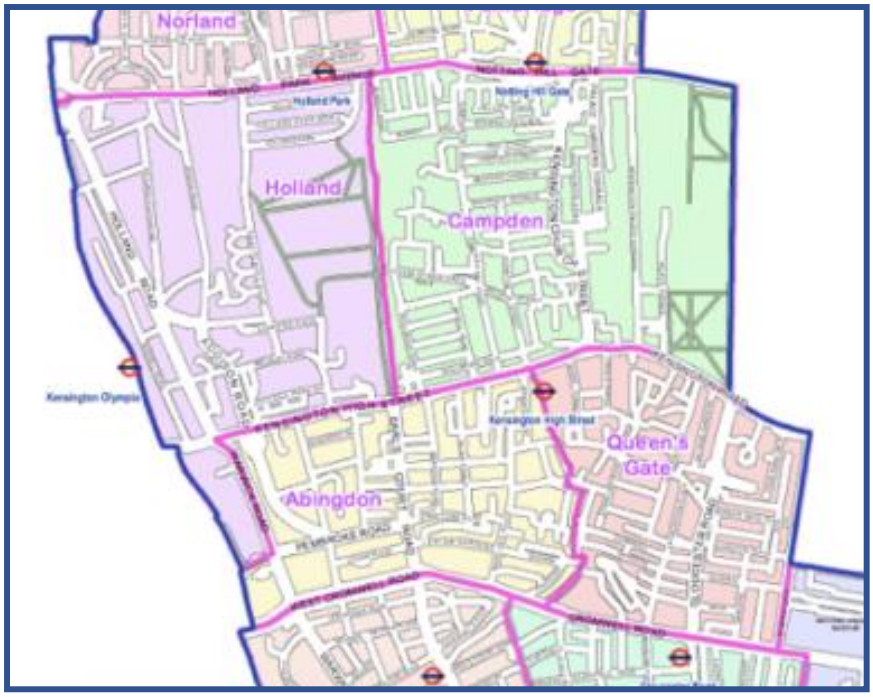


Fig. 9. The four Kensington wards: Holland, Campden, Abingdon and Queen's Gate.

Classification systems based on postcodes, like Acorn and Mosaic, were also considered. This type of dataset has proven particularly useful to the analysis of wealthy neighbourhoods (Burrows et al., 2017; Webber and Burrows, 2016: 4), but their use as a tool for studying a social environment remains controversial (Parker et al., 2007; Webber at al., 2015; Webber and Burrows, 2018). Although these systems undoubtedly contribute to the bigger picture of an elite neighbourhood, providing insight on tastes and distates of residents otherwise unreachable, they have an inherent ontological ambiguity. By implicitly denying the existence of individual identities outside a consumer logic, they lead to a conceptualisation of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood as orderly armies from which subjectivities related to individual experiences of belonging, judgment, beliefs and private affection have been erased. From this point of view, they produce stereotyped pictures of neighbourhoods, where distinctions are monitored by an algorithm rather than being observed in place.

Encounters with residents

In the second phase of my research, the focus shifted from an individual perspective to a collective one through active engagement with residents and informed observers. This phase

involved encounters, directed conversations, and tours of participants' homes. The information and knowledge gathered in the first phase of research served as a framework against which to compare people's narratives.

Interviewing residents in an élite neighbourhood is challenging, as the private spheres of wealthy sectors of the population might not be easily accessible (Nader, 1972; see also Agujiar and Schneider, 2012; Baeverstock et al., 2004: 402). Most of the recent literature on the super-rich draws on indirect sources rather than direct interviews. Indirect sources include media coverage on tycoons and celebrities and directories of the super-wealthy, like lists of Peers and landed gentry, *Who's Who*, The *Sunday Times Rich List* and the annual reports produced by Capgemini and RBC Wealth Management (Atkinson et al., 2016; Paris, 2016). Another way to approach the super-rich indirectly is through 'intermediaries' who support and are supported by their activities (Beaverstock et al., 2013; Davies, 2017; Glucksberg, 2016a; Glucksberg and Burrows, 2016) or through global real estate agents (Paris, 2016).

Whereas encounters in exclusive spaces for the VIP club scene may facilitate a qualitative approach to research based on ethnography (Glucksberg, 2016b), accessing the sphere of the home is almost impossible, unless you have direct personal connections. The reason Rachel Sherman was successful with recruiting affluent respondents for her research on consumption habits among New York elites was that she identified 43 out 50 interviewees through her personal and professional networks (Sherman, 2017, 2018: 415). Being a PhD researcher at a London University did not help. I made several attempts to reach the offices of super-wealthy residents by email or telephone. Only one of them answered my appeal: Sarah, an American multimillionaire and art collector, with whom I shared an extensive online encounter during the pandemic, followed by an exchange of emails.

Conversely, my attempts were more successful when I contacted the residents' associations using a list from RBKC's portal. While some appeared to be fairly inactive, in a few cases not only did I obtain a prompt answer but I was invited to participate in their meetings, where I could speak directly with various residents who in turn put me in contact with some of their neighbours, producing the effect of snowball sampling. As the members of these types of associations tend to be quite aged long-term residents, I also tried different types of associations, particularly those related to more mobile and international residents. Through *Internations,* an online community for expats, I met Jane, an ex-multimillionaire recently returned to London from many years as 'non-dom' abroad. Elena and Charlie were reached with the help of two Italian cultural associations. With Cheniston Gardens, the street where I live, I could rely upon an already existing network of neighbours and on new connections established during my fieldwork.

Overall, I conducted 37 in-depth conversations: fourteen carried in residents' homes, the rest in a public space (café, park) or online (one interview). They included both homeowners and tenants. During the conversations, I asked people about their perceived class position, but I did not

ask them about their income and assets. However, on the grounds of their lifestyle and personal biographies, I believe only a few of my interviewees can be ranked among the 'ultra-high net worth' (UHNW) individuals with a fortune of at least US$ 30 million (Capgemini and RBC Wealth Management, 2016), or are even among the '0.1 per cent' of the global population who possess fortunes in the order of 10 million Euros on average (Forrest et al., 2017; Hay and Beaverstock, 2016; Piketty, 2014). It is more likely, following the broader understanding of elites proposed by Mike Savage and colleagues (Savage et al., 2013, 2015), that many of my interviewees can be classified as 'ordinary wealthy' (Cunningham and Savage, 2015). They might have become multimillionaires thanks to the spiralling value of their properties, but their lifestyle has little in common with the ultra-high net worth individuals they share the neighbourhood with.

Given the difficulties in getting in touch directly with billionaire plutocrats, I then planned to rely upon secondary sources to 'access' the life of Kensington's ultra-wealthy population. Besides information available in the media, which often provides detailed descriptions of the houses and lifestyles of Kensington's magnates and celebrities, my main sources of information about the uber-wealthy were their 'ordinary' neighbours. From this point of view my ethnography shares similarities with the work carried out among Kensington's population by Roger Burrows and Caroline Knowles (2019), where they explored the impact generated by the 'über-wealthy' (the 'have yachts') on the life of the neighbourhood, through the narratives collected from their 'merely wealthy' neighbours ('the haves'). Looking at the unapproachable über-wealthy through the eyes of their 'ordinary rich' neighbours does not compensate for the lack of direct information, but it helps to highlight neighbourhood relationships and social dynamics. This approach has parallels with the few pieces of ethnography on the London elite, where the respondents are in the majority 'ordinary rich' people rather than über-wealthy (Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Knowles, 2022: 15).

Alongside the structured interviews, I had several informal encounters and interactions with other residents and people who work locally, from shop assistants and estate agents to public officials at the RBKC. All of them contributed information that in one way or another has been used to complement and enlarge my knowledge of the neighbourhood and point of view.

However, in Chapters four, five and six, the thread of the narrative is sustained through the stories and experiences of a few selected informants, whose stories have been chosen because they seemed particularly relevant to highlight the trajectories and specificities of neighbourhood belonging.

<u>In-depth conversations</u>

The setting of my encounters with the residents was rather informal. The interviews were structured as directed conversation based on a flexible list of topics (Fig. 10). The list was shared with the interviewees by email beforehand, together with a copy of the sheet for informed consent.

TOPICS DEALT WITH IN THE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE RESIDENTS

- ***PERSONAL DETAILS*** *(Age range, Profession) (asked in advance)*

- ***PROVENANCE*** *(Where born / Is Kensington the only place of residence? Is it a permanent residence?)*
- *HOUSING BIOGRAPHY (where they have lived before and plan for future)*

- ***HOUSEHOLD*** *(family members etc.) what class they think they belong to.*

- ***LIVING IN KENSINGTON***
- *since when? Why Kensington and not other areas of London (would they move somewhere else? Likes/ dislikes).*
- *if someone asks you 'Where do you live?' what is your answer?*
- *Getting around in the neighbourhoods (habits, choices, every day routine, leisure time, network of friends (where they live and where they meet up, etc…).*

- ***MOBILITY*** *(place of work, means of transport, how do they relate with other parts of London)*

- ***NETWORKS*** *(real and virtual, ethnic background, religion, where friends live and where they meet up, do they receive friends at home, parties, friends from abroad)*

- ***THE NEIGHBOURHOOD***
- *relationships/conflicts in the neighbourhood / likes and dislikes / What do they think of the Borough action to facilitate living in the area*
- *What is the relationship with other part of the RBKC, paricularly North Kensington, the Grenfell tower fire*

- ***THE HOME*** *(own property or rent / leasehold/freehold / characteristics (size, number of rooms / when last renovated, likes and dilikes)*
- *Other residents in the buildings*
- *Is your home 'your ideal home'?*
- *The living room [only in Home Tours], significant objects, biographic relationship to things*

- ***THE OTHER HOME*** *(especially EU residents) investigate the relationship with other places*

Fig. 10. List of interview topics.

During the conversations, my approach as a researcher was flexible and responsive, allowing for variations in the sequence and content of questions based on the specific characteristics and preferences of each respondent. I balanced the tension between maintaining neutrality and establishing rapport, aiming for an engaged, active and collaborative format that aligned with the purpose of the study. With the participants' consent, the conversations were tape-recorded.

The conversations primarily focused on the biographies of individuals and households in the context of their homes, the neighbourhood, the rest of the borough and the wider world. The topics explored varied from one conversation to another, depending on the residential choices of the participants. However, recurring themes included:

(a) The social composition of the household.

(b) The participants' wider social networks, including family and friends.

(c) Residential habits and routines.

(d) Consumption practices.

(e) Short and long-distance mobilities, such as commuting, traveling, destinations, and modes of transportation.

Additionally, a series of questions were centred around the residents' relationship with their place of abode, including factors like the duration of their stay and any comparisons to secondary residences elsewhere.

Regarding the residents' perceptions and experiences of the neighbourhood, the questions revolved around:

(a) Their relationships with other residents.

(b) Their interactions in the area.

(c) The utilisation of local services provided by the borough.

(d) Their perception of their own socio-economic position in relation to the rest of the neighbourhood.

(e) Their perception of diversity concerning ethnicity, gender and age within the vicinity.

A few encounters took place at interviewees' homes, providing an opportunity for a closer exploration of the individual and household order that exists behind closed doors and how it relates to the wider social world. The way domestic interiors are furbished and decorated intersects with factors such as class, gender, age and ethnicity, and is connected to the construction of ideal and actual social worlds (Miller, 2001). Aesthetic practices connected to domestic interiors may intersect with class distinctions and become a constitutive element of specific forms of habitus in response to a shared cultural and symbolic capital, as observed by Gary Bridge (2001) among Bristol's middle-class gentrifiers.The analysis of domestic interiors offered insights into the material representation of identity in relation to personal biographies of the interviewees. Examining 'home possessions' more closely revealed hierarchies, discontinuities, and discrepancies between what people express verbally and the silent material discourse conveyed through the organisation and furnishing of their homes (Hoskins, 1998; 2006; Rowlands, 1993: 144).

At the end of each interview, I transcribed the whole recorded conversation, and wrote down my impressions of the encounter. If it took place in the interviewee's home, I also wrote down notes about aspects that I deemed meaningful to an understanding of his/her lifestyle and tastes (furniture, special objects, etc.). Subsequently, I read the transcript over, highlighting what I considered relevant to my research. The analytical strategy was mainly comparative and based on a series of indicators against which residential and social patterns over time could be checked and compared. This method has been widely employed in the analysis of urban social space (Regin 1987). It entails what is described as a *holistic* approach, meaning that the unit of analysis, in this case the neighbourhood or a sector of it, is considered as a social and cultural 'whole', where individuals represent microcosms in the wider macrocosm of a residential area (Thornton 1988). However, in my analysis I also searched for a balance between a holistic approach aimed

at finding coherent, structural interconnections within place as a social whole, and the distinctiveness of single narratives which may reveal unique and contingent residential configurations at the level of individuals and of single households (Miller 2008; 2009). To this aim, in analysing the transcripts, I combined a holistic approach with the methods of 'critical discourse analysis'. This method of analysis focuses on the primacy of conversation. It entails scrutinizing the units of text in the light of the context where they were produced (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001; Wodak 2001). This approach is based on the assumption that 'words are never simply neutral reflections of reality' and language is used in a particular way which reflects choices to convey selected representations of reality (Wetherall, Stiven and Pott 1987: 60). In applying critical discourse analysis, I have focused on descriptions and observations emerging from the interviews from the perspective of the rhetoric devices that underlie the discourse, such as specification, generalization, vagueness, nominalization, use of passive voice and pronoun selection. This approach has been particularly useful to analyse the implications of positionality and reflexivity throughout the research.

Reflexive engagement

As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge that my personal experiences, assumptions and beliefs play a role in shaping the research process. I recognise the importance of 'positionality' and 'reflexivity' in understanding how my own background and perspectives may influence the narrative that emerges from the interviews (Byrne, 2003, 2004; England, 1994; Pillow, 2003; Rose, 1997; Skeggs, 2002).

I approached the research encounters with an awareness that the information gathered in the first phase of the research, through my exploration of the neighbourhood, reflected my individual sense of place. This sense of place influenced my decisions, interpretations and the selection of topics discussed during conversations with the residents. At times, my personal experiences and opinions emerged, creating a dialogue with the respondents' perspectives. The goal was to create a narrative about the neighbourhood that incorporated multiple points of view.

Throughout the investigation, I maintained a reflexive stance, critically reflecting on how my presence and chosen methods for interacting with people could shape the research outcomes. I recognised that my role as a researcher had an impact on the data collected and the resulting analysis. By acknowledging and considering my own positionality and reflexive insights, I aimed to ensure a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Kensington and its residents.

In adopting a reflexive position, I carefully considered the implications of being a Kensington resident myself, as well as an elderly Italian female expat who moved to London as a result of lifestyle-aspiration and chose this specific area as the subject of my academic research. Being a local resident at times facilitated contact and allowed me to be approached as 'one of them'.

However, there were also instances where I felt that my insider status could potentially influence the responses and interactions of other residents.

In particular, I recognise that my presence as a researcher who was also a resident of Kensington introduced complexities and nuances to the study. It was important for me to navigate these dynamics transparently and ethically, ensuring that the voices and experiences of the residents took centre stage in the research findings, rather than becoming overshadowed by my own position and background.

I was also aware of my own personal position as an 'ordinary wealthy' individual within the context of Kensington. While I may share certain socioeconomic characteristics with the residents I engaged with, I recognised that my experiences and perspectives may not fully align with those of individuals who possess higher levels of wealth and privilege. This self-awareness became a guide to approaching the research with sensitivity and an understanding of the diverse range of experiences and circumstances within the community. I strove to ensure that the narratives and viewpoints of all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status, were represented and respected throughout the study.

Furthermore, I was acutely aware of how my status as an EU expat in Kensington was significantly impacted by the Brexit vote in June 2016. Like many EU citizens residing in London, the outcome of the referendum triggered a sense of uncertainty regarding my residency status, gradually eroding the initial enthusiasm I had felt about being a part of the city. The 'Brexit anxiety' that ensued affected various aspects of my life in the neighbourhood. It undermined my sense of safety, trust and belonging, as well as the personal connections and social relationships I had fostered. Throughout my research, I approached interactions with other Kensington residents, both British and EU citizens, with an understanding of the emotions evoked by Brexit and how it shaped our experiences within the community. This awareness allowed for a deeper exploration of the impact of political events on individual and collective senses of identity and belonging.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process, great care was taken to address the potential intrusion involved in contacting individuals and delving into their personal lives, networks and relationships. This was achieved by prioritising privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as by maintaining transparency regarding the purpose and objectives of the research (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012).

Respecting privacy was integral to the entire research endeavour, including the mapping stage, as participant observation required a delicate balance between empathy and intrusion, particularly during interviews. Unlike data derived from population statistics, where anonymity is preserved, any information obtained through conversations establishes a direct connection between the participant and the research outcomes. Consequently, special caution was exercised

when conducting finely-grained research within small sectors of the neighbourhood, such as the focus areas. To protect individual identities, names of residents were changed, and the location of their homes was adjusted when necessary. Alternatively, when identification of people or places was crucial to the research, explicit permission was sought. In both cases, the use of data collected, whether in written or recorded form, was in line with the participant's consent.

Transparency regarding the purpose of the research played a pivotal role in establishing trust and confidence among participants. As the research involved contacting individuals residing in one of London's most affluent neighbourhoods, it was vital to clarify that the aim was not to rank individuals based on their wealth and that the focus was rather on exploring differences and similarities in their lifestyles and their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Participants were assured that discussions would not involve income or assets but rather centre around narratives of their life experiences. It was emphasised that I needed their involvement because I aimed to paint a nuanced picture of Kensington beyond stereotypes, superficial generalisations and common assumptions. Similarly, when engaging with residents in social housing schemes, full awareness of the potential implications in terms of stigmatisation and vulnerability was maintained.

Conclusions

The qualitative approach that underpins my research on Kensington combines a variety of methods aimed at exploring a residential neighbourhood over the longue durée, tracking patterns of change and continuity in the trajectory of this urban area over time. The methodology applied to the study combines documentary research, empirical observation of street life and the built environment, and interviews with residents.

Analysing the built environment was pivotal for examining residential trends and social dynamics. Housing choices, in fact, reflect personal and social identities, the life paths of individuals and households, and diverse ways of engaging with the locale. Observing the built environment entailed paying attention to the smallest detail that might prove crucial for a thorough understanding of the dwellings. To some extent, my attitude replicated the approach of Charles Booth's surveyors, who observed and painstakingly reported their impressions of their street inspections in their notebooks.

Aerial views contributed to 'an embodied and multi-sensory approach to researching urban spaces', which goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between the street level and the detached view from above (Jackson et al., 2021: 503). Both experiences - walking and observing from above– blend in my ethnography, eventually merging into a digital 'deep map' with five categories of dwellings that encapsulate the ongoing process of transformation of the built environment.

The classification of dwellings produced through my ethnography radically differs from the association between the type of building and consumption habits produced by the algorithm that stands behind the logic of the alpha territory (Burrows et al., 2017; Webber and Burrows, 2016;

2018). While with the alpha territory the classification is grounded on the algorithm's logic and applied to the study of place a priori, my classification is the outcome of the observational evidence gathered during the research process.

It was against this backdrop of neighbourhood observation and mapping that I proceeded with the second phase of the research, where I collected biographies of individuals and households in the context of their homes, the neighbourhood, the rest of the borough and the wider world. Collecting people's stories and points of view allowed for an understanding of how individuals negotiate their class identities in neighbourhood-making. Accessing some of the homes provided the opportunity to observe domestic interiors, getting insights into the material representation of identity, and the connection between symbolic and ritualised objects and people's lifestyle and trajectories (Appadurai,1986; Miller, 2001; 2008a; Tilley, 1999).

This multifaceted qualitative approach to the study of Kensington, where the materiality of the dwellings intertwines with people's narratives, provided the tools to analyse past and present social configurations in the neighbourhood. Behind this methodology is a conceptualisation of the built environment as a process of continuous transformation that changes and evolves through a dialectic relationship with the residents (Degen, 2018; Pulini, 2015, 2019, 2022). This type of ethnography over the longue durée represents a new approach to the study of an elite residential context and in many respects could open a path for further developments in neighbourhood studies, fostering a method where researching aspects of change and continuity inscribed in the built environment and people's life trajectories allows a return to a social narrative where place and time intertwine.

PART TWO
DWELLING IN KENSINGTON

CHAPTER THREE – RESIDENTIAL PATTERNS AND SOCIAL CHANGE OVER TIME

The academic literature on elite neighbourhoods has yet to explore the dynamics of social change in depth. When social change is mentioned, it is just in connection with the socio-spatial struggle between the 'merely wealthy' and the super-rich, which gained prominence with the financialisaton of housing following the 2008 financial crisis (Atkinson et al., 2017b: 264-265; Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Glucksberg, 2016c; Webber and Burrows, 2016).

The objective of this chapter is to explore Kensington's pre-2008 social transformation, providing insights into its distinctive trajectory of change, which deviates from the broader social narratives observed in the borough. By embracing an approach over the longue durée (Tilley, 2017; Pulini, 2016, 2019, 2022), my intention was to critique the lack of deep insight into the dynamics of change in most of the sociological research on elite neighbourhoods. I wish to argue in favour of a different approach, in which analysis of how the dynamics of change and continuity unfold over time is crucial for a better understanding of the contemporary social make-up of these areas. The different types of dwellings and their historical uses provided a lens for my analysis of Kensington. Drawing on archival sources, street observation, mapping and first-hand narratives from elderly residents who had witnessed the neighbourhood's social transformations, I explored the dynamics of change and continuity over the years. Such an approach not only allowed for an understanding of the social dynamics involved in urban change but also disclosed the rhythms of change, social reproduction and replacement within different sectors of the neighbourhood, emphasising the specificities that make Kensington unique and different from the other neighbourhoods in the RBKC.

On the basis of the evidence presented in this chapter, I argue that Kensington's elite status is rooted in a long-standing British aristocratic tradition grounded on the existence of the royal residence, which predates the Victorian urbanisation of the city's western suburbs. This tradition has been embodied and passed down through generations by a white British upper-middle class that I refer to as 'Kensingtonians' (Brophy, 1948).

From a Bourdieusian perspective (Bourdieu, 1984), I describe Kensingtonian belonging as a type of 'habitus' in which individuals identify themselves and develop their sense of the world, agency and subjectivity. Each generation of Kensingtonians is born and bred according to rules, moral values and privileges that they receive from the previous generation and rework and pass on to the next, as with a Maussian gift (Mauss, 1954). Through this process, they create a tangible

relationship between generations over time (Bennett, 2014) and contribute to the process of class reproduction based on the privilege and right to reside in Kensington.

Drawing on the works of Skeggs (1997) and Strathern (1992), I also discuss the meaning of 'respectability' in classed identities, arguing that it represents a form of shared social capital (Bourdieu, 1984) among Kensington's middle and upper-middle class. Respectability was an essential attribute for an individual endowed with moral authority in Victorian society, particularly for women (Wilson, 1991).

By examining the transition from Victorian single-family homes to bedsits (Briganti and Mezei, 2018; Cartwright, 2020; Delany, 2018), I argue that Kensington's bedsitters attracted predominantly middle-class tenants, primarily women (Braybon, 1981; Mulholland, 2017), instead of becoming populated with people from disadvantaged backgrounds as in Notting Hill and North Kensington (Glass, 1960, 1964; Martin, 2005; O'Malley, 1970). From the beginning, bedsitters represented a rupture in the process of social reproduction of British upper-middle-class families which had been the largest social group in the neighbourhood during the Victorian era.

New social configurations had emerged by the early 1970s with the arrival of young middle-class gentrifiers, who had been raised in the new suburbs of outer London or other parts of the UK and wanted to live in inner London as a lifestyle aspiration. I argue that in this respect, gentrification in Kensington differs from that which occurred over the same period in other areas of inner London (Atkinson, 2000; Bridge et al., 2012; Butler and Hamnett, 2011; Butler and Robson, 2003; Glass, 1964, 1973; Hamnett, 2003; Hamnett and Williams, 1979). Gentrification in Kensington not only mostly involved flat conversions rather than single-family houses (Hamnett, 2001, 2003) but more importantly, it did not involve upgrading the area to middle-class status, since Kensington had always been – and remained – a middle- and upper-middle-class neighbourhood. Instead, social change in Kensington can be described as a form of gentrification that generated micro-class distinctions within the area (Butler and Lees, 2006). In this case, the distinction was between a new generation of middle-class flat owner-occupiers and the existing population of middle and upper-middle-class Kensingtonians and bedsitters. These social groups were differentiated by various forms of capital, not just economic but also cultural and social (Bourdieu, 1984). While the Kensingtonians were preserving the legacy of a tradition, the newcomers shared a rhetoric of residential choice based on the rejection of suburbia as a lifestyle and the affirmation of the inner city as a place to belong (Benson and Jackson, 2013).

In the final section of the chapter, I argue that a spiralling process of 'luxification' of the built environment had already begun in the 1970s when a wealthy British and International elite started purchasing and upgrading grand Victorian mansions in prestigious locations.

By highlighting the early beginning of the luxification process in Kensington's built environment, I reconnect to the core question that underpins my research (see Chapter two) about

whether Kensington's current identity as an elite neighbourhood is a recent phenomenon, or whether it is the outcome of a long-term process of social change that began earlier.

Overall, through this analysis of Kensington's social make-up in the longue durée, I argue that Kensington's elite status is rooted in a long-standing British aristocratic tradition predating the Victorian urbanisation. This tradition has been embodied and passed down through generations by a white British upper-middle class of Kensingtonians. Despite the social changes in the residential and social milieu at the end of the Victorian era and in the aftermath of World War II, Kensington has maintained its status as a middle- and upper-middle-class neighbourhood with a remarkable continuity over the years without experiencing the forms of class displacement that have occurred in Notting Hill and other areas of inner London in connection with gentrification. Furthermore, by highlighting the very beginnings of the process of luxification of the built environment, I contend that the financialisaton of the housing market that followed the 2008 financial crisis did not trigger a new phenomenon, but simply accelerated and intensified a process that had started many years earlier.

How it all began

Kensington had existed as a country settlement to the west of London since the Middle Ages. It was part of the parish of St Mary Abbots, whose jurisdiction covered a territory that corresponds to the area of RBKC without the southern addition of Chelsea (Fig. 11). Originally a quiet hamlet of just a few houses, the village of Kensington was nestled around St Mary Abbots' church and extended along the suburban road to West England (now High Street Kensington).

By the early 1600s the airy slopes of Campden Hill just to the north of St Mary Abbots became attractive for members of the aristocracy who wanted to escape the insalubrious city surroundings. A few country mansions surrounded by extensive parks were built along the slope of the hill. One of them, later known as Holland House, occupied a large proportion of the upper left quadrant of the current neighbourhood. A few decades later, a Jacobean mansion already existing to the east of Holland House was converted by Christopher Wren into Kensington Palace, a suburban residence for King William and Queen Mary to use in winter in preference to Whitehall (Hobhouse, 1986: 1- 4). The establishment of the royal palace attracted to the Kensington area a residential population engaged in activities connected with the court in various capacities. Kensington Square with its sober Regency terraces is the oldest square in Kensington (1685) and bears witness of that aristocratic milieu (Hobhouse, 1986: 5-46). For the seventy years during which Kensington Palace was an important royal residence, the area provided housing for courtiers, aristocrats and the staff required for the palace. The first occupant at no.19 was the apothecary of King William, while nos.11 and 12 were reserved for maids of honour. After the court withdrew from Kensington Palace, some houses in the square were used as schools and academies, but many continued to be private residences. By observing the several blue plaques

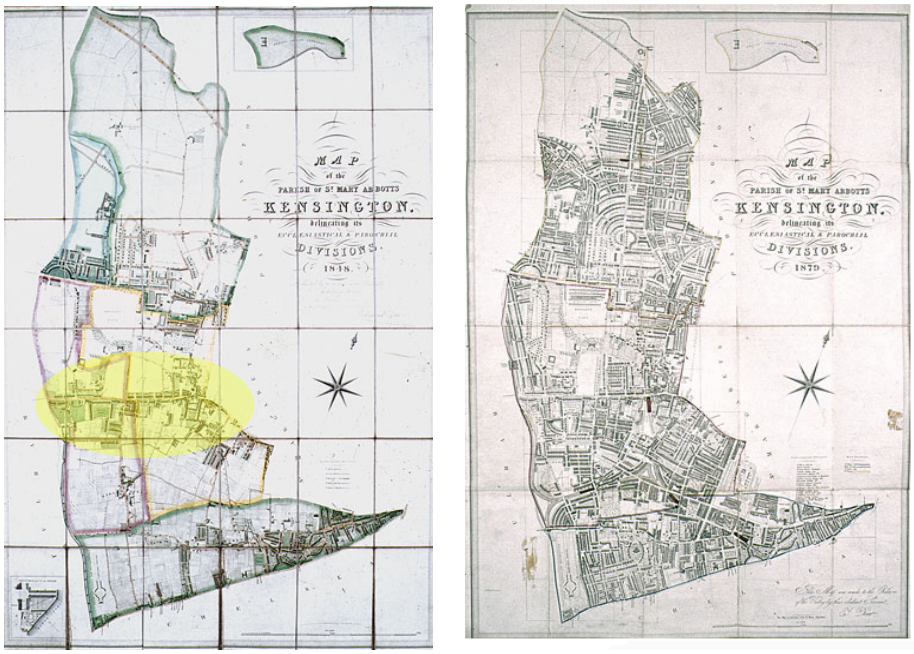


Fig. 11 (left). The village of Kensington at the core of the St Mary Abbots' parish,1848.
Fig. 12 (right). The parish of St Mary Abbots after Victorian urbanisation, 1879.

on the Regency facades while strolling around the opulent central garden, one can get a glimpse of the social milieu in the 'Old Court Suburb' (Hunt, 1855) on the eve of Victorian urbanisation. The French diplomat Talleyrand lived on the square after fleeing from the French revolution in 1792; no.18 was the residence of the philosopher Stuart Mill from 1837 to 1851. In the same years, the novelist William Thackeray lived just around the corner at no. 16 Young Street. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Holland House – which was refurbished as a glittering social, literary and political centre and as the social centre of the Whig party – performed the important function of attracting aristocrats and intellectuals.

In the second half of the 19th century, when the Victorian expansion of the city had transformed the whole of Kensington parish into a residential suburb (Fig. 12), the neighbourhood of Kensington had for a long time had a sound reputation as a place with aristocratic roots, unique and different from the rest of the parish. Following an established elite tradition, Kensington's development was targeted at well off respectable sectors of the upper-middle class and filled in pretty fast. From this point of view its pattern of urbanisation differed greatly from that of Notting Hill and North Kensington where the Victorian urbanisation consisted of the replacement of existing slums with speculative 'overbuilding' of cheap terraces soon turned into houses of multiple occupation (White, 2007: 86).

The 'old court suburb' and the rest of the parish were rapidly absorbed into the city by the Victorian urban expansion, which reached its peak after the construction of the railways and the Great Exhibition of 1851, particularly between 1860 and 1870. In just a few decades, one after the other, Kensington's landowners, in partnership with developers, builders and solicitors, parcelled up

their large estates into residential areas, both responding to and further encouraging a rapid rise in the resident population of this part of London. In a hundred years, the total population of the Kensington parish increased from 9,000 people in 1801 to over 190,000 in 1901. By this time, the suburban parish had long been turned into a residential sector of the modern city. However, despite its amalgamation with surrounding areas, Kensington's identity as a neighbourhood of distinction increased further during the Victorian era, in connection with Queen Victoria's personal attachment to this area of London. In fact, not only was she born in Kensington Palace and lived there during her youth, but it was there that she held her first council as Queen. Kensington was also the place where Prince Albert established the grand cultural project which led to the foundation of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum and many important educational and cultural institutions. The soaring glittering architecture of the Albert Memorial, towering in Kensington Garden opposite the Royal Albert Hall, epitomises the special link between this area of London and the royal family. In 1964, in recognition of these historic royal connections, Queen Elizabeth conferred the Royal title on the new borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Class distinctions in Victorian Kensington

When Kensington's country estates started being parcelled up and transformed into a suburban residential district, the green surroundings of Kensington Gardens and Holland House proved to be excellent locations for exclusive developments. Already in the 1840s, the Crown Estate had transformed the kitchen gardens of Kensington Palace into Kensington Palace Gardens, a spacious private avenue over a half a mile in length, along which grand mansions subsequently lined up, each with a breath-taking view of the Palace and Gardens (Sheppard, 1973: 151-162). Shortly after, luxury developments also started around the vast grounds of Holland House (Sheppard, 1973: 58-76, 101-126).

In these prime surroundings, the houses were built with an abundance of indoor and outdoor space with large gardens. The rooms were arranged over three to five floors connected by a central staircase, and with a basement. The distribution of the space over the floors reflected fixed hierarchies in the allocation and use of space in the Victorian home. In the basement there were kitchen, pantry, scullery, cellars and storage space. The ground and first floors were used as living spaces with the dining room and the parlour on the ground floor and the drawing room on the first floor. The upper floors were occupied by the family's bedrooms and bathroom. In the top floor there were the servants' bedrooms.

Prime developments of this type were largely connected to private mews, cobblestone alleys with two-storeyed terraced cottages used as stables and coach houses. Some mews had quite sophisticated features, as in Holland Park where the cottages were decorated with stucco details and the access to the alley was through imposing gates on both sides (Sheppard, 1973: 101-126). Other mews, such as Lexham Gardens Mews, had more modest aesthetics. Lexham Gardens

Mews was originally intended for stables associated with the family houses in Lexham Gardens, which itself is one of the largest Victorian garden squares in Kensington (Hobhouse, 1986: 289-299).

In Charles Booth's maps the luxury developments built next to Kensington Palace and Holland House are coded in yellow, the colour used for the highest class, described by the social researcher as 'Upper-middle and upper classes, wealthy' (Booth, 1902; Fig. 13). However, yellow streets were not a common feature in Kensington, as they were in other residential sectors of Central London like Mayfair, Marylebone and Belgravia. In fact, apart from a few yellow developments in the southern sector of the neighbourhood, most of Kensington's streets were coded by Booth in red, the colour of the middle class.

Fig 13. Detail of Kensington from Charles Booth's map. In yellow the luxury developments built near Kensington Palace and Holland House (Booth, 1902).

Booth chose three different shades of red according to a household's presumed level of prosperity: red for the 'middle class, well-to-do', pink for 'fairly comfortable, good ordinary earnings', purple for 'mixed, some comfortable, other poor'. In 'red streets', the houses were usually lined up in terraces; they were smaller, slimmer and built on smaller plots compared to the houses in the 'yellow streets'. Their rear gardens were small to non-existent, often replaced by poky courtyards. They were generally without mews. Red buildings were absent from yellow streets. Additionally, dwellings of different shades of red seldom coexisted within the same street and appeared to be distributed across separate areas.

All this raises the question of how Booth drew the boundary between yellow and red streets. According to his classification of social classes, the distinction was based on wealth, which could be inferred by examining the style and size of the house, the size of the plot and the overall maintenance of the property. The inspectors responsible for conducting the surveys were

meticulous about noting any signs of decline and dilapidation during their observations of the houses. They sought out clues that could indicate the wealth of the occupants and consequently the social class to which they belonged. However, although it had a high visual impact as a comprehensive map, Booth's system of classification failed to capture the complexity of class distinctions in Victorian Kensington. A more nuanced understanding of class distinctions emerges from an examination of the census records.

Based on the information obtained from the 1891 and 1901 censuses, it appears that the upper-middle- and upper-class families residing in the 'yellow streets' can be categorised into distinct social groups based on the type, rather than the amount, of their economic capital. On the one hand, there were individuals with 'new money' who were represented by bankers, wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs. Their fortunes were accumulated through recent business ventures. On the other hand, there were members of the landed gentry and the aristocracy who derived their income from country estates and inherited assets. In the census records, the presence of the landed gentry and aristocrats is indicated by the description, under occupation, of the head of the family as 'living on his/her own means'. Additionally, the absence of the family from the house during the census, except for a few live-in servants, suggests that they were aristocrats or members of the landed gentry. These individuals often resided extensively in their country estates and only spent limited periods of time in London during the social season (Pulini, 2015, 2019, 2022).

However, while the landed gentry and the aristocracy may share similarities in terms of their sources of revenue, the aristocracy belonged to a distinct social class characterised by their social capital, which was derived from peerages and nobility. The aristocracy typically disregarded the western suburbs that catered for the upper and middle classes, instead preferring more central locations like Mayfair, Marylebone and Belgravia. However, as censuses reveal, in the case of developments near Kensington Palace and Holland House, the exclusivity of the area and the grandeur of the mansions seem to have enticed some aristocratic families to overcome their reservations and interact with an upper-middle- class composed primarily of landed gentry, bankers, wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs

Aristocratic families were absent from the red streets, and even the presence of the landed gentry was scarce compared to the presence of a professional middle class consisting of solicitors, barristers, civil servants, army officers and small entrepreneurs. The lower economic status of residents in the red streets is reflected in the smaller number of live-in servants. While according to census records the grand mansions around Holland House and Kensington Palace would typically have between four and eight servants, the average number of servants in the red streets was around three per household. Census records also indicate the existence of several widows or spinsters 'living on their own means' in the red streets, often accompanied by live-in lodgers. This suggests the presence of a prosperous albeit unofficial rental business in the red streets. The

lodgers encompassed a diverse mix of individuals aspiring to achieve, maintain or reinforce middle-class respectability within Victorian Kensington.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, respectability can be seen as a form of social capital that was shared by all residents of Kensington, regardless of differences in wealth, possessions or peerages. Drawing on the work of Skeggs (1997) and Strathern (1992), we know that respectability played a crucial role in the emergence of the middle class in Victorian England, closely intertwined with the notion of Englishness. It represented an essential aspect of an individual endowed with moral authority (Strathern, 1992; Skeggs, 1997).

As Wilson (1991) notes in her study of the female condition in Victorian London, it was often women's behaviour that was scrutinised in terms of its respectability and morality. An illustrative example of this middle-class preoccupation with respectability is the case of Alice Kearney, a resident of 9, Cheniston Gardens. In 1894, Miss Kearney faced criticism in the press due to her involvement with the Women's Liberal Federation. She was falsely accused of spreading misinformation about her family's noble title and engaging in immoral behaviour during a trip to Lincolnshire. Interestingly, while Miss Kearney was unperturbed by the comments regarding her family's nobility, she felt compelled to refute the accusations of misconduct that cast doubt on her respectability.

> There are several inaccuracies in the little paragraph concerning me […], for instance with regard to my title, […] but the only which I feel bound to correct is that concerning my entertainment in the Horncastle division. I neither stayed with a carpenter nor in a cottage (*The Lincolnshire Echo*, Monday 22 January 1894).

The concept of respectability in Victorian society entailed the strict avoidance or control of contact with the lower class, often enforced through power dynamics marked by patronising superiority or by rendering such interactions invisible. This can be observed in the relationships between middle-class families and their live-in servants, predominantly women, who were assigned separate areas of the house such as the basement or the attic, separate from the family's space.

Respectability also dictated that middle-class Victorian women should avoid mingling with the lower classes in close proximity on the streets (Wilson, 1991). Popular literature of the time was replete with tales of encounters between the respectable and the rough, and there was a fear of respectable women being mistaken for prostitutes. The mere possibility of such mistakes exposed the fragility of the barriers of convention and respectability, thereby justifying the retreat of middle-class women from public spaces. Middle-class womanhood became confined within a private enclave, shielded by the cult of domesticity (Wilson, 1991).

This fear of mingling with the non-respectable is also reflected in Booth's maps, which include segregated purple areas for the lower-middle class. Some of these purple areas coincide with the residual architecture of the pre-existing rural hamlet of Kensington, as seen in the case of the

cottages around St. Mary Abbots. The census records indicate that these cottages were occupied by households whose members worked in the area in various capacities. Other purple areas were purpose-built with the intention of creating separate sectors for the lower class. One example is the Hillgate Village, located at the top of Campden Hill in the northeast quadrant of the neighbourhood. It was established as a cheap lodging settlement during Victorian urbanisation. The 1861 census data suggests that most of the houses were occupied by multiple residents as soon as they were completed, with some dwellings housing more than twenty people. The occupants were predominantly labourers and artisans. The Hillgate Village had a poor reputation, and the living conditions of its inhabitants were often compared to those found in the East End of London (Sheppard, 1973: ft. 85).

Artists were not exempt from social and spatial divisions. Kensington was a favoured spot for many artists, who either lived or established their studios in the neighbourhood. Artists' studios were characterised by unique architectural features, such as large north-facing windows that provided ample, consistent natural light – an essential requirement for artists working in a naturalistic style (Hobhouse, 1986; Walkley, 1994). The exclusive area of Holland Park was particularly renowned for its luxurious and spacious studios. Lord Leighton, a prominent painter and sculptor, president of the Royal Academy for nearly two decades, constructed an opulent studio-home there in the late 1860s, attracting other leading artists to follow suit. In addition to these grand studios, there were also more modest artists' studios tucked away in small clusters of cottages hidden behind communal gates and interspersed with taller buildings in the southern part of Kensington. These enclaves created a unique atmosphere where artists of high standing lived alongside middle-class households, often with just one or two servants, adding a bohemian character to the surroundings (Clarke, 1881: 286).

The atomisation of the Victorian family home

In the commentary accompanying his second map, Booth cautions against interpreting his colour scheme too literally, particularly regarding the transition of 'yellow' streets to 'red' (Booth, 1902). In this regard he clarifies that:

> These houses are now occupied, now empty; tenants come and go. The house, a home no longer, is made a source of income. There are guests who pay, or the drawing-room floor is let, or boarders are taken, or at length the fatal word 'Apartments' appears in the fanlight over the door … Those who can afford to do so leave …, and those who come or those who do not go are alike in seeking to grasp an elusive advantage, desiring to trade on that vanishing quantity—the fashionable character of the neighbourhood (Booth, 1902a: 107-109).

Through his insightful analysis, Booth anticipated the forthcoming social changes that would disrupt the established residential pattern centred around the Victorian family home as the new century approached. Several factors contributed to this transformation.

Firstly, the labour market was evolving, offering women employment opportunities beyond domestic service. Young girls were increasingly drawn to jobs in factories, shops and offices, which they considered superior to domestic work, which offered limited leisure time and lower salaries (Braybon, 1981). The outbreak of World War I marked a significant turning point, as women replaced men in various industries. Even after the war, many women continued to pursue work outside the home, viewing domestic service as a less respected occupation (Braybon, 1981).

Secondly, although Victorian houses were relatively recent constructions, they were becoming outdated and in need of modernisation, especially in terms of technological advancement and fittings. The rapid progress of technology rendered many aspects of these homes impractical for contemporary living standards. Lastly, the expansion of the railway provided an incentive for investment in new suburban areas situated further out in the countryside. These developments offered residential opportunities in serene, green environments, which appealed to individuals seeking a departure from the urban setting.

Consequently, the traditional family home ceased to align with the requirements of a modern lifestyle. Many large properties underwent conversions into boarding houses and bedsits, prioritising the maximisation of profit over improving their physical conditions. However, careful examination of census records, electoral registers and historical archives in the RBKC reveals that while the social changes resulting from the transformation of family homes into bedsits were widespread, they were not uniform across the entire neighbourhood. Instead, the process primarily affected grand terraced houses, particularly those situated in bustling thoroughfares or noisy areas near underground stations, where the residential appeal was diminished.

A noteworthy case that illustrates these residential dynamics can be observed in Cheniston Gardens, a Victorian terraced development constructed between 1882 and 1885, located just behind the High Street and in proximity to the underground station. This specific enclave demonstrates the impact of location and housing characteristics on the changing nature of residences in the area.

Recorded as a yellow street in Booth's first map (Booth, 1891) and downgraded to red in 1901 (Booth, 1902), Cheniston Gardens comprises 39 high-rise terraced houses. The transition from family residences to boarding houses and bedsits was likely to have been influenced by various factors. Not only was its proximity to the bustling High Street a contributing factor, but also differences in tenure and the substantial size of the houses. While most of the houses were occupied by owners on relatively long leases, some properties were retained by developers with the aim of maximising profits. It is plausible that these properties were the first to be converted into

boarding houses, leading to the overall decline of the street due to its mixed residential usage (Hobhouse, 1986, fn. 27).

Census records for Cheniston Gardens from as early as 1911 indicate a shift away from the typical Victorian family households with live-in servants towards a different household structure centred around a housekeeper, often a woman. These households typically occupied a smaller portion of the house, such as the basement or ground floor. In-house servants were no longer necessary as the housekeeper often took charge of domestic tasks or hired external cleaners.

During the inter-war period, the conversion of larger properties into smaller units became increasingly common in Kensington, driven by the rising demands of a new type of resident: the modern woman. Census and electoral registers provide evidence of houses exclusively occupied by young women from various parts of the country who came to London to work as typists, receptionists, shop assistants or civil service employees. As Mulholland's research reveals, boarding houses offered a sense of freedom for women seeking to escape traditional domestic norms, although at times they also reinforced gender segregation and inequality (Mulholland, 2017: 23-25).

At 30 Cheniston Gardens, a boarding house for women was managed by the Perks family for six decades until the early 1980s. In 1911, when John Perks, a clerk at the stock exchange, and his wife Elsie, a dressmaker and employer, moved to Cheniston Gardens, their residence served as both a home and a workplace. The records from censuses and electoral registers attest to a constant flow of young girls employed as live-in dressmakers in the household. Towards the end of the 1920s, Madame Elsie made the decision to close her business and transform her workshop into a boarding house.

In 2014, when I embarked on my search for individuals who could transport me back in time through their memories of Cheniston Gardens, I was fortunate to stumble upon the captivating blog of Anne P., then a remarkable 94 years old. In her blog, she mentioned her time as a lodger at 30 Cheniston Gardens in 1943. Anne agreed to meet with me and I had the privilege of being invited to her home in the Oxford countryside for lunch, where she graciously shared more details of her personal story. At the age of 22, she had ventured to London to work as a civil servant at the Ministry of Information in the Senate House. Despite the challenges of air raids, Anne maintained a steadfast routine, working until 6:00 p.m., attending typing lessons at Pitman's, and indulging in evenings with friends in the West End (Pulini, 2019: 90):

> My room was on the first floor, not far from the bathroom. There was a *partition* [my emphasis] dividing the bed from the stove and the sink. Apart from the bed, there was no other furniture in the room, and when I had friends visiting me, we used to sit on the floor.

As Ann's recollection highlights, partitions were flexible. They could be easily fitted, moved or removed, without the need for any planning applications. Cartwright observes (Cartwright, 2020:

11) that they ‘existed in a state of flux’ and could generate different types of configurations, going through a series of conversions often within the space of a decade. Partitions brought about an increased awareness of difference among individuals, while simultaneously creating uncomfortable proximity, as described below by Raban in his *Soft City* (1974: 14):

> The house has been sliced horizontally and vertically into a higgledy-piggledy pile of chunks of living space, some of many rooms, some of only a bit of floor big enough to make a bed. The house is constructed around a well – a deep rectangular column of light and air, which was supposed to work like a lung through which the building breathed its own enclosed atmosphere. Now all it does it to bring strangers into eerie juxtaposition with each other. It transmits unasked-for intimacies, private sights, private sounds, which fuel suspicion and embarrassment and resentment.

However, these subdivisions also provided space for unexpected alliances that cut across class and gender boundaries, giving rise to alternative ways of ‘making home’ that deviated from the conventional model of the middle-class nuclear family. Muriel Spark effectively captures the world of bedsitters and how these spaces served as catalysts for progressive change, breaking down barriers of race, sexuality and class in her novels, *The Girls of Slender Means* and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (Spark, 1963; 1988). This theme is also explored in a substantial body of literature and films (Briganti and Mezei, 2018; Cartwright, 2020).

The atomisation of space through the subdivision of Victorian homes was driven by profit and encompassed the entirety of inner London, leading to an expansion of the private rental sector, contrary to the long-term decline of private renting nationwide (Hamnett and Randolph, 1988). Analysis of Kensington’s value lists reveals the substantial gains that could be achieved through subdivision or re-letting. Even before rent controls were lifted by the Conservative government in 1957, subdividing a house or renting out each room individually to separate tenants or groups of tenants could result in a 75% increase in annual rental income (Cartwright, 2020: 9).

In his examination of bedsitters in fiction novels, Paul Delany argues that bedsitter life lacked the fixed markers of class associated with other types of residence (Delany, 2018: 63). While I agree with Delany’s conceptualisation of bedsitting as involving novel social configurations where class intersects with gender, age, and ethnic background, I propose that the phenomenon of bedsitting needs to be contextualised within specific locations, rather than treated as a housing category universally applicable right across London.

In Kensington, bedsitting was primarily a middle-class phenomenon, at least until the early 1960s. It represented a significant discrepancy in household types, juxtaposing a middle or upper-middle-class bedsitter population (including singles and couples) against the traditional middle or upper-middle-class family. Although the Kensington bedsits were modestly furnished and sometimes slightly run-down, they cannot be compared to the conditions found in Notting Hill or

North Kensington, where unscrupulous landlords exploited disadvantaged individuals (Glass, 1960; 1964; Martin, 2005; O'Malley, 1970).

Ann's story provides insight into the special nature of becoming a lodger in Kensington. In order to secure a room at the Perks' boarding house in Cheniston Gardens, she needed to be introduced by a family acquaintance who resided in the vicinity. Ann, a 22-year-old woman with an academic background (her father being a professor of classics at Edinburgh University) and an English degree from Newnham College, Cambridge, possessed the necessary credentials to be accepted as a lodger in Kensington. However, despite her alignment with Kensington's expectations of class and respectability, Ann represented the archetype of the 'new woman':

> As a single person I used to eat my main meal daily in a canteen or restaurant near Senate House. In the evening it could be a play or a film at Marble Arch, then Pimms at Coach and Horses or we ended up at the Dog and Duck or in a Leicester Square pub. It seems odd now that I should have felt fine walking back alone through totally blacked out streets as long as there was no air raid on.

Unlike the Victorian women who lived in Cheniston gardens family homes, Ann did not need to hide from the street to protect her respectability. She felt free walking home alone at night in Kensington's deserted streets!

Although bedsits were primarily aimed at young transient female tenants, archival evidence also reveals the existence of small independent units for elderly female residents. For instance, Kate P., the owner of an extensive farm estate in the Rift Valley (Kenya), returned to London in her later years and spent the last years of her life at 8, Phillimore Gardens, a residence that catered for affluent elderly 'independent residents' and nurses. She died there in 1941, at the age of 89.

Unlike Notting Hill, where the conversion of family houses was widespread throughout the neighbourhood, bedsits and shared accommodation in Kensington were more scattered, coexisting with larger dwellings on the same street and sometimes even within the same buildings. An analysis of the occupancy density in the terraced houses of Cheniston Gardens demonstrates that, even at peak density between 1939 and 1970, houses with more than twenty rooms coexisted with those containing just a few flats that served as family homes (Pulini, 2019: 83, Fig. 1.8). For example, at 17 Cheniston Gardens, a maisonette on the second and third floor served as the residence of wealthy offspring whose parents were business partners of Fortnum and Mason. Across the street, the top three floors of number 12 were occupied from 1932 to 1957 by the Sewell family, who had a colonial background in the Orange Free State in South Africa. In addition to dwellings, some houses had areas rented out for various types of commercial activities, including dance and music studios, dressmakers' workshops, schools, private clubs, therapists and masseurs.

Conversely, there is limited evidence of conversions from family houses into bedsits in prime locations, but occasional conversions into flats of various sizes coexisted with grand houses that

were either still utilised as family homes or repurposed as embassies, schools or nurseries. In 1958, Mrs F, the owner of 3, Holland Park, converted her grand house into four flats and a maisonette, with the basement flat serving as a nursery for a group of 10 children.

As the functions and purposes of family houses changed, also mews underwent transformations. Horses and coachmen were no longer needed and stables were converted into garages. Census registers and survey cards in the Llewellyn-Smith Archive indicate that the upper floors were either used as accommodation for private chauffeurs and their families or were rented out as small apartments to single tenants (London School of Economics, 1930).

Apartments as a lifestyle choice

When the traditional Victorian house began to lose its appeal as desirable accommodation for families in the city, developers turned to a new type of dwelling that seemed more suitable for modern urban life: the block of apartments (Marcus,1999; Pulini, 2022). By the turn of the century, mansion blocks became increasingly popular as they brought about a radical change in lifestyle. These apartments were equipped with central heating, electrical fittings, and lifts, and featured a communal concierge who took over many of the tasks traditionally performed by live-in servants in larger family houses. The apartments reduced the space for live-in domestic servants to just a single bedroom.

Apartments were advertised as more respectable alternatives to outdated family houses that were becoming occupied by lower-class tenants, as evident in the advertisement for Iverna Court, a large complex of apartments built just behind Cheniston Gardens in the early 1900s. Iverna Court's apartments targeted 'people in excellent positions' seeking an 'ideal healthy and sanitary place of residence' with 'no possibility of ever being tenanted by Artisans or the Working Classes' (Hobhouse, 1986: 104). The grandeur of the communal hallways, with open fireplaces and impressive staircases, served as tangible evidence of the developers' efforts to create a respectable and desirable form of accommodation for the middle and upper classes. The luxury of the communal spaces compensated for the loss of privacy associated with a single-family dwelling (Marcus,1991; Pulini, 2019, 2022).

Mansion blocks gained popularity in Kensington as family dwellings when it became evident that living in an apartment allowed people to share a prestigious lifestyle with families of similar social status. This status was embodied and made apparent by the grandeur of the communal hallways. Changes in taste also played a decisive role. Apartments became symbolic of the new modern lifestyle of the glamorous Edwardian era, representing a departure from the respectable yet outdated Victorian lifestyle of the previous century.

In Kensington from the early 1900s, tall buildings of imposing proportions were rapidly constructed, not only on the few remaining available plots but also by demolishing outdated terraced houses and villas. These constructions had a profound impact on the urban landscape,

altering the skyline in many areas of Kensington. This transformation can be clearly seen, for example, in Cheniston Gardens, where once airy terraced houses ended up being squeezed by the towering mansion blocks of Iverna Court, Iverna Gardens and Marloes Road.

Although smaller than single-family houses, the apartments built in the early 20th century were of substantial size, typically in the range of 200 square meters. Unlike family houses that are developed vertically, apartments were organised horizontally with rooms on both sides of a long corridor. The living quarters for domestic staff consisted of just one bedroom and a toilet. Unlike single-family houses, apartments were not suitable for conversion into smaller units or to be used for multiple occupation. Their internal configurations could not be easily subdivided, and the leasehold companies overseeing the mansions closely monitored the social backgrounds of the residents, setting boundaries to maintain the respectability of the site.

Later, starting from the interwar period, smaller apartments became a popular type of dwelling in Kensington, offering an alternative to single accommodation in converted Victorian family houses. Modernist-style blocks of flats were constructed along High Street Kensington and Kensington Church Street to meet the demands of a new lifestyle that prioritised efficient use of space at affordable prices.

‘Kensingtonian’ resilience

Kensington was severely impacted by the upheaval of the Second World War. Many families who had left London during the war faced challenges in returning home due to the extensive damage to their properties. Despite a significant decline in population, Kensington’s upper-middle-class residents tenaciously held onto their place in the neighbourhood. In the aftermath of the war, writer John Brophy observed:

> Quite a number of *original* [my emphasis] upper middle class Kensingtonians survive… All over sixty now, some over eighty. Most of the men are bewildered and defeated. The old ladies are invincible. Neither rationing, queues, the disappearance of servants, not heavy taxation and the lower power purchase of money gets them down. Kensingtonians are quite unscrupulous, mainly took their meals in restaurants, talking to each other across the small tables ‘as though from mountain top to mountain top … They were born to privilege, and in the days of their decline they fight for it. (J. Brophy, 1949; cit. in Kynaston, 2007: 261).

What Brophy describes is a class of ‘original Kensingtonians’, predominantly represented by their female members, who defend Kensington as the stronghold of the white British upper-middle class. The survival of the Kensingtonian tradition, endangered by recent social changes, was at stake in their resilient behaviour. When I use the term tradition here, I do not refer to a nostalgic appeal to a bygone socio-cultural setting that juxtaposed the past and the present. Instead, it denotes a constitutive element of the symbolic and social capital accumulated over the years through the process of neighbourhood-making by Kensington residents. As Leonard Woolf

suggested at the beginning of the 20th century, 'It is an intricate tangle of ancient roots and tendrils stretching far and wide through the upper-middle classes, the county families, and the aristocracy' (Woolf, 1964: 74-75).

Seen from a Bourdieusian perspective, the Kensingtonian tradition emerges as a form of 'habitus' in which individuals identify themselves, develop their sense of the world, agency and subjectivity (Bourdieu, 1984). From this viewpoint, the Kensingtonian tradition can be regarded as a set of rules, moral values and privileges associated with the neighbourhood. Each generation of Kensingtonians receives, reworks and passes it on to the next, starting from the time of the Old Court Suburb, spanning across the Victorian era and into Modernity. Drawing on Bennett (2014), I argue that the temporality embedded in the Kensingtonian 'habitus' can be linked to the metaphor of place as a Maussian gift (Mauss, 1954), where place is handed down from one generation of a community to the next, creating a tangible relationship between generations through time.

Given the existence of a resilient middle class of 'original Kensingtonians,' a question arises about where and how they lived.

Kensingtonians continued to reside in Victorian family homes, often sharing contiguous spaces alongside bedsitters. As revealed by the 1939 census registers, on the eve of the Second World War, changes in residential patterns were hardly noticeable in prime locations such as those around Holland House. For example, in Phillimore Gardens, the change of use or conversion of family houses into flats remained limited to the lower part of the street, where the houses did not enjoy a scenic view of the park. Their attractiveness was further marred by the imposing height of the new modern blocks of flats built along the High Street. However, in the upper part of the street, grand Victorian mansions maintained their original function as family homes, although their transition to modernity was indicated by the changing roles of household staff. The traditional 'butler' was replaced by a 'manager' or a 'chauffeur,' and the host of live-in maids was replaced by a caretaker living with their family in the basement. In the mid-fifties, the local council's intention to preserve the special status of this upper sector of the Phillimore Estate was demonstrated by its proposal for an 'area tentatively zoned for single-family dwelling houses' in an attempt to address the growing demand for multiple occupation housing.

Even small single houses resisted losing their function as family homes, as seen in the case of Kensington New Town, a village-like area situated to the south of the High Street. The biographies of families listed in the electoral registers for this area in the 1950s and 1960s return the image of a British enclave of Eton-educated Kensingtonians with multiple connections to the British peerage.

Kensingtonians also favoured large apartments in Edwardian mansion blocks. As Mrs D, an elderly resident of Campden Hill Court, pointed out, 'these apartments have always been occupied by respectable families. Even after the war, when the whole area was dilapidated and run down, Campden Hill Court remained untouched.' In fact, properties like Campden Hill Court were typically

regulated by strict lease rules that prohibited inappropriate modifications or short-term rentals. Apartments were never converted into lodgings or flats for multiple occupation. As long as people were willing to bear the high maintenance costs, the decor, appearance and ultimately the respectability of the place were guaranteed.

Generational replacement

In 1967, when Mrs D and her husband bought a house in Gloucester Walk on Campden Hill, the scars of the war were still tangible:

> After we arrived, my daughter came down one morning absolutely covered in black… the ceiling which had been put up in a temporary measure had just collapsed and that was because bits of bombs had come through the roof, my husband spent hours digging in the gardens to get rid of those shrapnels.

Their choice to live in Kensington was related to Mrs D's family ties with the neighbourhood:

> Well, my family lived here for so long … six generations have lived in Campden Hill, … My great grandfather's house which was unfortunately bombed was right across the street from where we lived. He bought a palace there that was built for Queen Ann, it was called Little Campden House. My great grandmother only left the house about six months before it was bombed to go and live with her daughter in Gloucestershire because the family was worried about a lady of 95 on her own. When we came here, the house we found in Gloucester Walk was the only thing a young married could afford.

Mrs D pointed out that when they bought the house, many families who had been living in Campden Hill for generations could not afford to live there after the war. Even the people they bought from were among such families:

> She was born in Campden Hill, but they had more children, and they had moved out to the suburbs … I know of other people who had always lived in the street, and they were still there, a number of people who had survived the war living in the street, but because of the general damages to the houses, they sold them, and the houses that were for sale there in the fifties were bought by young married, like us …

Mrs D and her husband, and other young married couples who bought properties in Gloucester Walk after the war, belonged to a new generation of white British residents. The decision to live in the neighbourhood was rooted in a shared identity as upper-middle-class Kensingtonians. This identity was validated by strong family connections to the area and involved a process of class reproduction based on the privilege and right to reside in Kensington.

From this perspective, the newcomers replaced a generation of elderly residents who had chosen to relinquish their Kensingtonian habitus and join their children in the new suburbs. The elderly residents' relocation from Kensington may have been expedited by the damages caused by the war to their properties. However, opting for a middle-class life in the new suburbs near their children was viewed as a practical and rational choice. Mrs D and those who arrived after the war

did not form a socially distinct group from those who departed, nor were they substantially better off:

> you could buy a house, but with 10,000 you could buy no more than a 21-year lease, but then you had to spend money on it to make it habitable, but none of us torn it to pieces as they do now. We did what we had to do piecemeal, living inside, because we all needed houses, and we had not enough houses. Then, we bought the freehold from the Pitt Kensington Estate. If I told you how much money we paid to buy that house and how much we sold it for 30 years later, you could not believe!

Mrs D's decision to live in Kensington represents the continuity of an ongoing tradition, taken over by a new generation from the previous one, contributing to the reproduction of Kensington's upper-middle-class social and cultural capital.

Raising inequalities

The period following the Second World War was characterised by significant social and political turmoil throughout the country. London, like the rest of the nation, faced a severe housing crisis due to a shortage of new homes and extensive damage inflicted on housing stock during the air raids in the war (Kynaston, 2007).

The Kensington 'Great Sunday Squat' on September 8, 1946, where more than a thousand people occupied vacant flats, lasted only two weeks but prompted central government to take action by initiating social housing measures (Burnham, 2004). The new regulations stated that unoccupied buildings in Central London could be converted into council houses. One such example was 25 Cheniston Gardens, which was seized and transformed into a home for elderly women in need. A few years later, the Cheniston Court Hotel, spanning two adjacent buildings, served as temporary accommodation for homeless families. Social housing became widespread, and council housing blocks were constructed both on the outskirts and in the heart of Kensington (Pulini, 2015, 2019).

However, while Kensington did experience the widespread economic crisis that affected the country in the aftermath of the war, its social landscape did not undergo the same kind of transformation as Notting Hill and North Kensington. In those areas, dilapidated terraced houses and newly built council houses were occupied by a disadvantaged population, largely consisting of successive waves of Caribbean migrants (Burrows et al., 2017; Glass, 1960, 1964; Martin, 2005; O'Malley, 1970; Pahl,1975: 187).

By the time Mrs D and her husband arrived in Gloucester Walk, Little Campden House, her great grandfather's manor, had already been demolished (Sheppard, 1973: 49-57). The land had been incorporated into the Tor Garden Estate, developed under the London County Council Housing Scheme on the war-damaged site bounded by Sheffield Terrace, Hornton Street, Tor Gardens and Campden Hill Road.

> They built council flats on what had been my great grandmother's house because to get houses built the council had said to the family: 'you have to rebuild what was there or we give you some money… so they bought the land from those who could not afford to rebuilt it. So, when we came in 1967 the whole of Gloucester Walk was the only thing that young married could afford.

From the very beginning, the insertion of the council estate into Campden Hill triggered tensions in the neighbourhood. Mrs D remembers that even the allocation of the flats was a matter of negotiation with nearby properties:

> What was interesting is that the council selected who was going into those flats. You see, they tended to give those flats to people who had been bombed out of the East End and they tended to be older couples because the flats that they built on our side were only one-bedroom flats. and they could not have more than three storeys because everybody in Gloucester Walk 'claimed the ancient lights' [5]; it means that that they could not have a building cutting out your light … It was one of us, a solicitor who lived in Gloucester Walk who organised this whole claim. And that is why there are only three storeys on that side. While on the other side of the garden there are all bigger flats … so here we had older people, and this meant less noise and less fuss.

The approach taken by the residents of Gloucester Walk, with the cooperation of the Council, involved the controlled inclusion of council tenants. This meant that tenants were carefully chosen from white British families from the East End who exhibited good manners and respectability. Over time, friendly relationships developed between the two groups, albeit of an asymmetric and hierarchical nature, leading to many council tenants becoming employed as cleaners and gardeners for nearby properties. With the implementation of the Right to Buy, introduced as part of the 1980 Housing Act during Margaret Thatcher's government, most of the council tenants began to buy their flats. As the estate increasingly shifted towards privatisation and the council reduced its involvement in management and control, the dynamic gradually transformed from controlled social inclusion to a growing escalation of conflict, social exclusion and rejection.

> there were quite a few knife attacks among them in those years … gangs of youngsters from there, of course… (Sam, a Sheffield Terrace resident).

Mrs D recalls that during those years, not only there were problems with the council houses, but the whole of the surroundings of Campden Hill Court were socially mixed:

> Hornton street that was all bedsits … I used to have an au-pair to help me … and I would not let them walk up Hornton Street at night because you had all sorts of strange people, there was a lot of drugs ...

Mrs D's description returns a vivid picture of the mixed social environment in the Campden Hill Gardens area in the 70s and 80s. The converted flats on the main thoroughfares had been

[5] The Right to light is a form of easement in English law that gives a long-standing owner of a building with windows a right to maintain an adequate level of illumination. The right was traditionally known as the doctrine of 'ancient lights' (Kerr, 1865).

overwhelmingly transformed in bedsitters, while resilient Kensingtonians negotiated the neighbourhood with the council house tenants. In Observatory Gardens, low-income tenants in heavily bombed converted flats faced the respectable façades of Campden Hill Court, where Benazir Bhutto, the ex-Pakistani prime minister, who was living in the ground floor flat that later became Mrs D's home, shielded her privacy behind the heavy curtains that still hang in Mrs D's living room. This is how inequalities function and were negotiated in an area that was bound to become part of today's elite neighbourhood.

Kensington as a lifestyle aspiration

While Kensingtonians were going on with their generational replacement and class reproduction, the inner city was attracting a new generation of young individuals who had grown up in the suburbs or other parts of the UK but wanted to study, work and settle in London instead of a mundane suburb. Their return to the city was driven not only by the aesthetic appeal of urban living but also by the emerging job opportunities in professional and creative services linked to the shift towards a post-industrial urban economy. These aspirations laid the groundwork for gentrification to take root in various areas of inner London, particularly those that contained dilapidated Victorian properties that were ripe for renewal. Sociological literature has extensively documented this process, emphasising the expansion of the middle-class into areas occupied by a white working-class population and/or ethnic minorities (Atkinson, 2000; Bridge et al., 2012; Butler and Hamnett, 2011; Butler and Robson, 2003; Glass, 1964, 1973; Hamnett, 2003; Hamnett and Williams, 1979). Notting Hill serves as a paradigmatic example of this type of gentrification, where young gentrifiers rapidly displaced the local population by acquiring houses of multiple occupation (Atkinson, 2000; Glass, 1960, 1964; Martin, 2005).

However, in Kensington, a rapid displacement like that of the Afro-Caribbeans from Notting Hill never occurred. At the onset of gentrification in Notting Hill, Kensington's housing stock primarily catered for the middle and upper-middle class and properties were expensive. Young middle-class gentrifiers could not afford to purchase entire houses in Kensington, as was the case in other parts of inner London, so they bought flats (Hamnett, 2001: 882; 2003: 2416). The story of Michael and Carole illustrates that even buying a flat in Kensington was not a straightforward process:

> I am from Reading, and I arrived in Kensington as a student. When I met Carole in 1967, I was living in a very depressing bedsit in Holland Road… she was sharing a flat with her two sisters in Cottesmore Court [a 1930s apartment block to the south of the High Street]. Then the sisters moved out and we were on our own and two years later the landlord offered the flats on long leases with a discount for sitting tenants and we managed to put down a deposit and got a mortgage to buy the flat. It was a huge amount of money for us.

The ‘discount for sitting tenants’ that allowed Michael and Carol to buy the flat was one of the changes generated in the rental market by the 1965 Rent Act, which introduced greater security of tenure and rent control. This new legislation created a shift in the market dynamics, making it more profitable for landlords to sell off properties on long leases or invest capital in their redevelopment, rather than renting them out at lower rents. As Smith (1979) suggests, the 1965 Rent Act played a crucial role in widening the rent gap, which refers to the disparity between the actual rent and the potential return under the site’s ‘highest and best use’ (Smith, 1979: 543). Consequently, many properties that had previously been rented out as bedsits or shared flats became attractive for sale, renovation (to achieve the highest and best use) and subsequent letting or sale at a net overall profit. Landlords gradually shifted their focus towards high income tenants or buyers seeking redeveloped flats, prompting them to sell off their properties as long leases. This process is evoked in Michael’s narrative of his first years in Kensington:

> This area had a high number of people in flat shares and bedsits. You can think of it as a rite of passage: people come to London, they spend a few years at the beginning of their career, they need housing, they can’t buy a house … This area performed a major function in the private rental market. A large part of that went in the first few years of the 1970s when landlords sold them off as long leases. Take the houses in Cornwell Gardens for example, they were filled with people, but hardly anybody had a car … all changed overnight to having one or two persons per flat and they all had cars, so each house has 5 to 6 flats, each one had a car, and it changes the nature of the area.

However, in Kensington, the conversion of Victorian homes from rented bedsits and shared flats into owner-occupied flats occurred gradually and in specific locations. Bedsits were not evenly distributed throughout the neighbourhood but clustered in less desirable areas. Additionally, the process of conversion took time, as bedsits continued to be used as rental investments for a considerable period. The occupation density curve in Cheniston Gardens demonstrates a gradual decrease rather than a sudden shift in the pattern (Pulini, 2019: 83; Fig.1.8). In other words, Kensington did not experience mass displacement of people living in bedsits as did Notting Hill. If evictions were necessary during the transformation of a house, they were selective and localised. However, with the number of owner-occupied flats increasing, tensions arose between bedsit tenants and flat owners, reflecting differences in lifestyle and generational conflict. In the late 1970s, flat owners in Cheniston Gardens frequently complained about groups of students sharing run-down properties, while the director of a well-known museum was greatly concerned about the growing number of unlicensed hotels and the intensive renting out of rooms, which posed a threat to the street’s respectability.

Against this backdrop, the social change that occurred in Kensington through the rise of owner-occupied converted flats can be understood as part of the broader process of gentrification in inner London. However, this understanding of gentrification goes beyond its original formulation by Ruth Glass (1964) and Tim Butler (2007, 2010) as the transformation of working-class or vacant

areas of the central city into middle-class residential areas. Instead, we need to adopt an understanding of gentrification as a multifaceted process with different developments and entry points (Lees et al., 2016: 4-5), which builds on the work of Loretta Lees (Lees, 2003) and her collaboration with Tim Butler (Butler and Lees, 2006) and allows for variations within gentrification.

From this perspective, gentrification in Kensington was of a different type and scale compared to the typical transformations of period properties in North or East London. Not only did it predominantly involve flat conversions rather than single-family houses, but more importantly, did not involve upgrading the area to middle-class status, as Kensington had always been and still was a middle and upper-middle-class neighbourhood. Following Butler and Lees (2006), the social change that occurred in Kensington can be described as a form of gentrification that generated micro-class distinctions within the area. In this case, the distinction was between a new generation of middle-class owner-occupiers of flats and an existing population of middle and upper-middle-class Kensingtonians and bedsitters. These social groups were differentiated by various forms of capital, not just economic, but also cultural and social (Bourdieu, 1984). While the Kensingtonians were preserving the legacy of a tradition, the newcomers shared the rhetoric of residential choice based on the rejection of suburbia as a lifestyle and the affirmation of the inner city as a place to belong (Benson and Jackson, 2013).

The luxification of the built environment

In the past fifty years, the residential landscape of Kensington has undergone a continuous process of 'luxification,' a term coined by Graham (2015) to describe the construction of luxury properties in urban areas.

The transformation of Kensington's residential environment began to emerge in the early 1970s, coinciding with the influx of foreign capital into the property market. The arrival of numerous Americans was seen as disruptive by the 'original Kensingtonians' due to the introduction of a new lifestyle centred around consumerism and glamour. As Mrs D commented:

> When we were here we had a car that you parked automatically outside of your house, a Hillman Minx or little baby Austin or something of that nature, and I remember my husband looking out the window one day and saying: 'there's a Volvo in the street, do you think we ought to move?', and then horrors of horrors, a Rolls-Royce, at that point he said: this is not us. When the expensive cars came that was the time when people started to move away for various reasons

Through Mrs D's account, we gain insight into the significant clash between the American way of life, exemplified by the luxury brands of the newcomers' cars, and the close-knit ties and lifestyles of the upper-middle-class English neighbourhood. It becomes evident that the introduction of this foreign lifestyle created a noticeable contrast and tension within the Kensingtonian community:

> They did not involve their children with our children. They let their children run wild in the street and they did not encourage the street to be together, otherwise all our children knew each other's houses. That was when proper nannies came in. Before, all of us who had children would take our children each day to a different house, so that two mothers each morning could look after the children in the street, which gave the other mothers mornings to go to the dentist, go shopping, to do whatever you wanted because you knew you had two and a half hours of freedom. When you are all like-minded people, you were all happy to swap…. You all knew each other, we had a half Greek family, for the rest we were English.

In a changing landscape of restored normalcy in advanced global economies (Piketty, 2014), the arrival of Americans sparked a process of investment and redevelopment in Kensington's property market, setting the stage for profound social change. Fragmentary and piecemeal evidence from planning applications indicates that by the late 1970s, dilapidated grand houses in the prime areas north of Holland Park were being reconverted into single-family homes by wealthy buyers, complete with swimming pools and amenity spaces in the basements.

One of the earliest instances of basement conversion into a luxurious leisure space in Holland Park involved an Iranian dealer of oriental antiques and decorative arts who sought permission in 1978 to transform the basement of his property into a lavish swimming pool adorned with marble and golden mosaic. Around the same time, Mrs F's grand house at number 3 Holland Park became the London luxury residence of the Malay Royal family.

However, the initial owners of these renovated grand houses were not solely Americans and Arabs; they also included a new generation of British entrepreneurs. Among the British super-rich residing to the north of Holland Park during the 1970s were a young Richard Branson and, slightly later, Robert Sangster, the renowned pools owner and horse-breeder. These were the years when the Sultan of Brunei established his London residence in Kensington Palace Gardens, paving the way for tycoons and oligarchs to join Ambassadors and High Commissioners on what would become known as 'Billionaires' Row' in the 21st century.

As the built environment underwent increasing luxification, the concept of home underwent a dramatic shift from a mere dwelling to a commodity (Atkinson and Jacobs, 2016: 40-42). The property market was increasingly viewed as an opportunity for investment and speculation. Periods of value decline, speculative bubbles and severe slumps, notably during the 1990s recession and the 2008 financial crash, presented opportunities for profit. During this time, middle-class households who had purchased properties in Kensington between the 1970s and the 1990s witnessed a continuous rise in property values year after year.

In the last three decades, the spread of the phenomena of 'buy to leave' and 'buy to let' has become paradigmatic of how properties in Kensington are used as financial assets for generating profit (Minton, 2017). The 'buy to leave' phenomenon occurs when super-rich non-dom investors purchase properties and leave them vacant to benefit from rising house prices, while 'buy to let' relies on generating returns from exorbitant rental incomes. These two phenomena have had a

dramatic impact on the social patterns of the neighbourhood. The former has created areas of residential vacuum, while the latter has triggered a relentless turnover of tenants, leading to unprecedented class struggles.

Amid the increasing commodification of the property market, the built environment has taken on innovative configurations to facilitate the most profitable use of space. Similar to the transition from Victorian family homes to flats and bedsits, the plasticity and adaptability of the existing built environment have been leveraged to meet the requirements, expectations and aspirations of buyers.

By and large, we can identify two opposing yet complementary trajectories in the luxification of the built environment: 'going big' and 'going small'. These trends are not solely influenced by the financial capacity and investment allure of the buyers but also intersect with lifestyle preferences, mobility needs, household types, and importantly taste.

'Going big' primarily involves the increasing trend towards re-converting Victorian houses from flats and bedsits into single-family dwellings, re-imagining the original 19th century house plan to align with buyers' preferences. In many cases, renovating a Victorian family home includes excavating luxury underground spaces for leisure and fitness, significantly increasing the property's surface area, value and symbolic capital for the owners in terms of prestige and recognition. Since 2008, there has been a tremendous surge in applications for basement extensions in Kensington. In less than a decade, over a thousand mega-basements have been excavated in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, with the majority located in Kensington itself. A study conducted by Newcastle University (Baldwin et al., 2019) estimates that 6.6 percent of the total number of 1,022 basement excavations carried out in RBKC from 2008 to 2017 qualify as 'mega' extensions, involving the excavation of more than 1,500 m3 of earth, either by digging down two or three floors beneath the house or extending horizontally under the garden.

Conversely, the 'going small' process, focuses not only on the upgrade of dilapidated bedsits into self-contained studios, but also on the transformation of non-residential premises, like old school hospitals, and warehouses, into self-contained luxury studios, suitable for a super-rich transient lifestyle. Most of these developments are gated and accessible only to residents.

A significant part of small luxury architecture is represented by Victorian mews, cottages, and artists' studios. They started been transformed into 'cobbled-stoned villages in the early 1970s. In 1972 the Sunday Times reported that such schemes were regarded as 'harbinger[s] of a new age of urban renewal – the age of discretion, when developers and planners [who had] thought big for too long' were launching the 'village style' of living (Hobhouse 1986, fn. 87). Thinking small was becoming a fashionable trend.

Within this relentless process of luxification social housing has almost disappeared in Kensington. Most of the blocks of flats built in the sixties are now privately owned. In the Tor Garden Estate just a small sector of council flats survives, well concealed from the view at the core

of the estate. A thick fence of vigorous shrubs surrounds the estate, making it look like a cage placed in the middle of an estranging environment. Rather than a simple fence, the enclosure has been working for years as a mutual shield, marking a dystopian territory where the few remaining council tenants were bound to seclude themselves and become invisible to the view together with the incongruous architecture of their dwellings.

Overall, the changes in the residential environment described in this last section of the chapter, show that the beginning of a trajectory of 'luxification' of Kensington's built environment can be set back in the late 1960'. In this perspective, the process of luxification currently going on in this elite neighbourhood is not just connected to the financial crisis of 2008, as some researchers highlight (e.g. Burrows and Knowles, 2019), but it is rather the outcome of an incremental process of change in the residential and social environment that began many years earlier. What dramatically changed after 2008 was not only the excess of the new architecture, that has reached sizes that were unthinkable even in the previous decades, but also the rhythm of the process. From this point of view, following Burrows and Knowles (2019), I argue that the post-2008 process of luxification in Kensington can be described as a form of gentrification or super-gentrification, provided we accept Butler and Lees' (2006) definition of it as 'displacements involving hierarchies generative of micro-class distinctions' and we look at the ongoing displacement of the merely wealthy as voluntary displacements in which long-term merely wealthy residents have the option of releasing equity ramped up by the plutocrats moving into the area (Burrows and Knowles, 2019: 84).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the process of social change in Kensington follows patterns that distinguish this neighbourhood from other parts of the RBKC. Specifically, I have shown that even before the Victorian urbanisation Kensington had already acquired an elite status in connection with the presence of the royal residence. This status is reflected by the dwellings built in the Victorian era to attract upper-class households, including the luxury developments surrounding Holland House and Kensington Palace. The aristocratic legacy of the Old Court Suburb was absorbed and reinterpreted during the Victorian era and passed down to subsequent generations of residents as a form of symbolic capital, along with the moral value of 'respectability' that was integral to Victorian middle-class social belonging (Skeggs, 1997; Strathern, 1992; Wilson, 1991).

By examining the atomisation of the Victorian home into smaller units, I have highlighted how bedsitters in Kensington were predominantly occupied by a respectable middle or upper middle-class population, mainly consisting of young women working in Central London (Braybon,1981; Briganti and Mezei, 2018; Cartwright, 2020; Delany, 2018).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Kensington remained a solid middle and upper middle-

class British neighbourhood, where a bedsitter population coexisted with a diminished class of Kensingtonians (Brophy, 1948) who resiliently defended their neighbourhood as the stronghold of a white British upper-middle class, actively contributing to the preservation of its traditions through a process of class reproduction based on the privilege and right to reside in Kensington.

Only against this backdrop, where Kensington stands out as a stronghold of the middle and upper-middle class, can we fully comprehend the social changes in the neighbourhood from the late 1960s. During those years and the subsequent decade, Kensington witnessed the simultaneous arrival of two distinct social groups. One was a young middle-class generation of gentrifiers whose decision to live in the city was a lifestyle choice. Due to the high cost of properties in the area, these newcomers could not aspire to buy a family house in Kensington, but only flats (Hamnett, 2001, 2003). The other social group that had begun to appear by the early 1970s was a new British and international wealthy elite, which purchased family houses in the heart of the Kensingtonian enclaves. Their arrival generated anxiety and a defensive attitude among Kensingtonians, who did not cherish the conspicuous consumption of these outsiders.

The evidence presented in this chapter shows that neither of these processes manifested as abrupt changes but rather as the gradual replacement/displacement of the residential population. This is different from what occurred in other areas of inner London, where multiple processes of gentrification and super-gentrification took place (Butler and Lees, 2006, Butler and Robson, 2003; Glass, 1964). Nonetheless, the social change that unfolded in Kensington in the late 1960s marked the beginning of a shift in the meaning of a home, from dwelling to commodity. This shift gradually developed in the following decades up to the present, with peaks and troughs characterised by periods of declining values, speculative bubbles and severe slumps.

Against this backdrop of incremental change, the increased presence of super-rich global investors after the 2008 financial crisis does not represent the start of an abrupt process of super-gentrification. As this chapter has demonstrated, by the late 1960s the ‘luxification’ of the built environment in Kensington had already begun. What changed dramatically after 2008 was not only the excessive scale of the new architecture for the super-rich, reaching previously unimaginable sizes, but also the pace of the process. From this perspective and following Burrows and Knowles (2019), I contend that the post-2008 process of luxification in Kensington can be described as a form of gentrification or super-gentrification, only if we accept Butler and Lees’ (2006) definition of it as ‘displacements involving hierarchies generative of micro-class distinctions’, where the ‘merely wealthy’ long-term residents voluntarily embrace a form of displacement in which ‘they have the option of releasing equity ramped up by the plutocrats moving into the area’ (Burrows and Knowles, 2019: 84). What they barter away in this transaction is the privilege and right to reside in Kensington and to transfer it to the next generation, enabling social reproduction.

Overall, going back to the question that underpins my research, I have demonstrated in this chapter that Kensington’s identity as the quintessential elite neighbourhood in London is not a

relatively recent phenomenon linked to the spiralling financialisation and commodification of the housing market. Conversely, this identity is deeply rooted in a tradition specific and contingent to this neighbourhood. This tradition did not allow gentrification to occur according to the pattern of class replacement typical of other areas of inner London, because Kensington has maintained its middle and upper-middle-class identity with remarkable continuity over the years.

CHAPTER FOUR – EXCLUSIVE ENCLAVES

Chapters Four and Five work together to illustrate the research carried out in different neighbourhood sectors. The two chapters complement each other by providing insights into how residents relate to and practice place, showing how belonging and neighbourhood-making vary according to location and residential patterns.

This chapter combines ethnographic research conducted in three exclusive areas of Kensington: Holland Park, the Phillimore Estate and the surroundings of Victoria Road, which was formerly known as Kensington New Town (Fig. 8). While the first two areas have catered for the upper-middle class since the Victorian era, with their opulent grand mansions reflecting this status, Kensington New Town was originally a village characterised by a bohemian atmosphere and unassuming houses. These three areas, sought after by tycoons and magnates since the 1970s, have seen a significant increase in their allure in recent years due to the proliferation of underground architecture, which provides substantial additional space to meet the luxury lifestyle choices of the super-rich.

The aim of this chapter is to unpack the dynamics of neighbourhood-making in a context where the super-rich predominate, drawing on the accounts and insights of long-term residents. In all three areas, my interactions with billionaire residents were indirect, mediated through the narratives of their affluent yet less wealthy neighbours (John, Shian, Michael and Victoria). Sarah was the only ultra-wealthy individual I managed to talk to. The stories I compiled, with the assistance of the residents, have been interwoven with information from media coverage, personal biographies and documents attached to planning applications.

To understand these elite enclaves, I apply an analytical framework used in the study of middle-class neighbourhoods that recognises that classed identities are shaped by ongoing processes through which class and place intersect (Bacque et al., 2015, Benson, 2014; Benson and Jackson, 2013; Bridge, 2003; Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005). In particular, by focusing on the different narratives of belonging through a Bourdieusian lens, I argue that distinctions based on shared similarities (the recognition of people like us) and efforts to differentiate oneself from other residents, contribute to the formation of class identity (Savage et al., 2005).

By exploring and discussing with my respondents how people perceive their belonging in place, I argue that a crucial distinction between residents in these exclusive surroundings juxtaposes the lifestyle of absentee residents with those who actively participate in neighbourhood-making. This pattern, in which those whose are largely absent and only fleetingly present are juxtaposed with engaged households in elite contexts, has long been recognised by social scholars

who have highlighted the differentiation between 'those who move between multiple residences and those who have chosen London and live there more extensively, often with children attending expensive and prestigious private schools' (Atkinson, 2016: 1310). This distinction within the category 'super-rich residents' demonstrates that class identity in place goes beyond wealth (millionaires vs. billionaires, old money vs. new money) and involves dynamics linked to lifestyle choices and cultural and social backgrounds (Butler and Robson, 2001, 2003; Jackson and Benson, 2014; Jackson and Butler, 2015).

Moreover, by considering the recurring theme of the 'village' that emerges from residents' narratives, I argue that residents maintain distinct boundaries between different sectors of the neighbourhood. These boundaries shape their identity in place and are reinforced by perceived distinction from nearby areas and surrounding neighbourhoods, according to a pattern described by Paul Watt (2009) as 'selective belonging'.

Overall, by applying to the study an analytical framework grounded on performativity and belonging in place, I show that social distinctions in these elite enclaves are not just a matter of wealth, but are rather the outcome of discursive practices, where place is not just chosen, but made by the repeated actions of the residents who simultaneously reconstruct classed identities (Benson and Jackson, 2013).

Grand houses at the edge of the park

Flats among grand houses in Holland Park

I reach the opulent Victorian development known as Holland Park with a gentle walk uphill from the High Street to the upper edge of the park. The development is on the top of the hill and consists of two wide tree-lined streets merging into a crescent, separated from each other by two rows of mews houses. I arrive there at dusk in a spectral silence, just rare lights. Walking along the line of imposing grand houses in Holland Park South one can feel a rarefied atmosphere (Fig. 14 a and b): no noise, no coming and going of people or cars. The shiny dark smoothness of the luxury cars parked on both streets complements the mesmeric whiteness of the house facades. The only signs that some kind of family life is going on behind the doors are a few prams, small bicycles and skateboards by the front doors. The houses look identical to each other with their white stuccoed facades. They have been recently renovated and look impeccable, only a few showing signs of long neglect, as if nobody has been living there for a long time. A few doorbells hint at the existence of flats among luxury family houses.

Fig. 14 a and b. Holland Park South. Images by author.

Shian lives with her husband Paul and their two children in grand house that has been converted into flats. Their three bedroom flat is quite substantial in size (190 square metres) and has rooms arranged around a central communal staircase (Fig. 15). Shian regards the size as quite unusual for a flat, which makes her 'feel like being in a house… it's big enough for our family…'. The value of the property is estimated in the range of £4.5 m (2019), which is a significant amount more than the other flats in the building. This is because it is on the first floor, which is the most sought after and expensive, with imposing bay windows to the front and to the rear of the building.

When Shian and Paul started living in Holland Park in 2005, they were a young couple of affluent professionals working in financial services. Their choice of Holland Park was the outcome of a thorough and painstaking selection of somewhere 'exclusive':

> We looked all over the place …We did not want Notting Hill. Too chaotic, we wanted somewhere more *residential*. What was important for us was the type of architecture, classical, high ceiling, lovely proportions, and again you can't find that in lots of areas of London. It was exactly the sort of property that we wanted.

The way Shian frames her residential choice reflects what Savage et al' describe as 'elective belonging' denoting the moral ownership over place that residents claim through their ability to choose. This apparent freedom to choose is a marker of distinction (see Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). As Savage (2010) emphasises in relation to the middle class, this type of belonging

is distinct from merely ‘dwelling’ in a place, as residents select the area based on its symbolic meanings (Benson, 2014). In the case of Holland Park, its symbolic meaning is derived from the area’s reputation as one of the most coveted address in the neighbourhood, where residents can live alongside the Kensington elite.

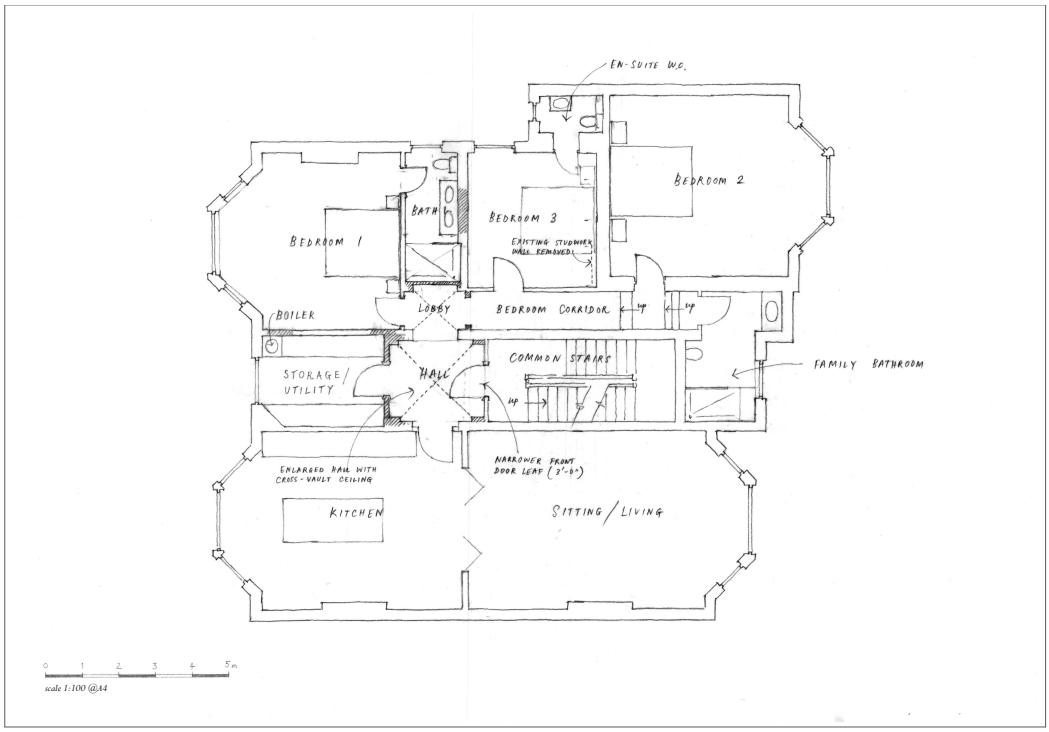


Fig. 15. Floorplan of Shian’s flat in Holland Park (RBKC Planning Application Archive).

Shian and Paul undertook a thorough renovation of the flat, transforming it according to their own taste. The outcome is a blend of classical touch and minimalist flair, with slight, almost imperceptible links to Shian’s Punjabi ancestral background. A gorgeous high tech open plan kitchen occupies half the double reception, fulfilling the needs of the proprietors who like to cook for their guests.

John is the chairman of the Holland Park Residents’ Association. He is from South Africa and runs an investment and wealth management company for a wealthy family working from home, a flat not far from Shian’s. His husband Sean, of Scottish background, works in finance. Their flat is almost identical to Shian’s in layout and proportions, but the design of the interior is more formal: the kitchen is in a separate room and the double reception is divided into dining room and living room where John’s grand piano is scenically arranged as a centrepiece. The value of the flat is in the range of £3.8m (2019), which is significantly less than Shian’s, as it is on the third floor, which would originally have been bedrooms in this Victorian house, and has smaller windows compared to the living areas on the first floor.

John and Sean discovered Holland Park in the early 2000s:

> In those days, we were living in Notting Hill and this area was unknown even among Londoners. Initially we rented a flat that looked straight into the park, that was exactly what we were looking for, two to three bedrooms, two bathrooms, *south* facing … but we ended up buying on the other side of the road, on the *north* side of Holland Park *South*.

This play on words reveals their slight disappointment regarding the location, akin to the feeling someone might experience at a theatre when unable to secure a seat in the stalls and instead have to settle for an ordinary balcony seat. In fact, John refrains from mentioning that on the south side of 'Holland Park South' flat conversions are extremely rare, with only two houses having been converted into flats, as the rest is entirely occupied by the grand mansions of billionaires.

For both John and Shian, Holland Park is home and embodies privacy first and foremost. Shian perceives her home as 'a sanctuary', and 'a place where she can recharge and rejuvenate 'when you come back from a busy day of work, … where I could imagine we will live until we will retire'. However, it appears that neither John nor Shian have close relationships with their neighbours:

> It is not that kind of street. I mean I am a great fan of community … I think community is great, but it does not happen in our street. I think it is too big and impersonal. The houses are so far apart from each other. In one house you might have let's say twenty people and then *one of those houses*, then some people like those above us … they use the house like a *pied a terre* and live away most of the time. (Shian)

Similarly, John acknowledges that social interaction within his street is virtually non-existent, except for the connections he fosters in his role as chair of the residents' association, which typically revolve around specific and local issues. According to John, the lack of neighbourliness can be attributed to the presence of the ultra-wealthy individuals and households residing in the grand houses:

> When one of the homes in our road is one of your many homes, you are not just involved in the community because you would spend all your lives involved in the communities where you have six or seven residences and that is impossible.

Shian also acknowledges that even among their fellow flat dwellers, contact is infrequent, and when it occurs tends to be problematic. During our conversation, I notice a slight shimmer in her eyes and a blush on her cheeks as she mentions a 'delicate relationship' with the occupants of the flat below hers, a mature couple of mixed American and French background, who complain constantly about the noise made by her children.

Both Shian and John perceive the street they reside in as part of a larger residential area they refer to as 'the village', that encompasses a portion of Kensington and the southern area of Notting Hill, with Holland Park Avenue in the middle:

> as in every village you have a high street and this [Holland Park Avenue] is our high street … we have a *fantastic butcher*, a fantastic baker … So, I would say this area here and a couple of blocks up … this is our area' (John)

The 'village' boundaries largely align with the pre-existing Victorian development, suggesting that in the case of Holland Park, the architecture assumes a symbolic significance by acting as boundary marker for the elite enclave. This elite enclave does not need physical barriers, like gates or fences, as its boundaries are metaphorically represented by the interwoven network of prestigious grand mansions. This type of seclusion inside soft boundaries can be framed within an elite residential pattern that Atkinson (2006) describes as 'enclavism', where 'relative insulation' and 'open seclusion' represent the lowest level on a scale of segregation tendencies enacted by the elite. In this regard, it has been suggested that enclavism not only operates against external threats but is consistent with the high value elites ascribe to privacy, quiet and an absence of social contact, themselves seen as badges of status (Atkinson and Flint, 2004: 890).

In Shian's experience, the 'Holland Park village' revolves around the Norland Place School, the prestigious independent prep school that both her children attend:

> When we moved here, Paul and I, we hardly knew anybody'. Quite a few people *like us* live in the village, you know, we met people through the school, both my children go to private schools you know… So, we do have lots of friends who are in this area … Paul is an excellent cook, we enjoy inviting them for dinner.

The school serves as a social hub for children and parents, fostering their sense of belonging. Through their children's education, Shian and her husband have developed significant relationships with like-minded people who share similar backgrounds and can afford the fees of a prestigious private school. In this context, children's education becomes a strategic tool in the process of neighbourhood-making, allowing residents to establish connections with like-minded individuals and 'create a sense of sanctuary' among people who are similar to them (Atkinson, 2006: 823; Butler, 1997). The social connections forged through the school environment contribute to a critical mass that aligns residence with personal identity, promoting a sense of attachment to place attachment.

Shian's family leads quite an affluent lifestyle that includes frequent expensive holidays abroad and regular weekends at the fake Georgian manor they built from scratch in Hampshire, located a convenient distance from London:

> It is quite common for people *like us*, whose children are in London day schools to live and operate weekdays in London, and to go to another place during the weekend.

However, when I asked Shian how she identifies herself in terms of class, she firmly asserted that she considers herself to have a middle-class background. In her opinion, class belonging is primarily determined by the family into which people are born. From this perspective, her roots and family background hold greater significance than her current level of prosperity or achieved success:

> You know, Paul and I did not go to private school… our families are not very wealthy families, so for us to be identified as upper class would be very peculiar… We may be successful, but we are rather self-made … neither through birth nor through historic wealth can we identify ourselves as upper class.

John's class identity aligns with Shian's perspective, but he adds the terms 'solid' and 'upper' to describe his class as 'upper middle' due to the prevailing level of prosperity in the neighbourhood:

> We belong to a good solid upper middle class, a *working* upper middle class, … wake up in the morning come back in the evenings, raise their families… Not a lot of families here anyway, but some families. It's mainly couples, older couples, single people and older widows.

By identifying themselves as part of the middle and upper middle class respectively, Shian and John have established a symbolic boundary that separates them from the ultra-wealthy, 'with 50 million pounds on their back' (John), who have acquired the majority of mansions in Holland Park. They perceive the extreme wealth of these individuals as a clear distinction and perhaps even a source of tension within the neighbourhood.

Shian's and Paul's identification with the middle class is rooted in the belief that hard work and self-made wealth are the basis for their capital accumulation. This serves as a moral justification for their social and economic status, a pattern that has been observed in other elite contexts as well (Sherman, 2017). However, despite their middle-class identification, the flat dwellers of Holland Park actively seek proximity to their billionaire neighbours, which serves to legitimise their aspirations to belong to an elite enclave. By living in the grand mansions, even if only in a flat, they enhance their social status and become part of the elite community. Upgrading from Notting Hill to this prestigious area of Kensington is the result of a painstaking search for a place where they can attain elite status. In other words, for the flat dwellers of Holland Park, their sense of belonging is intertwined with the process of becoming elite (Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005).

Phantoms and the super-rich in Holland Park

Shian uses the term 'phantoms' to describe the elusive occupiers of the grand houses of Holland Park. 'Phantom' owners are mostly offshore companies related to billionaire foreign investors.

> There is a 'big house' where once a year maybe you see lots of cars outside. You see the staff constantly maintaining, but you never see anybody… they are phantoms, that is the kind of middle eastern property.

Shian's comments are echoed by John's:

> They are Middle Eastern families …you notice them during the summertime, they come around Ramadan, when it is very, very hot in the middle east and they come here, and they stay for six weeks or two

> months. We have Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Dubai, UAE, Iran… and suddenly those houses are occupied, they do take a lot of parking for several weeks and then they go away again. So, there are quite a lot of absentees and what I have noticed is that some of the houses, no. 30 for example, has been recently reconverted from a block of flats into a single residential house, that I believe is going to be a phantom house. It was done by a developer; it is not sold. None of those houses are members of the association. The closest contact I have is that I say hello to bodyguards.

Cars, bodyguards and chauffeurs are the only visible manifestations of the lives of John's and Shian's Arab and Middle Eastern neighbours. The 'social invisibility' of the super-rich from the Arab and Middle Eastern regions may be linked to a long-standing tradition of stereotypical depictions of the Orient in the Western imagination (Awad, 2012). It can be argued that the portrayals of these Arab 'phantoms' by their European and British neighbours perpetuate the trope of the Western-Self creating the non-Western Other (Said, 1978). However, as in the mirror game depicted by Said in his concept of 'Orientalism' (Said, 1978), the Arab elite who inhabit prime locations in London might indulge in the romanticised orientalist version of Arab culture by reproducing it through their concealed, transient and elusive practices of neighbourhood-making.

Shian points out that empty houses might not necessarily hint at permanently or long-term absent owners, but they might as well denote 'split living':

> They can be mature couples whose children have since long left home, might leave for extensive periods of time, and then come back … there's plenty of that. In the 'big houses' there are also families with children, like us you know, who have a second home in the countryside, and they go there on weekends and holidays … they might come and go, but this is very much their home. … I do not think there are real differences in those houses. They come and go as plenty of other families do.

She also highlights the existence of two types of super-rich neighbours among the 'big houses' in Holland Park. Firstly, there are the 'phantoms' who are rarely seen or interacted with. And secondly, there are families who reside in their Holland Park homes most of the year, despite periods of absence. This suggests that the sense of belonging in Holland Park is primarily established through actual residence, as opposed to absence.

Both John and Shian show little interest in discussing the magnates and celebrities who reside in the grand houses, and they prefer to ignore them or at least pretend to do so: 'to be honest, I am not very interested' (John); 'The Beckhams? I do not keep an eye on them… (Shian). However, when it comes to discussing neighbourhood relationships, they both bring up the case of a dispute between two billionaire neighbours over a basement extension:

> That was happening at the time when the borough's policy about basements was going complete bonkers: you could dig three storeys down for the 80 per cent of the gardens… (John)

> All these houses are huge already, … we all thought it was too much and it was not good as you can set a precedent where somebody can dig two floors below the houses. You do not want this to happen in anyone's house. And thanks to *one of us* the project was downsized. (Shian [Author's emphasis])

The dispute that Shian and John refer to was related to an application for the excavation of a mega-basement in one of the sixteen grand houses on the southern side of Holland Park. To understand the details of the fight and the motivations behind it, I gathered information from the media coverage and the RBKC Planning portal as well as John and Shian.

The application for the mega-basement was submitted in 2015 by an American hedge fund manager. The plan was to create a 3,500 square feet extension beneath the garden, including a swimming pool, changing room, gym, sauna and steam room (Fig. 16). However, a hedge fund and investment banker residing in an identical grand house next door took the case to the High Court, arguing that the construction would cause damage to the surrounding properties and was 'totally unacceptable'.

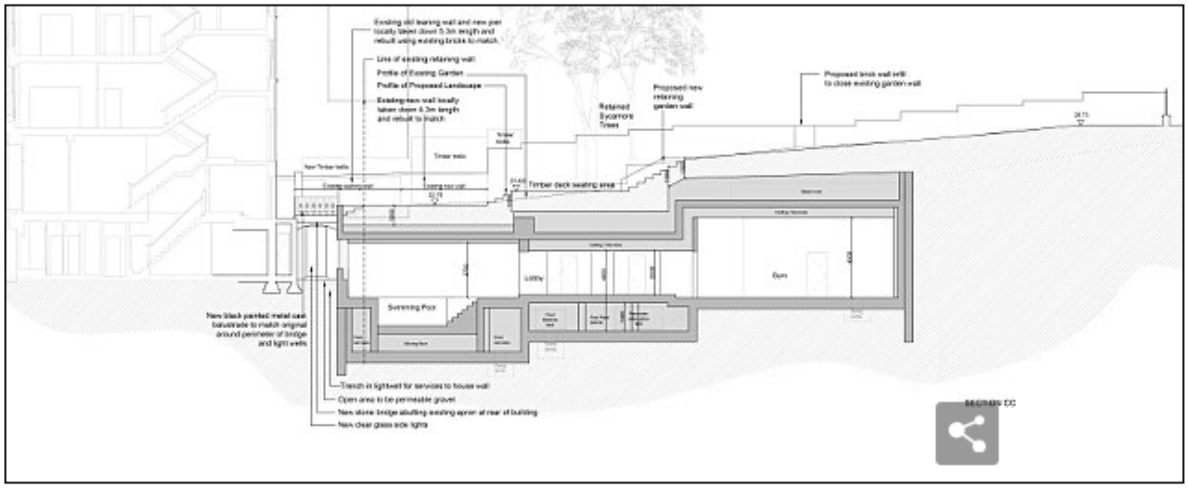


Fig. 16. Original proposal for the Ps' basement extension (RBKC Planning Application Archive).

The two super-rich contenders, despite being in the same field of enterprise, have distinct cultural backgrounds, tastes and lifestyles. The defendant, Mr P, is a Yale graduate Jewish American known for his aggressive business approach and connections with Russian banks. On the other hand, the claimant, Mr T, is an Englishman of Greek extraction and an Oxford graduate, with a reputation for maintaining a low professional profile in the financial sector. Both are married to foreign women, with Mrs P coming from a Russian-Bulgarian background and actively involved in her husband's business ventures, while Mrs T is from Germany and not involved in her husband's business.

Mr and Mrs T had been living in their Holland Park grand house for over twenty years when the dispute with their neighbour erupted. When they purchased their property in the early 1990s, it was in a state of disrepair and deemed uninhabitable. Numerous documents in the RBKC planning archive show the meticulous care taken in drafting their application to achieve a compromise between the Planning Committee, English Heritage and their own tastes and aspirations. Their plans included an underground pool that extended beneath almost half the garden.

Since Mr and Mrs T had their own large basement pool, their opposition to the planned mega-basement by Mr and Mrs P was not primarily against underground extensions. Officially, their concern was about the potential damage caused by extensive construction works. However, Mr T's opposition may also be seen as a resistance to excessive luxury. Apart from the construction nuisance and the potential imbalance between the market value of Mr P's house and other properties in the street, we may argue that the Ts opposed their neighbours' mega-basement because its exaggerated size clashed with the low-profile luxury embraced by the majority of the rooted elite in Holland Park, to which the Ts themselves belonged.

Belonging to the 'rooted elite' in Holland Park entails considering the property as a primary residence, as in the case of the Ts. Their grand house had been their family home for decades, with their children attending local prep schools. Mrs T had also been an active member of the Holland Park Residents' Association for many years.

When Mr and Mrs P purchased the property, they were aware that fostering a family-oriented attitude would be crucial to gain the confidence of their prospective neighbours. In the correspondence accompanying their planning application, they repeatedly emphasised their intention to restore the property to its former glory and create a family home. Even during the trial, Mrs P's comments to the press revealed her attempt to build decent neighbourhood relationships:

> We are never going to be the best of friends but it's not all-out war, and we are not shouting at each other. That we ended up in the High Court is disappointing… I come from Bulgaria, and I grew up in a village where your neighbours are the most important people in your life (Watts and Prynn,2018).

Eventually, to keep going with their development, not only were the Ps requested by the council to downsize their proposed mega-basement, but also to provide additional evidence of the future use of their property as a 'family home', when they had multiple residences around the world, from Moscow to New York. By downsizing their basement extension Mr and Mrs P distanced themselves from a lifestyle that has been metaphorically described as 'luxified troglodytism' (Baldwin et al., 2019), and committed to embracing an overground luxury lifestyle centred on the family home, and on a discreet but not overtly secluded life.

Building on recent reflections on the way the wealthy inhabitants of the world's wealthiest cities engage with their surroundings, I would argue that an elite lifestyle centred on the 'family home' is a form of 'selective engagement' with place, that enables the super-rich to 'appear

unremarkable and thus concealed by the kind of normality they are able to achieve in these areas' (Atkinson, 2016: 1314). Drawing on sociological literature focused on the value of incorporating performativity in the study of place-making (Benson and Jackson, 2013), I would also suggest that by embracing a luxury lifestyle centred on the family home, the super-rich enable a collective process of place-making aimed at the reproduction of their residential place as an elite stronghold. Such territory does not need physical demarcations (barriers, gates, bodyguards) because it is 'guarded' by the invisible ties of collective discursive practices that the super-rich incorporate in the routines of their luxury 'family home lifestyle'. It is in fact an open and porous territory, connected to a network of urban spaces the super-rich feel free to transverse (Atkinson, 2016), but it is also a place they call home.

The super-rich who perform a 'family home lifestyle', socialise in exclusive social circles and clubs in the West End, but at the same time they consume their rituals of privileged domesticity through their residential routines. From this point of view, the long-term engagement of Mrs T with the residents' association suggests a lifestyle that regards being local as a value. Similarly, by equipping their garden with paraphernalia that often occur in English back gardens, from conservatory to shed to fixed barbecue with chimney, the Ts seem to regard home as a place where the family can enjoy the domesticity of social gatherings.

The secluded and protected overground and underground spaces of 'the family home' allow the super-rich to lead a lifestyle largely sheltered from the wider city, and foster feelings of elective belonging (Savage at al., 2005). In this sense, following Rowland Atkinson (2016), I argue that it is important to distinguish between those among the super-rich who have chosen London and live there more permanently, often with children at expensive and prestigious private schools and 'the genuinely footloose' who move between multiple residences. These two broad segments of the very wealthy appear to have somewhat different values and orientations to life in the capital (Atkinson, 2016: 1310), as 'for the very wealthy resident class of buyers (those buying to live for more substantial periods of the year in London), the needs of family, safety and cultural infrastructure are frequently identified as unsurprising priorities' (*ibid.*).

Children's education has a pivotal role in the process of elite place-making. The most prestigious London prep schools are in fact located in Kensington and some families might steer their residential choices to increase their children's chances of success in being offered a place. Based on media coverage, the reason for the Beckhams' decision to invest in a £31 million property in Kensington was exactly the excellence of its private schools. The girl went to Glendower Prep School in Queen's Gate, the boys to Wetherby, the prep school of the royal offspring. In interviews about their grand house in Holland Park they declared they were not going to make any radical transformation to the house, to keep it as much as possible a family home (quote). Possibly in view of this, they did not apply for basement excavations, nor did they build any swimming pool in the basement.

Even billionaire Kazakh businesswoman and socialite Goga Ashkenazi explains her decision to buy a £28 million mansion in Holland Park in connection with the education of her two sons, who live with her mother, a nanny, and a tutor each a few houses away from the Beckhams (Llewellyn Smith, 2016). As Shian and John point out, once children are grown up and go to a boarding school for their secondary education, the super-rich families tend to stay away from their homes for long periods of times.

The picture that emerges from this insight into an elite enclave on the edge of Holland Park is of a process of neighbourhood-making that brings together three distinct social groups. These are the 'phantoms', the super-rich families living in the grand mansions and the flat dwellers - who seem to move past each other with scarcely any interaction, in line with what Butler and Robson (2001, 2003) have described for a middle-class context as a process of 'social tectonic', like plates sliding underneath the Earth's crust having little contact among each other. However, as Jackson and Butler later acknowledged by revisiting the metaphor of 'social tectonics' (Jackson and Butler, 2015), I argue that even if contact between these groups is minimal, each group is symbolically important for the other. The evidence provided by the elite enclave of Holland Park, shows that the idea, if not the reality, of the lives of 'others' is incorporated into the constitution of classed space and identities. People define who they are in opposition to others who are not them. Concealed and sleepy most of the time, the reality of the others emerges to the surface and is manifest when clashes occur, as in the case of the fight against the Ps' mega-basement. In these circumstances claiming moral ownership over a place becomes a priority and generates unexpected, yet temporary alliances.

Phillimore Gardens

Phillimore Gardens is on the eastern side of Holland Park. As in the Holland Park development, the most sought-after properties face directly upon the park. Although the area conveys a similar aristocratic feel dominated by a surreal silence, the look of the street is slightly less imposing than in Holland Park (Fig. 17).

Phillimore Gardens and the surrounding streets are part of the Phillimore Estate, which was developed in the 1850s and is controlled by the Phillimore Trust. Originally, the tenure of the estate was based on leases that expired after 99 years. While many properties purchased in the last two decades have been enfranchised, a few still remain under short term leases. Renewing expiring leases on these exclusive properties can be prohibitively expensive, making leasehold tenure an advantageous aspect for potential buyers seeking prestigious homes in prime, exclusive locations that can serve as valuable assets in the property market. From this perspective, the impact on long-term residents of the Phillimore Estate can be seen as a takeover, where the aggressive financial capacity of buyers is supported by the cooperative stance of the landlord – in this case Phillimore Estate itself. This scenario unfolded for Mrs South, whose property in Upper Phillimore Gardens

was acquired by an American private equity investor.

Fig.17. Phillimore Gardens at the crossroad with Upper Phillimore Gardens. Image by author.

I managed to get hold of Sarah, the buyer's wife, following the thread of her activity as art consultant and philanthropist, and she was happy to share the story of her home in Phillimore Gardens:

> Mrs South? …. she was quite a character … We first met her in 2000 …when John D Wood showed us this house in Upper Phillimore Gardens. We fell in love with it at first sight, we put in an offer which she turned down and at that point we learnt about the fact that she was actually in litigation… We had to wait almost two years before buying … so my husband every three to six months he just gave her a call, and said hallo Mrs South, how are you doing, how is the legal thing going, da, da, da, da ….

The story of Joan South is a tale filled with acrimonious animosity. In 1960, she and her late husband purchased a 37 year lease on 26 Upper Phillimore Gardens. At that time, the law did not grant any rights to extend leases or buy the freehold. It was understood that when the lease expired in 1997, they would have to vacate the property. However, subsequent changes in leasehold law allowed Mrs South to acquire a legal right to buy the freehold. A year before the lease was set to expire, the Phillimore Estate offered her the house for £1.5 million, stating that the offer aimed to 'be fair to Mrs South and avoid the cost of legal proceedings and delays.' Mrs South offered less than £750,000, and when her proposal was rejected by the Phillimore Estate, she served a legal notice to purchase the freehold under the 1993 Leasehold Reform Act. The Act states that if parties cannot agree on a price, it will be determined by the independent Leasehold Valuation Tribunal (LVT). The Phillimore Estate increased its valuation to £2.8 million, while Mrs South raised her offer to £1.1 million. She was disappointed when the LVT settled on a price of £2 million, suggesting that the estate's initial offer had been favourable. Mrs South appealed the case to the Lands Tribunal, seeking a reduction of £150,000 based on claimed 'improvements' made to the property. However,

the tribunal chairman found that no significant improvements had been carried out on the house in many years and did not grant any reduction. It was also determined that Mrs South had no legal right to remain as a sitting tenant. Mrs South then took the case to the Court of Appeal, which meant that the house could not be sold until the issue was resolved. Ultimately, Mrs South lost the case, the lease and the house.

On September 11th, 2001, Sarah's husband purchased the lease for just under £2.4 m and enfranchised the property from the Phillimore Estate:

> we tried to stop it because we thought the world was ending on that day. We were both very nervous, but she invited us over 'calm down, come to the house, and walk around your new house' and so we went over there, and she had champagne for us, and she had lit up the whole house with candles, and she felt really happy for us… She tried to comfort us 'I know for you this is a difficult time but I want you to know that this is a wonderful place', she was very sweet… she befriended us, because she probably thought there was a bit of a kinship, as we were both interested in art, both had three children, but also because in her view we were not just looking for a speculative investment, but for a home for our family

Unfortunately, I could not collect Mrs South's version of the story, as she had passed away a few years after downsizing into a small garden flat on the Phillimore Estate.

'Welcome to the *Phillimore*', this is how Sarah, and her husband were greeted when Mrs South introduced them to one of her neighbours. That emphasis on *Phillimore*, Sarah explains, made her immediately aware that they had come to a very special place:

> a rarefied tiny area of Kensington with some really beautiful houses, a *very English* neighbourhood, where there is a feel of a sort of enclave, something like 'we live in the *Boltons'* [an exclusive residential enclave in Chelsea]. [Author's emphasis]

The refurbishment of the property was demanding, extensive and expensive, and took almost five years:

> The house was so old and dilapidated, very English, because Mrs South was an art historian, very much into this pre-Raphaelite stuff, it was like William Morris' style, you know, wallpaper everywhere, heavy upholstery, but it had so much potential, and we had *appetite* for doing some change to a house … [Author's emphasis]

Mrs South's flamboyant interior was completely replaced with a minimalist style that complemented the owners' contemporary art collection. Only the original staircase remained, serving as a Victorian centrepiece.

However, Sarah's family life project was short-lived. In 2014, her marriage ended and with her children then attending boarding school, she found herself alone in the large house. In December 2015, the house was sold for almost £17.5 m.

Sarah says Kensington was good as 'a place for families', with very good private schools. However, her family life had come to an end and she desired a change. She decided to move to

Islington where she feels immersed in a more 'vibrant and real environment, where one can build more real relationships than in Kensington'. But there was also another reason for Sarah's decision to leave the Phillimore Estate. The residential environment had changed significantly since she arrived. This emerges clearly from her vivid description of the taking over of the area by phantom investors who had transformed the Phillimore Estate into a place without life:

> When we arrived, it was possible for more diverse people to live in the area. It was neighbourly and friendly and then that sort of buying up happened. By the time I left, I felt like it was a *morgue, just dead*, it felt sad… Big, beautiful houses and no one lives there …, a Hong Kong Chinese has the house opposite, next to us it was rented, and we never even knew those neighbours, never even met them, never saw them, you just see the guys polishing the brass door's knobs, nothing else. [Author's emphasis]

The daughter of a Ukrainian mining magnate and her Danish husband now own Sarah's former home:

> They appear to have ripped out everything we did, and 'restored it' to a fake Victorian vibe, … now I know how Mrs South felt when she knew about the changes we were going to make to her house!'

Sarah recalls that after 2008, during the peak of the basement construction trend, underground excavations caused numerous conflicts between neighbours. In 2012 she became part of a group of residents who voiced their concerns about a two-floor extension beneath a £12m property. This extension was intended to house a swimming pool, gym and massage room.

Victoria, who also joined the residents' protest, resides in a home located on the highly desirable side of Phillimore Gardens, where the rear gardens seamlessly blend with the lush greenery of Holland Park. Her house, adorned with thick chenille curtains in a faded shade of olive, was purchased by her father, a British entrepreneur and financier, in 1961 when she was five years old. Following the death of her parents, she inherited the house and has continued to live there with her husband, a Baronet, and their three sons, who are now living on their own. During our conversation, she informs me that there are less than thirty years left of her lease before it expires.

> Our children will deal with it, we have enough time left to live here ... They will decide what to do with the property when time will come.

In this context, the impact of aggressive buyers, such as Sarah's husband, on the existing residents can be seen as a struggle between 'old money' and 'new money,' where the latter possesses significant financial capability and readily available capital. As highlighted by Burrows and Knowles (2019), conflicts between different forms of wealth, juxtaposing the 'haves' and the 'have yachts,' have become increasingly prevalent in Kensington and other elite neighbourhoods in London over the past fifteen years. This phenomenon is closely tied to the transformation of the prime property market into a safe haven for investors (Glucksberg et al., 2015; Glucksberg, 2016a; Atkinson et al., 2017b; Minton, 2017).

However, it is not just money at stake in the stories told by Mrs South and Victoria, but a whole value system that is embodied by a dwindling number of residents of the Phillimore. The influx of new money into what Sarah describes as the quintessentially 'English' Phillimore has brought with it an insatiable appetite for change, resulting in the obliteration or distortion of the longstanding aesthetic preferences that were part and parcel of the Kensingtonian way of life, passed down through generations. Morris-style wallpapers and faded upholstery are being replaced by vibrant contemporary interiors, as seen in Sarah's refurbishment, or transformed into an artificial Victorian ambiance, as exemplified by the Danish-Ukrainian tycoon couple who purchased from Sarah. Tastes and dislikes intersect and overlap, overshadowing the symbolic capital embodied in the Kensingtonian legacy. From this perspective, the solemn candlelight ceremony marking the transfer of the property from Mrs South to Sarah was not merely the celebration of an economic transaction but metaphorically represents a shift in taste and lifestyle. After a strenuous battle, the 'old' surrendered to the 'new,' but it did so with a touch of 'style,' adhering to the codes of the Kensingtonian tradition that was once prevalent in Phillimore.

The example of Phillimore Gardens confirms the existence, as in Holland Park, of different social groups among the elite enclaves. Although in this case the focus is on the clash between new and old money, the dynamics of place-making are similar. People tend to ignore each other until a fight breaks up. When this happens, it is harsh and sustained by alliances that go beyond classed distinctions.

The area around Victoria Road: a peaceful backwater

Walking with Michael towards Victoria Road, we zig-zag along rows of immaculate terraced houses and semi-detached villas to the south of High Street Kensington. I am struck by the difference between the architecture of this area compared to the grandeur of the houses in the surroundings of Holland Park. The houses are smaller here. They rarely exceed three floors and convey a peaceful village atmosphere, still reminiscent of the time when this area, then known as Kensington New Town, was a Victorian bohemian enclave. The village feel is accentuated by the contrast with the high-rise terraced houses and modern blocks that encapsulate the area, acting as physical barriers to its permeability by cars and pedestrians.

> This is what makes this area so different from other parts of Kensington … It is a peaceful backwater… I tell you a bit of the story. There was a report in 1963 called *Traffic in town* which was trying to recognise that cars were one of the biggest problems and proposed to create environmental areas, cutting out the traffic. That scheme was applied to this area, that became a sort of a revanchist … they made this one way out here and this other way out there [pointing at the map where I annotate my street observations],

so you can't drive in, and you can't drive across, so you would not come into this area unless you have got some business to do. This is what gives it such a village feel.

At the time of our conversation, Michael and Carole were living in a small, terraced house in Cambridge Place, a tiny cul-de-sac just behind Victoria Road (Fig. 18). They have been living there since the early 1980s, when they managed to buy the property thanks to a legacy and the profit from the sale of their flat in Cottesmore Court. If it wasn't for the legacy, they could not have afforded to buy an entire house in Kensington, however small, in those years. He points out that although he had a good salary as an urban planner in a private practice and a was civil servant, Carole had stopped working and they had three children, who were sent to Fox, the local primary school as they could not afford a private school. With a mortgage they paid for essential works:

When I arrived here there was no central heating, there was a boiler in the corner there. They had fireplaces everywhere, one in each room; so we had to take out everything here. It took us about ten years to do all the things. We could not do everything at the time, because we did not have somewhere else to live while this was going on.

Fig. 18. Single family terraced houses in Cambridge Place. Image by author.

Michael acknowledges that when they arrived in Cambridge Place, they were like 'black swans' among Kensingtonians:

We bought from a lawyer who lived there with his family. Just in front lived a prominent judge of the International Court of Justice, His great-great-grandfather was a famous abolitionist, … she was the daughter of a French judge who worked for the Nuremberg tribunal'.

The judge, the lawyer and many similar families living in Cambridge Place in the 1980s were still part of that post-war English intellectual and social elite (Griffiths et al., 2008) whose authority

over the place was grounded in the cultural, social and symbolic capital embedded in their Kensingtonian habitus. Carol and Michael did not belong to that class, neither by birth nor by education. The only trait they might have had in common was the shortage of liquid assets to invest in the house, but, as Michael points out, many properties were leaseholds and 'when a lease gets short people are not so keen to invest in a house they do not own'.

Although the first celebrities arrived in the Victoria Road area in the same years as Michael and Carole (Nureyev had living been already in Victoria Road since 1973; Dustin Hoffman bought a house soon afterwards), the pace at which houses changed hands was quite slow in the neighbourhood according to Michael:

> I stood for the election in 1978 for this area as an independent. I was going to stand again in 1992 but I was not allowed by the government because of my job. But what I did do was to compare the electoral registers between the two dates … there was a very low turnover of people, and I managed to get the support of important people in the area, but all of them have now died, and the people who replaced them are international groups…

Gradually, over more than 50 years as Kensington resident, Michael has witnessed the disappearance from the village of the 'original Kensingtonians' and their replacement by new owners with fresh foreign capital to invest:

> not all the people who buy, plan to stay. I mean that although people have been giving the reason that they needed to expand their amount of space for their family, providing it with TV Rooms, swimming pools etc, then when it is finished, they do not come to live there. They sell it, so increasingly the houses in this area have been taken over and transformed into a money dump.

In this regard, Michael brings in the case of the elderly Swiss woman, who in 2013 bought a disused warehouse squeezed into a low-rise terraced in a small cul-de sac near Cambridge Place. Behind the modest façade, the property was extending substantially to the rear, providing an excellent opportunity for vast underground excavations under the existing building. The woman applied to dig three floors down, triggering a revolt on the part of her neighbours, who massively objected to the proposal. The infuriated woman raised the tone of the battle by painting the façade of her house in striking red and white stripes (Fig. 19), which came as a shock to the existing residents. In June 2021, after six years of battles, the refurbishment was completed. After the restrictions set by the new basement regulation (RBKC, 2015), the woman obtained consent to dig just one floor down. The red and white stripes disappeared, and the facade is now clad with dark brown stone, attuned to the sober character of the street. To date (spring 2023), no sign of residential use is at all visible.

Fig. 19. The 'striped house' (2015). Image by author.

At the time of our conversation in April 2019, Michael and Carole were looking to relocate to something smaller:

> Here, there is more space than we need. When we had the three children the house was full, now it is just the two of us rattling around and somebody coming for cleaning once a week'.

While revising and updating my notes two years later, I found out from the Zoopla website that the house had been sold in May 2020. Although this was at the peak of the Covid pandemic, when the housing market was stagnating, the sale went well. The property was sold at £4.1m. I rang Michael for an update, and yes, I was informed that the house was sold to a young Chinese man who had been gifted the property and its refurbishment by his mother as a wedding present: 'One of those very clever students, very English in his manners, but she is very Chinese, and hardly speaks any English. They have recently submitted the application which includes a basement extension, it will take time, she is pregnant, and it seems they are going to live there…'.

Michael's entire adult life was spent in Kensington and for Kensington in his multiple roles as a government advisor for planning policy, Chair of the Victoria Road Area Residents' Association, a Trustee of the Kensington Society and of the Kensington and Chelsea Social Council:

> So, I am not typical, as I am far more embedded in my area, and I dedicated a huge amount to my community. However, in our experience with the Kensington society, we can say that in certain areas there are responsible communities behind, and these areas can take care of themselves - we are such an area - and for us the Council is not more than a managing agent and we get them to do what we want. When we look at other areas, they are apathetic and some of the people do not have any loyalty to the

> place. So, there are areas that are different because there are a lot of bedsits or airbnb or other areas where it is just pop stars and bankers, and there is no real sense of community except when they all agree to stop someone who wants to build some major basement.

Michael's description of Victoria Road surroundings as an area that takes care of itself through its 'responsible community' suggests a residential pattern based on forms of withdrawal and insulation. The idea of a community that feels empowered, through its own associations, to steer the council's policy according to its needs is not just the expression of a desire for spatial autonomy. At the same time, it in fact reveals a pattern of spatial segregation where higher-income-groups tend to insulate themselves from the surroundings by creating their own exclusionary and exclusive spaces with the aid and complicity of the local authority, holding back public policy of inclusive residential patterning (Atkinson, 2006).

From this point of view, the idea of the 'responsible community' goes together with Michael's understanding of his area as a 'village', 'a peaceful backwater' shielded by higher buildings, whose boundaries are reinforced by a traffic plan aimed at keeping the area free from cars and pedestrians. This type of seclusion within soft boundaries can be framed as an elite residential pattern that Atkinson (2006) describes as 'enclavism', where 'relative insulation' and 'open seclusion' represent the lowest level on a scale of segregation tendencies enacted by the elite. In this regard, it has been suggested that enclavism not only works against external threats but is consistent with the high value the elites ascribe to privacy, quiet and an absence of social contact, themselves seen as badges of status (Atkinson, Flint, 2004: 890).

Given Michael's lifetime commitment to his community, it came as a surprise that 'the worst thing [he] finds a bit difficult to say is *I live in Kensington"*:

> You know, I used to speak at conferences … and as soon as I mentioned I came from Kensington, it was like 'oh' [rejection gesture]. People have such strong preconceptions of the kind of people who live here…I can't change the way they think about it, you know, it is like a stamp in your forehead. I feel sad that people feel like that, but the impact on me is that if somebody asks me where I come from, I say I come from London. And if they insist, I say just south of Kensington Gardens. I had to live with it.

I could not help but share with him the knowledge that I am well aware of that 'oh' gesture and the reluctance on my part to admit that I live alongside billionaires. However, even though Michael and I both feel a certain unease about being associated with the super-rich, he politely reminds me that the street where I live, with its converted flats, bedsits and Airbnb accommodation, bears little to no resemblance to the pristine, village-like surroundings of his own area, except for the fact that they are spatially adjacent: 'with all due respect I do not consider Cheniston Gardens as part of my community!'

Michael's desire to distance himself from other areas of Kensington reflects his concept of village. As noted by Paul Watt, spaces of belonging are often defined by excluding areas that are

perceived to have lower cultural value, thereby asserting moral ownership over the selected residential areas. This process of defining belonging is dynamic and influenced by both time and space, as highlighted by Bridge (2003) and Watt (2009) and discussed by Benson (2014).

Michael's views reveal an underlying fear for the future of his 'village'. During my ethnographic research, I attended meetings of two local associations: the Victoria Road Area Resident Association and the Kensington Society. These meetings consisted mainly of elderly members who were not being replaced by the global tycoons or magnates who had recently moved into the area. The 'responsible community' that Michael takes pride in is sustained by a dwindling group of Kensingtonians, who are increasingly outnumbered by absentee landlords and ultra-wealthy residents whose connection to the area does not seem to match that of the old elite.

However, Michael's personal reasons for feeling besieged in his neighbourhood are also linked to his social identity. In order to fit into this transforming social environment, one must belong either to the old elite represented by the remaining Kensingtonians, or the new elite legitimised by their wealth. Coming from a middle-class background, Michael has struggled to fit into the Victoria Road area since the 1980s, feeling like a 'black swan' among the Kensingtonians. Despite eventually finding his place and becoming 'Kensingtonian' through his community work, he senses that the old environment is fading with his generation, and he does not identify with the aggressive influx of the new super-rich residents. To maintain a sense of identity in his surroundings, Michael needs to differentiate himself from the nearby areas. By distancing himself from Cheniston Gardens, he defiantly asserts that we are not alike; he belongs to the Kensington elite, while I do not.

Conclusion

By bringing together three of the most exclusive sectors of Kensington - Holland Park, The Phillimore, and the Victoria Road area - this chapter has explored how place intersects with class distinctions in elite enclaves, providing evidence of the existence of distinct social groups which differ from each other not only in terms of wealth or cultural and social background, but also in the way they participate in the process of neighbourhood-making. Although they rarely interact, these different groups seem to ground their social identification with place on the idea, if not on the reality, of the lives of 'others', who according to the circumstances may become allies or harsh enemies.

The main distinction between residents is between absentees and engaged households. The absentees rarely show up or are gone for extended periods. Although they do not actively participate in the neighbourhood-making process, their absence is perceived as a presence by the other residents who define their sense of belonging through continuous processes of distinction and differentiation from them (Bourdieu, 1984). Unlike the absentees, the super-rich households actively engage in the neighbourhood-making process. Despite leading a 'split life' between

multiple residences, their main family homes are in Kensington. Their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood is embodied in a 'family home lifestyle' that allows them to blend in and remain inconspicuous by adhering to the perceived normality.

In all three elite enclaves, my respondents refer to their living environment as a 'village.' These elite villages correspond to specific areas within the larger neighbourhood. The village boundaries are not physically demarcated by fences or gates but are instead embedded in the architectural features of the areas. In Holland Park and the Phillimore, they are defined by the unique location at the edge of the park and by the grandeur of the Victorian mansions; in the Victoria Road area they are marked by the taller buildings that surround the Victorian village architecture, and by a traffic plan that isolates the area as a car- and pedestrian-free environment. This understanding of elite residential geography as villages creates a symbolic landscape characterised by spaces of privilege and relative insulation that cater for the preferences of affluent individuals who withdraw into enclaves 'guarded' by invisible ties of collective discursive practices that they incorporate into their routines (Atkinson, 2006; Atkinson and Flint, 2004).

The cases presented in this chapter demonstrate the presence in all three villages of a new financial elite investing significant sums of money to purchase and expand existing properties by constructing luxury mega-basements. This new elite challenges the claim to place of the established residents. Distinctions between this new wealthy elite and long-term residents manifest in various configurations, encompassing differences in wealth, taste and lifestyle. In the Phillimore Estate, the clash between the new and old elites, exemplified by the case of Mrs South, takes on the tone of calculated eviction, where 'new money' not only aggressively displaces 'old money' (Burrows and Knowles, 2019), but also washes out any trace of the previous décor.

In contrast, the conflict between uber-wealthy investors in Holland Park is not rooted in a financial power dynamic. Instead, it reveals a thinly veiled resistance to the uncontrolled proliferation of mega-basement architecture. By opposing the Ds' project, Mr and Mrs T metaphorically juxtapose their discreet above-ground lifestyle that centres on their family home with the Ds' aspiration for excessive 'luxified troglodytism' (Baldwin et al., 2019).

In the Victoria Road area, an established Kensingtonian elite asserts its claim to place by investing in the neighbourhood as a responsible community, which starkly contrasts with the lifestyle of the new elite. However, drawing on the narratives of residents with middle-class backgrounds (Michael, Shian and John), I argue that fitting into an elite environment requires one to either be born and bred into the elite or possess the financial means to access it. Michael, with his middle-class background, continues to struggle to fit into his 'village' despite his long-standing commitment to the community. He was neither born and raised in Kensington nor able to afford to send his children to a private school like the established elites. To continue living in the area, he must sell his property and downsize back to a flat which was his original choice as a Kensington gentrifier in the 1970s.

Conversely, Shian and John's deliberate decision to 'elect' Holland Park as the place to which they want to belong (Savage et al., 2005) is driven by their aspiration to climb socially. They made a conscious choice to move away from what they perceived as the chaotic atmosphere of Notting Hill and upgrade to a more exclusive and residential environment among super-rich families and absentees. Despite their substantial income, they could afford only a flat in Holland Park, rather than a whole grand mansion like the wealthier individuals in the neighbourhood. However, by residing in this elite village, Shian's children have access to the same private school as their super-rich neighbours. This school environment fosters social connections with like-minded parents, enabling them to share motivations and aspirations, while empowering their children to become part of the next generation of the elite, thus activating a new process of social reproduction.

Moreover, through its analysis of three elite sectors of Kensington this chapter provides evidence of the way exclusive areas are imagined and practiced as villages in elite neighbourhoods. Their soft boundaries are inscribed in the built environment. However, they are not protected by fences or gates but are rather maintained by practices and discursive boundary drawing that are part and parcel of the process of neighbourhood-making.

CHAPTER FIVE – ORDINARY WEALTHY SURROUNDINGS

If we move away from the exclusive and rarefied enclaves dominated by single-family houses and mega-basements, it becomes apparent that extensive areas of Kensington exhibit more diverse residential environments where single-family houses are the exception rather than the rule. This chapter delves into the social patterns associated with four recurring residential configurations in these mixed environments: flat conversions, apartments, mews and cottages. The ethnographic research focuses on four specific areas: the slope of Campden Hill, Cheniston Gardens, Gregory Place and Lexham Gardens Mews.

In these areas, the presence of the super-wealthy 'one percent' population often goes unnoticed, as they blend in with the 'ordinary wealthy'. The concept of the 'ordinary wealthy' was introduced by Mike Savage and colleagues in the context of the Great British Class Survey, making up a larger portion of the population, estimated at around 6 percent, within the elite category (Cunningham and Savage, 2015; Savage et al., 2013, 2015).

In this chapter, the broader understanding of the elite proposed by Savage and colleagues has been adopted to describe individuals who possess sufficient wealth to reside in an elite neighbourhood like Kensington, although their lifestyle and residential choices differ from those of the super-rich. From this point of view, I align my perspective with a 'phenomenological' approach to wealth, centred on the experience, perception and understanding of wealth among individuals (Hecht et al., 2022).

Among Kensington's 'ordinary wealthy' population, a variety of social configurations emerge, which combine wealth, habitus, cultural and social capital and length of stay (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). In this chapter, I examine how the dynamics of attachment to place and class identities work in this type of surroundings and how they manifest in the everyday process of neighbourhood-making (Benson, 2014; Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005). By exploring how spatial dynamics of belonging unfold, I focus on the specificities and idiosyncrasies that arise in relation to different residential settings and types of buildings.

Dwelling' is the 'field' where the residents of converted flats continually negotiate place, measuring themselves against one another through conflicts or fragile alliances that reveal their tastes and sensibilities, the likes and dislikes that are unconsciously embodied in people's way of being and lifestyles. Fewer and fewer of the middle-class British gentrifiers who arrived thirty to fifty years ago in Kensington engage in harsh fights with their neighbours of different nationalities. However long-term residents team up irrespective of their nationalities against short-term residents and airbnb lodgers. Drawing from the works of Skeggs (1997) and Strathern (1992) on the middle class, I argue that mixing with transient residents is perceived as 'inappropriate' by long term

residents because it potentially undermines middle-class respectability and generates a ‘fear of falling’ from the privilege achieved through their residential choice (Ehrenreich, 1989).

Middle-class flat dwellers represent a distinct social group among both a thinning residual group of working-class bedsitters, and the more affluent population of Kensingtonians living in apartments of substantial size. The latter describe themselves as ‘solid middle class’, hinting at a comfortable affluency, but also at the ‘solid’ roots of the Kensingtonian tradition (see Chapter Three), where belonging to Kensington’s upper-middle class is sustained by high levels of cultural and symbolic capital and by the privilege into which people are born and bred, rather than by the social status they long to achieve.

My ethnography of Kensington’s ordinary wealthy environments is also a personal reflection on my own identity as a resident. Indeed, having acquired a property in Cheniston Gardens before reaching my sixties was not only a prudent investment of my family’s legacy but also the realisation of an aspiration and the beginning of a new phase in my life. After retiring from my role as a museum curator in Italy, I relocated to London to live independently in Cheniston Gardens, becoming a British citizen in 2022. My lifestyle choice and individual experience of belonging influence the reflexivity and positionality of my research, as I am simultaneously a researcher and one among the many ordinary affluent individuals residing in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of my story as an ‘elderly Italian female expat in Kensington’ highlights the variety of social configurations among the ordinary wealthy.

Cheniston Gardens

Cheniston Gardens is a Victorian development consisting of 39 terraced houses that have been converted into flats of various sizes. The houses are situated along an L-shaped street intersecting Wright Lane, approximately a hundred yards south of High Street Kensington and the underground station (Fig. 20). While the everyday rhythms of the street are relatively quiet compared to the bustling surroundings, Cheniston Gardens is not an isolated area. From my top-floor window at No. 10, I can observe and hear the constant flow of tourists dragging their wheeled luggage along Wrights Lane towards the nearby hotels. Quite a few of them make a stop at the Muffin Man, a tearoom located at the corner with Wrights Lane.

The market prices of properties in Cheniston Gardens exhibit significant diversity. Flats are sold for prices ranging from £600,000 to over a million pounds, depending on their size. On the other hand, dilapidated studios are available for rent at £230 per week, including utilities. These studios are often occupied by individuals with low incomes, both on short and long-term contracts. Their living conditions frequently fall below acceptable standards, with some units still featuring shared toilets and showers located on the landings along the communal staircase.

Fig. 20. Cheniston Gardens' terraced houses. Image by author.

Although some buildings, including the one I reside in, have been refurbished in recent years, the overall condition of the terraces in Cheniston Gardens remains quite uneven. While certain facades have undergone recent renovation and repointing, others still bear a thick blackish coating resulting from long-term neglect, accentuated by numerous loose aerial cables hanging along the frontages. Window frames, front doors and tiled steps display different styles and colours, and several doorbells are of poor quality, with labels haphazardly scribbled.

The patchwork nature of the street reflects a residential pattern characterised by socio-economic disparities. The individuals I interviewed included fairly affluent residents such as a Swiss banker, the CEO of an international IT company, professionals in financial services and IT, and a primary school teacher and university professor, to name a few. They live in fully refurbished two-bedroom flats. Alongside them, there are also nurses, social workers, shop assistants, receptionists, yoga teachers and students who have opted for small studios or bedsits in Cheniston Gardens due to its affordability and proximity to their workplaces or educational institutions.

Living in a converted terraced house

The flat smells like wet dogs: 'It's the dryer in the lobby, you know I am American I must have a dryer'. Claire's flat is on the first floor, with a bow window and a nice little balcony overlooking Cheniston Gardens.

When the house was built more than hundred and thirty years ago, this flat was the sitting room of a large family home. When Claire moved there in 2006 with her British husband and her

three teen-age children she searched for documents and plans in the local archive of the RBKC to learn about the history of the street, and even created a resident's website with the history of the site. Yet she soon lost her enthusiasm:

> I was overwhelmed with all the problems with the freehold company… a dreadful nightmare… and we are not completely over yet, after more than twelve years … You should have seen the state of disrepair when we bought thirteen years ago … I paid from my pocket for the most urgent repairs to the communal area, but it was impossible to find an agreement on the major works… the roof was leaking, the parapet dangerously cracking… but *she* did not admit it'. [Participant's emphasis]

She is Glenda, the 'basement lady', a retired lecturer in Economics at a London university. Glenda's lives in the basement flat, in the space that used to be the kitchen, scullery and pantry of the Victorian home. Now the lower ground floor is accessible exclusively through an external staircase, but originally it was connected internally to the rest of the house through a flight of stairs, that was removed in the early 1960s when the building was converted and sold as five separate self-contained flats, each of which takes up a floor.

When Claire arrived in 2006, Glenda had been living in the basement flat for more than twenty years:

> My partner at the time had just got a job lecturing in Roehampton, I was lecturing in Central London, we had sold a place on Dartford Heath, and he spotted an advert in the Sunday Times that sounded interesting.

For £80,000 paid off with a mortgage not only did Glenda buy her flat but also the freehold of the entire house. However, if being a landlady initially appeared to be a lucrative business, it soon revealed its drawbacks. In fact, maintenance or restoration works had been carried out rarely since the house was built at the end of the 19th century. The conversion into five separate units had been carried out without planning permission from the council. As a result, at the time Glenda bought the freehold, repairs to the communal parts were urgently needed, and for the next twenty years she struggled to get money for improvements from the leaseholders. Owner after owner, tenant after tenant, the communal area was patched up with superficial makeovers until eventually Glenda received an offer for the freehold enfranchisement from the other leaseholders. That was a consequence of the Leasehold Reform Act of 2002 that introduced the collective right to buy the freehold. 'Glenda was happy to sell … It was a relief for her to get rid of such a burden…' remembers Ana, who is the owner of the second floor flat, originally the bedroom area in the former Victorian home:

> Claire and Richard had just arrived, I had bought three years earlier, then everything went wrong … Glenda felt that her role as landlady was under scrutiny, she and Claire where both in their late forties, one was an authentic Brit, the other an American … and she was taking over, Glenda could not accept it … It

was a matter of power, a pure matter of power … The case ended up in court, Glenda won … we had to pay a huge amount of money, but at least we are freeholders now.

The battle between Claire and Glenda discloses an irreconcilable clash of sensibilities about building maintenance. Glenda regards the place where she lives first and foremost as a safe deposit box, an asset for her old age. The house is the loyal companion of an entire life and makes her richer while aging together with her. Cracks in the bricks and rust on the ironwork go hand in hand with the wrinkles on her face. Patchy lifting here and there temporarily delays an irreversible decay.

Glenda was fiercely against stripping the coat of white acrylic paint that at an unknown date had been laid over the creamy stock bricks of the front facade. Painting over bricks, so typical of many Victorian facades, was and still is a well-known shortcut, a cheaper alternative to cleaning, restoring and tuck-pointing. Years of neglect can be easily concealed under a quick coat of white paint. Claire and her husband Richard, a writer and expert in the conservation of old buildings, stand at the other end of the spectrum. They invest the Victorian creamy stock bricks with almost human qualities, describing them as tactile, textured, grainy and warm. The brick façade is likened to a human body that needs to breathe and matures and improves with the passage of years. From this point of view the white paint needed to be removed urgently.

Stories reflecting different sensibilities and approaches to building maintenance and refurbishing emerge from many Cheniston Gardens' terraced houses:

That bloody Italian and his works, he broke through my ceiling and now he wants to get rid of my water tank on the roof; he is arrogant, I will report him for bullying ... (Jenny, yoga teacher)

They are Swiss, you know, their posh architect wants us to engage in massive communal works; we do not care, we just let them talk … (Maria, retired primary school teacher)

One of the reasons for conflicts among neighbours in flat conversions is closely tied to the type of tenure. Converted flats were initially leasehold properties, with their freeholds becoming available for enfranchisement following the Freehold Act 2002. Freeholders have equal rights in making decisions regarding the communal areas of the building, which are often not professionally managed. Consequently, there is a high likelihood of disputes and protracted negotiations before arriving at shared decisions.

However, when we examine the nature of the conflicts, it becomes apparent that the majority are triggered, or at the very least intensified, by cultural and social differences between neighbours. Drawing upon Bourdieu's conceptual framework, it can be argued that much of the thinly veiled intolerance of one's fellow flat owners stems from clashes between different forms of 'habitus' associated with distinct nationalities. Here, 'habitus' refers to a system of cognitive 'structures of perception, conception, and action' that are ingrained through family upbringing and unconsciously influenced by one's environment (Bourdieu, 1977). From this perspective, the rules and codes at

the core of an English individual's habitus may differ significantly from those of an Italian, North American or Chinese individual.

Adopting this Bourdieusian perspective, a 'dwelling' becomes a 'playground' (referred to as the 'field' in Bourdieu's framework) where a multitude of habitus' clash. Tastes and sensibilities, likes and dislikes, which are unconsciously embodied in people's way of being, collide when it comes to matters of home, decor and maintenance. Intolerance towards the tastes of racialised others (Bourdieu, 1984, page 56; Watt 2018: 2876) reinforces prejudices that contribute to strengthening self-identities through perceived differences: 'I am Italian (or English, French, or American), and I am not like *him/them*.'

Bedsits and studios

No. 9 was still a boarding house at the time I started exploring Cheniston Gardens in 2014. Several rooms in the house were occupied by an enclave of Spanish migrants who had been living there for over 20 years on a social rent contract. These people were on low paid jobs, mostly in the caring and cleaning sectors, and one of them, Pedro, acted as an unofficial house caretaker during time off from his job as a night watchman in a hotel in Knightsbridge; he was in charge of collecting the rents on behalf of the landlord: 'When you have to collect the money' – he explained with a complicit wink – 'you have to speak the same language'. That was one of the last surviving bedsit houses in Cheniston Gardens.

That house attracted my curiosity since I first arrived in Cheniston Gardens in 2012. It stood there right in front of my window with its blackish coat of dirt, its discoloured and ripped curtains, and yet with the prettiest balcony of the street, tiny and overwhelmed by many kinds of plants, one on top of the other. Every morning after breakfast, the noise of a broom alerted me that Pedro was out in the street sweeping the pavement in front of his building. On weekends, particularly during the summer, when windows were open, I could hear the jingling and clinking of kitchenware that mingled with indistinct conversations, laughing and coughing.

On the tiny first floor balcony the 'lady with the balcony' was coming out to pamper her greenery. A bedsit tenant for many years, every spring she used to fill Cheniston Gardens with the seasonal rhythm of her suspended charming garden. In the bedsit next to her, I could see two women in their fifties (I figured out they were sisters as they looked very much alike) setting the table. After lunch, they also used to come out on their balcony, next to the cosy flowered one, where they occasionally treated each other to pedicure sessions.

Just above them, on the second floor, every afternoon after 5:30, the 'same man' was there, sitting on an armchair at the centre of his room just in front of his window. The window was left constantly open, a bit even in winter because he is a heavy smoker. A man in his 50ish, I would say, every single evening I observed him on that armchair, alone. A ceiling lamp hung over his head as he smoked and drank beer, his attention focused on a TV screen that remained hidden

from my view. Occasionally, he would engage in loud, aggressive conversation with himself, accompanied by animated hand gestures. He maintained a fix gaze either directed at a seemingly empty view outside his window or perhaps at the TV screen, but our eyes never met during the six long years I observed him. Only once, I noticed he joined the two 'sisters' downstairs to play a card game, but I was too far away to understand what language they were speaking. Sometimes in summer he disappeared for a month or so, perhaps, I imagined, to visit some relatives in his homeland.

When I started my ethnography, I tried several times to reach out to the people of the house in front, but Pedro acted as an insurmountable barrier. I believe he was suspicious of my research; possibly the idea that I was going to write about the neighbourhood was not at all reassuring for him. I think he was somehow reluctant to disclose things regarding the lives of those people, perhaps he was simply worried that I could became aware of the degree of disrepair of the house and even indirectly contribute to the acceleration of their eviction.

Bedsits rented out for long periods of time to a low-income population are now rare in Cheniston Gardens, as in the rest of Kensington. Even those who settled in a place for many years and have developed a sense of attachment to the place, like Pedro, do not feel at ease in the neighbourhood: 'We are going to move soon to North Kensington, where there is the Spanish school and a large Spanish community'. For these residents, the terraced house served as a haven where they concealed their distinct lifestyle from the other residents. Their reluctance to engage in conversations with their neighbours, including myself as a perceived newcomer, is somehow revealing of the precariousness of their situation, living with the constant fear of imminent eviction.

Over the last ten years 'the house in front' was put up for sale several times. When the tenants were eventually evicted, it was transformed into eighteen self-contained studios of the type advertised on the rental market as 'student' accommodation' and subsequently listed on Airbnb.

Time, lifestyles and attachment

Length of stay plays a significant role in the process of neighbourhood-making in Cheniston Gardens. Many long-term residents are homeowners who belong to a generation of middle-class British individuals who moved to Kensington thirty to fifty years ago, when properties were still relatively affordable. Their decision to find a property in Central London was often driven by an aspiration to move away from the middle-class environments where they were raised, whether in the newly developed suburbs of London or further afield, and symbolically 'return' to the city. In this sense, their residential choice can be framed within the 'back to the city movement' that contributed to the gentrification of inner London from the 1970s (Smith, 1979). However, given that property prices in Kensington were already relatively high compared to other inner London's residential areas, these individuals could only buy dilapidated flat conversions within this neighbourhood.

Over time, the generation of long-term British residents who invested a modest amount of money decades ago to purchase run-down flat conversions in Cheniston Gardens is gradually diminishing. Whether driven by necessity or a desire for a peaceful retirement in a quieter environment, many of them are now selling their Kensington properties, utilising the capital gained from the sale. While I was working on this chapter, Glenda informed me that 'very sadly' she had listed her flat on the market:

> Now I am retired, plus lockdown, I have decided I probably have more to do living in the country [in the Hampshire hamlet where she inherited a modest house from her parents], I have had an offer, although it is pretty rubbish, but with things the way they are I will probably go along. I am feeling quite depressed about leaving as I have lived here virtually my whole working life.

Maria is another Cheniston Gardens' long-term British resident. A retired primary school teacher and a widow now, she lives with two of her three adult sons. Together with her elder son, a filmmaker, she volunteers with young adults with disabilities and refugee and immigrant families. Their flat is one of the largest in Cheniston Gardens, a maisonette of more than 150 square metres. The living room on the ground floor is screened from the street by dozens of plants placed against the large bay window that looks like an indoor greenhouse. Though unpretentious and unsophisticated, their home is cosy and atmospheric and conveys an overall sense of inclusiveness. Nothing is there by chance; furniture and accessories tell a lot about the life story of the family, the places they had previously lived in or visited, their tastes and beliefs. The miniatures and butterflies framed on the walls, the tribal mask on the side table, the African wooden masque over the fireplace and the poster of a Ken Loach film are fragments of personal biographies – messy, temporary and precarious, as human lives are.

The narratives of long-term residents like Maria and Glenda reveal a strong attachment to Cheniston Gardens and to their home:

> I have been knowing this street for a long time; there was a special memory attached to it, as we married here at the register office just opposite our house in 1977 … so when this house came on the market in 1992, I literally fell in love with it (Maria)

> Cheniston Gardens is my home. I like for its diversity, its location and for being a little scruffy' (Emily)

> It's the last scruffy street in this part of Kensington, but it has a lot of character' (Emma)

'Scruffy' is a recurring adjective in the descriptions of the street, and, in contrast to 'shabby', it entails an implicit loving indulgence for this 'idiosyncratic' street (Glenda). People seem to love it even more because of its rundown character, like a mother who shows a particular care for a sickly child.

The term 'convenient', as repeatedly mentioned in the residents' accounts of Cheniston Gardens, encompasses an ambiguity in its meaning. On one hand, it refers to the favourable

location of the neighbourhood, while on the other hand, it signifies affordability, which may be the primary reason behind the decision to purchase a property in Cheniston Gardens. Compared to other areas in Kensington, 'scruffy' Cheniston Gardens is amongst the most affordable options. Thus, being a resident in Cheniston Gardens can be seen as the realisation of an aspiration that would have been difficult to achieve elsewhere in Kensington. In this context, the 'elective' belonging (Savage et al., 2005) of Cheniston Gardens' homeowners denotes the moral ownership of place that these residents claim through their ability to choose. This apparent freedom to choose, even when constrained by affordability, is a marker of middle-class status (see Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). As Savage (2010) highlights, this type of belonging is different from 'dwelling' in place; the focus of these residents is on living in a suitable environment for 'people like us', privileging the symbolic meanings of their place of residence (Benson, 2014).

The strong attachment to place shown by long-term homeowners stands in opposition to the lack of a feeling of belonging among short-term residents.

Fred, a US citizen and the CEO of an American media company, rented for less than two years a maisonette almost identical to Maria's, paying £3,350 a month (in 2016). Beautiful but rather impersonal, Fred's flat strikingly contrasts with the human richness of Maria's interior. It retains the typical character of many furnished homes advertised on the rental market, featuring immaculate fitted kitchens combined with living areas where the banal becomes manifest through touches of exoticism mixed with a zest for vintage and a flavour of Britishness. A reproduction of a photograph chosen from a predictable range of subjects invariably complements these interiors, usually placed above a fireplace. For Fred, the flat in Cheniston Gardens was 'just a place to live, with a 'convenient location by the tube station, close to grocery shops and to London cultural centres', but he regarded the area as 'too snobbish, and the people not all friendly'. Eventually, he left Kensington and moved to Notting Hill.

> Notting Hill has a more diverse economic and racial mix. Anyway, I stop two or three times a month at Whole Foods in Kensington on my way home, then hop on the bus from there to Notting Hill, and I can still run on weekends in Kensington Gardens.

Fred never invested emotionally in his Cheniston Gardens home. Groceries and well-being were the only forms of attachment he developed during his staying in Kensington.

However, as has long since been acknowledged (Savage et al., 2005; Watt 2009), the length of time people dwell in an area does not necessary increase their attachment; likewise, being a tenant rather than an owner occupier does not necessary entail a weaker sense of belonging.

In fact, as my encounters and observations in Cheniston Gardens testify, belonging is not univocal, but it can rather be interpreted and experienced according to circumstances and individual biographies and sensibilities. By bringing into the public eye the complex minutiae of her greenery, the 'lady of the balcony', a bedsit tenant of many years, is performing a ritual of place-

making that opened the space of her tiny cubicle into the street for her own enjoyment and the delight of the neighbourhood. Monica, a young Slovakian psychotherapist, although she lived for less than two years in the street, proactively engaged with her social surroundings, taking turns with Jenny, a long-term resident, to do the shopping of an elderly lady living on the top floor of her building. Monica is still attached to Cheniston Gardens and comes back from time to time:

> My accommodation was so tiny, the supermarkets so expensive … but this is one of the best places to live in London, it is a safe area, I keep coming here, I like the surroundings, there is Holland Park, the Muffin Man and so many cute little streets to walk around.

The two examples above – the 'lady of the balcony' and Monica – show how belonging-to-place builds up through everyday discursive practices that contribute to the process of neighbourhood-making.

Alliances

Despite the recurring conflicts over maintenance issues and regardless of their nationality and tenure, long-term residents claim to have good relationships with some of their neighbours. They share stories of communal solidarity as evidence of proactive behaviour. However, in practice, the concept of an idealised community persists mainly in the narratives of the past as a form of 'nostalgia' (Boym, 2007):

> When we moved here [1992] there was a different atmosphere, people sitting outside on the doorsteps, chatting and laughing, I do not know, perhaps it was because it was a very hot summer that year, everybody seemed to know each other. (Maria)

Proactive behaviour recurs in the form of a shared neighbourhood mythology, as in the story of the night when a hardened group of neighbours convinced the car-clamping truck man not to remove the car of a disabled resident who went away before the temporary parking ban was implemented, or of the voluntary care offered on various occasions to an old lady living in a top floor flat.

On the rare occasions when soft and volatile forms of neighbourhood alliances occur, these take the shape of hybrid and contingent configurations rather than enduring alliances and might involve tastes and sensibilities or intersect with issues of gender, age and ethnicity. Emily, who describes herself as a white British Kensington resident, told me how she suddenly rediscovered her Christian Lebanese origins in the circumstances of the 7/7 terrorist attack:

> I talked a lot with Anthony [the owner of tearoom at the corner of the street]; he is Lebanese and Christian. We cried together. I lived in Beirut as a child; I am half Jewish and half Lebanese, but Christian like him.

From a gender perspective, female residents shared a recurrent narrative in which three rooted 'male personalities' emerged: Anthony, the owner of the tearoom at the corner of the street, Pedro,

the caretaker at no. 9, and Rob, the doorman of an apartment house at the bottom of Cheniston Gardens, who are described as the watchdogs of the street. The crucial role of these three individuals as unofficial guardians of the street was confirmed by male residents. However, what makes the women's descriptions unique is the charisma embedded in the paternal authority they bestow upon these three men. Despite their different ethnic backgrounds - Spanish Galician (Pedro), Lebanese (Anthony), and white British (Rob) – these three guardians have been endowed with an authority that is significant for this study. It is reminiscent of Jane Jacobs' notion of 'public characters' in Greenwich Village, described as 'the eyes upon the street' (Jacobs,1961: 71). These figures were considered the natural proprietors of the street, reinforcing the importance of their presence and vigilance.

Cheniston Gardens' residents also team up and lobby to defend their rights against actions by the council that they believe to be unfair. In 2023, one of my neighbours approached me and other residents to sign a petition urging the council to use the funds allocated to our street to repave it at once rather than spending it elsewhere:

> You know, if we don't apply pressure, they'll snatch the money and spend it on them [pointing to the north with his finger].

Joint actions of this sort reveal Cheniston Gardens to be an ordinary wealthy area where residents group up to 'take care of themselves' in a manner that is similar to what Michael describes for his elite surroundings in the Victoria Road area. Moreover, the alliance against the disadvantaged 'them' who live in North Kensington, shows that place works as a strong mark of social distinction within the borough territory.

Irrespective of gender, age, ethnic and social background, Cheniston Gardens' longterm residents regard themselves as a cohesive group separate from the transient population of tenants in short-term lets, or tourists renting on Airbnb. These very mobile occupiers are held responsible for the increasing lack of social cohesion in Cheniston Gardens:

> They arrive here and do not even know where they are… they live like aliens among *us* and then they leave. (Veronica, yoga teacher)

> They are like hordes of barbarians, … they rent a room or a flat for a week or just a few days until the next horde arrives. (Fred)

By contrast, the isolated presence of a mansion for the super-rich, joined to an apartment block at the bottom of the street, goes almost unnoticed:

> I do not know who lives there, never see anybody around… we do not have multimillionaires here… This is a scruffy little street, … we do not have diggings for basement extensions… such things happen elsewhere in the borough… (Jenny)

By teaming up against outsiders, whether it be the unrespectful tourist or the isolate super-rich living in a single-family house at the bottom of the street, Cheniston Gardens' residents perform and reproduce their middle-class identity in place. Their middle-class belonging serves as marker of authority, distinguishing them from other residents who are considered 'inappropriate' for the street (Blockland, 2009; Benson and Jackson, 2013). The concept of 'inappropriate' encompasses anything that is considered 'excessive' or that conflicts with the residents' middle-class respectability, which does not tolerate 'excess'. Middle-class respectability in Cheniston Gardens rejects and disdains the excessive 'luxification' brought about by the super-rich, exemplified by the underground basements found in other parts of Kensington. Similarly, it rejects and disdains overcrowding associated with rental studios and Airbnb accommodations. These are seen to diverge from the residents' middle-class values and disrupt the desired atmosphere of the street:

> It is a shock to learn this proposal to build 16 studio flats at 17 Cheniston Gardens. These flats can't be of the right proportion … This property with multiple occupiers would bring more overcrowding, dirt, noise, pollution, and insecurity… its horrific. […] There have already been at least ten multiple-occupied houses … some are in a state of dilapidation and unsecured. The streets and pavement are often dirty/ PLEASE DO NOT ALLOW CHENISTON GDNS TO TURN INTO A GHETTO OF BEDSITTERS!!!' (Christine, letter to the RBKC, 2015)

From a critical analysis of Christine's heartfelt appeal, it becomes evident that her fear of mixing reflects an underlying anxiety about the presence of 'inappropriate' residents potentially undermining the overall respectability of the social environment and her own social status. Drawing on Ehrenreich's analysis of insecurity among the American middle class (Ehrenreich, 1989) Christine's 'fear of mixing' can be interpreted as a manifestation of the 'fear of falling' from the social status she achieved by becoming a resident in one of London's most prestigious residential neighbourhoods.

Middle-class respectability also entails the rejection of immoral behaviour, particularly when it involves matters of sex. It is worth noting that several female interviewees in Cheniston Gardens, including Glenda, Claire, Mary and Jenny, felt compelled to recount a story from twenty years ago about three women running a brothel in one of the terraced houses. The fact that the story was vividly recalled by the interviewees highlights how the occurrence of what they considered to be immoral behaviour in close proximity raises concerns about the fragility of the barriers of respectability. Drawing a parallel with an incident described in Chapter Three with regard to Miss Kearney, a Victorian female resident in Cheniston Gardens, we can argue that immoral behaviour continues to jeopardise Cheniston Gardens' respectability today, much as it did more than a hundred years ago when Miss Kerney vigorously defended herself against accusations of moral misconduct.

Campden Hill

Campden Hill is an area of Kensington to the north of the High Street, where a variety of dwellings have been built piecemeal over the years (Fig. 8).

A few manors with extensive gardens, now home to embassies and billionaires, are the remains of a suburban landscape which was later filled with Victorian terraced houses of different sizes, being generally quite small along the side streets, but far more substantial along the main roads. One of the most striking examples of the latter type is Airlie Gardens, an imposing development of nineteen terraced houses creeping up the slope of Campden Hill Road, a busy thoroughfare connecting High Street Kensington to Notting Hill Gate (Fig. 21). On the other side of the road from Airlie Gardens stands Campden Hill Court (Fig. 22), one of the largest compounds of mansion blocks built at the beginning of the 20th century in Kensington. Developments like Airlie Gardens and Campden Hill Court accentuate the verticality of the urban landscape in this sector of Kensington and create a striking contrast with the smaller terraced houses crawling below in the side streets.

The variegated nature of the urban landscape in this area allows people of different socio-economic backgrounds to coexist at short distance from one another. Millionaire super-penthouses share the same building with student bedsits, and billionaire manors, family houses and ex-council flats share views of each other.

<u>Airlie Gardens</u>

Airlie Gardens is an imposing development of nineteen terraced houses creeping up the slope of Campden Hill Road. The houses appear squeezed-up against each other and exceptionally tall, with five floors plus attic and basement. Their design was clearly intended to maximise the benefits of their location near the summit of Campden Hill, offering sweeping views of the surrounding area. Notably, the development includes a magnificent private garden to the rear, which can be regarded as one of the most beautiful gardens in Kensington.

Fig. 21. Airlie Gardens terraced houses. Image by author.

When I met Charlie in January 2019, she had just moved to a tiny one bedroom flat on the first floor of no. 4 Airlie Gardens. The flat is 23 squares meters, including a lobby, a living room, a bedroom and a bathroom, and is rented out for 1,600 pounds a month.

The small size of the flat does not seem to be a constraint for Charlie, who combines her study for a graduate degree in Physics at King's College with her many hobbies, including playing piano, opera singing, teaching salsa and making extravagant cakes that she sells to her dance mates and students. Gaining entrance to her flat is a hazardous venture. I wait in the micro lobby while she is clearing a little corner of what can hardly be perceived as a two-seater sofa, then she sits in front of me on the only other available seat: a tiny chair by a small shelf she uses for eating, working and preparing her cakes.

Charlie is new in Airlie Gardens and does not know anybody. What she tries tentatively to figure out about her neighbours is based on her assumptions and investigations:

> Below there is a family who lives over two floors, … there is a music teacher because I hear the instruments, an aged professor … I've looked at the mailbox, they all seem English to me ..., but in the house next to this they are so grumpy … I waved at a lady behind the window, and she shut the blinds.

Charlie is aware of an intangible yet distinct barrier between herself and her neighbours in Airlie Gardens, which she attributes to her age and nationality. While these factors may hold some truth, Charlie has yet to realise that the barrier is likely to stem from the peculiarities of Airlie Gardens' dual exposure: the noisy and polluted Campden Hill Road at the front and the exclusive communal garden at the rear.

During the late 19th century, Campden Hill Road was a highly desirable location along the hill's slope. However, as traffic increased over the years, it became less desirable to live at the front. Consequently, the original houses were converted into flats, with their size and value varying based on their location within the building. The basements and lower floors facing the street were

transformed into studios and small flats, such as Charlie's, which are often rented out as affordable accommodation for short-term residents or utilised as Airbnb rentals.

Conversely, the flats with direct access to the rear garden are generally larger, as are those on the upper floors, which offer exceptional views of the London skyline. While some of the larger properties are used for exclusive short rentals, the majority are occupied by long-term owners who tend to view short-term residents like Charlie as outsiders. Airlie Gardens stands as a prime example of the variety of configurations that can result from converting Victorian family homes into smaller units. This phenomenon underscores the dynamics and everchanging nature of the neighbourhood, as it continually transitions from one configuration to another, resembling an ongoing 'state of flux' (Cartwright, 2020).

Among the prosperous residents facing the rear, the British actor PT has been living with his wife N for more than forty years, five houses up the road from Charlie's. Naomi, an actor herself and a famous ballerina on the 1970s London scene, who later became a fashion and interior designer, has transformed their Airlie Gardens property into a photoshoot set that can be hired for anything between two and four thousand pounds a day (Shootfactory, 2022). The flat, which is also one of the couple's private homes, is a sophisticated maisonette with direct access into the garden, designed by the owner in her typical flamboyant style – an 'opulent minimalism' as she describes it on her website - made of old gold brocade sofas and silk curtains falling into crumpled folds on original parquet floors laid with antique Persian rugs.

From the planning applications in the RBKC archive, we can see that PT and N's alluring flat is the outcome of a single project approved in 1980, for the conversion of a whole terraced house into a rear maisonette and six small residential units overlooking the street. Around the same time, the adjoining house at No. 8 was also converted on the same principles, allowing for the creation of a lavish penthouse with terrace on the top two floors. The penthouse has been sold three times since 1995, the last in 2015 for £4.6 m.,[6] and is the second most expensive property in its postcode. The contrast with Charlie's flat, which is valued in the range of £400,000 could not be starker.

Charlie finds herself in a social limbo in Airlie Gardens. However her priority is living in a safe neighbourhood, no matter if she does not know anybody there. As she explains to me, while extracting from her bag a heavy bundle, filled with five and ten pence coins and tied up with a long string:

> I moved here from a students' accommodation in Southwork. It was then that I got the habit of going around with a weapon in my bag…I started carrying this with me when I was going to Elephant and Castle, or even worse to Vauxhall…I was living in constant threat until my parents literally rescued me. I had found a bigger flat in North Kensington, in the area of the Grenfell Towers, but my parents were

[6] https://themovemarket.com/tools/propertyprices/penthouse-flat-at-8-airlie-gardens-london-kensington-and-chelsea-greater-london-w8-7aj

> categorical that I should remain on this side of Kensington. I have friends who live there, so one night we went 'pit-stopping' from midnight to 2am, a five km slow motion tour; we reached the far north areas of North Kensington, where the buildings are all run down…, we could see drunken people, drug addicted, prostitutes… That area is not a place to live…It is not safe at night. In Notting Hill and Kensington, I feel absolutely safe in the evening when I walk alone. Here the streets are totally empty at night, I am not afraid of empty streets, up there they are never empty.

Charlie's recollection of her adventure into North Kensington at night to experience the thrill of trespassing into an unsafe territory is a vivid illustration of the irreconciliable social and economic divide between the North and South of the borough. North Kensington and the people who live there are perceived as a threat by the respectable residents of Kensington.

Campden Hill Court

I meet Mrs D in her four bedrooms ground floor flat on the northern side of Campden Hill Court. She moved here in the 1990s from her family house in Gloucester Walk, just round the corner (see Chapter Three), because her husband had developed a severely invalidating condition and needed accommodation on one floor.

Fig. 22. Campden Hill Court apartments. Image by author.

Campden Hill Court has always been a stronghold of well-off residents. The strict rules and regulations necessary to run a substantial compound with centralised heating systems, lifts and

other shared facilities have been the cornerstone of the high-quality maintenance of the buildings over the years. The prestige and decor of the mansions is further enhanced by the continuous presence of porters:

> We have a rota of six porters but only the head porter lives in, and then we have 3 day porters and 2 night porters.

When Mrs D settled here in the 1990s, the majority of residents were British along with a few foreigners, now the situation has been reversed, despite the strict rules included in the leases aimed at discouraging 'absentee owners' and 'buy to let':

> There have always been foreigners in these blocks, we bought from Benazir Bhutto, you know, but the majority were English families … There was strict control in the past over the tenants, … But with time things got more relaxed, companies started buying the apartments for people living abroad. Which is sad because when we came twenty-five years ago in this block which has twelve flats there were only three that were not owned by British people because it was still an old Victorian family mansion ... Now there are only three flats owned by British people and the rest are owned by companies and so they rent them out. But we are not a place for buy to leave … having said that the Egyptians who just bought the flat above me they come only a few months a year.

Despite a few changes carried out by previous owners, Mrs D's apartment still retains most of its original layout. A very long central corridor gives access to the reception rooms on one side and to the bedrooms on the other and terminates in a large kitchen/dining room, incorporating the space originally intended for a live-in maid.

The corridor walls showcase the genealogy of Mrs D's enlarged family. My attention was captured in particular by a drawing with a very familiar face, a famous 19th century scientist. The portrait is paired to another of similar size:

> Do you recognise them? He is my husband's great grandfather and this [pointing at the other picture] is my great grandfather. These are etchings. If you go to the National Portrait Gallery the originals are there, we call this the ancestor's gallery.

Behind the faces of those men and women are stories of academic excellence and cosmopolitan connections between England and America, culminating in the marriage between Mr and Mrs D. She shows me the newspaper article published for her wedding, highlighting the exceptional interbreeding between the offspring of two of the most celebrated British scientists of the 19th century.

Mrs D's mother was American, the daughter of a Harvard professor. After her father died, she came to live in England and ultimately married the Englishman who became Mrs D's father.

> It was not peerage marriage of the type of Consuelo Vanderbilt's … we were not that sort of family, we were very old original Dutch settlers, and people like my family would slightly turn their noses up at the nouveau rich. On my father's side they were virtually all academics: do you know A.B [a well-known

> English author]? He is my uncle. They were all very English, but they all married women from other countries.

Mrs D frames her social background within the middle class, highlighting how the whole area of Campden Hill, where she has been living for over fifty years, is a middle-class area:

> we have always been *very middle class* [my emphasis] here, Campden Hill has never been aristocrat. The aristocracy lived in Mayfair, up there, but Kensington was not chic, it was *solid middle class*. There were obviously aristocrats who lived here, but it was not an aristocratic area, it was not chic. It was not Belgravia.

Mrs D uses the term solid to hint at comfortable affluence, but also at the 'solid' roots of the Kensingtonian tradition, where belonging to Kensington's upper-middle class is a privilege people are born and bred with, rather than a social status they long to achieve.

The academic background of her family is part and parcel of Mrs D's class belonging. According to Bourdieu, academic and intellectual capital are specific forms of cultural capital, as they are the outcome of 'the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and by the school… the efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital directly inherited from the family' (Bourdieu, 1984: 23).

However, for Mrs D and her family, the inherited academic and intellectual capital holds a significance that surpasses mere accumulation and transmission of capital within the family's habitus. The 'recognition' stemming from being direct descendants of renowned academics adds a crucial symbolic component to the family's academic background, demeanour and accomplishments. We can understand this form of cultural capital using Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic capital', which encompasses the symbolic value and prestige associated with one's social position and cultural heritage.

Viewed through the lens of cultural capital, education is of great importance in an academic family like Mrs D's. There is a well-established network of prestigious private prep-schools in Kensington, which serve as the initial stepping-stone to cultivating the next generation of privileged, privately educated elites. Mrs D's two daughters attended Upper Phillimore Gardens Kensington Junior school, an exclusive girls' school (which has now relocated to Fulham), while her son began boarding school at the age of seven.

However, within the framework of meritocracy embedded in her academic disposition, Mrs D believes that a private education should not be taken for granted. It is essential for children to demonstrate that they deserve it. They must exhibit exceptional brilliance and excel academically, as is expected of them as part of their family 'habitus'. While Mrs D's children did attend private primary schools, she emphasises that they had to prove themselves worthy of such education:

> I always said quite frankly that if the children had not passed their entrance exams, then I would have sent them to the FOX [a community school in Campden Hill], which had a very good reputation, but I was not

prepared to send them to another independent school that I did not think was *academically* good. [Author's emphasis]

However, she points out that other families living in the Campden Hill area preferred to save money by sending their children to grammar school:

> You know, that's the type of people who will then send their children to a grammar school, because they have that sort of income as lawyers, doctors, that does not allow them to afford the independent school.

What Mrs D alludes to is the existence of two distinct educational trajectories that begin as early as primary school. On one hand, there is the option of private education offered by independent schools, which is considered a privilege reserved for the extremely wealthy elite or families from the affluent middle class who place great importance on education as a means of perpetuating their cultural and social capital. On the other hand, there is a path that leads from community primary schools to grammar schools, which is typically pursued by children from the ordinary affluent professional middle class. This approach to education, characterised by 'class-specific circuits of schooling' tailored to the needs of different areas of the city, has long been recognised as a defining characteristic in the process of cultural and social reproduction in London neighbourhoods (Butler and Robson, 2003: 139-160).

It is only upon my specific request that Mrs D mentions Holland Park School. Established in 1958 next to Airlie Gardens, it is the outcome an ambitious left wing egalitarian experiment that aimed to foster integration between students from Kensington and the racially tense Notting Hill and North Kensington (https://www.hollandparkschool.co.uk):

> Do you know, that nice English expression: curate's egg is good in parts? They had a very good headmaster who treated it like a grammar school but it was a comprehensive school so it took from all around …Then it went through a very poor number of years, probably a decade, where we had to have extra police and it was bricks through people's window ah ah ah. Now it is much better, I knew people who sent children there, well I would not at that moment. But, at the very beginning when even the local MP sent his children there, you would have sent your children there.

The concern for the presence of children from socially disadvantaged areas in Holland Park School is echoed by Sam, who lives just across the road from Arlie Gardens:

> In the 60s and 70s there was a lot of drug taking in the school, but also posh people sent their children there, Tony Benn was one of them. It was called the socialist Eton. Now as far as I can see they have no drug problems, but people mostly come from North Kensington, and they are mostly coloured. They call it an academy now, they are very well ahead, they have a glossy brochure, and they seem to do very well. The children are wearing uniform, they have some self-respect, they do not carry knives.

In Sam's imagination, there is a perception that drug addiction and violence are inherent characteristics of the young racialised individuals, 'stigmatised as coloured' who attend Holland

Park School. This perception contributes to a negative stereotype associated with the students and reinforces social distinctions between the North and the South of the RBKC.

The villages of the ordinary rich

In this section of the chapter, I focus on two ordinary rich areas of Kensington where belonging is framed within a representation of place as 'village'. One area is a group of cottages tucked behind St. Mary Abbots church, while the other is a small cluster of ten mews-cottages situated on the south-eastern edge of the neighbourhood.

In these areas, the modest architectural scale of the buildings is overshadowed by the height of the surrounding buildings, reflecting an unresolved conflict between the different heights of buildings in the cityscape. These mews and cottages are set back from main roads and pedestrian thoroughfares, and their residents perceived and described them as 'villages'. Through the everyday discursive practices of the residents, the symbolic significance of these spaces as 'places apart' within the larger city is upheld and reinforced.

The concept of village, as enacted within these mews and cottages enclaves, can be understood in terms of Pahl's notion of the 'village in the mind' (Pahl,1965,1966: 305; see also Benson and Jackson, 2012; Butler and Robson, 2003). This concept suggests that the 'village' is an imagined construct that encapsulates and therefore preserves and reproduces specific middle-class values (Tyler, 2003). From this perspective, the 'village in the mind' shares similarities with the enclaves of super-rich described in Chapter Four, where the boundaries of alleged villages serve as a form of protection from external threat, fostering insulation and segregation (Atkinson and Flint, 2004: 890). However, unlike the elite enclaves where residents have limited interaction with one another, these village-like communities encourage mutual engagement and solidarity among neighbours.

<u>Gregory Place</u>

Jane resides in Gregory Place, a secluded and quaint cul-de-sac nestled amidst a cluster of cottages located behind St. Mary Abbots, at the intersection between High Street Kensington and Kensington Church Street. This tiny alley is so inconspicuous that finding it can be quite challenging (Fig. 23).

Jane guides me through a narrow passageway that leads to a small courtyard surrounded by a dozen diminutive cottages. Within this serene setting, a couple of benches and a table accentuate the tranquil atmosphere, evoking the peacefulness of a rural village centred around a local church. The towering presence of St. Mary Abbots' Victorian spire creates an intriguing contrast with the

size of these cottages, which were constructed in the early 18th century, when only a few suburban manors dotted the area (Sheppard, 1973: 25-41). The sombre tolling of the spire's ten bells (a Victorian addition) seems out of proportion in comparison with the soundscape that would have characterised the alley before the urbanisation of the Victorian era, when St. Mary Abbots was a modest brick church with a small bell tower. 'It's difficult to get accustomed to such a loud noise,' Jane remarks, while pointing out her petite balcony that faces the spire.

Fig. 23. Gregory Place village. Image by author.

This unassuming group of modest cottages was originally built around the old parish church prior to the Victorian urbanisation. It was only in the 1980s that developers began targeting this little alley, transforming the cottages into desirable dwellings of small proportions, suitable either as pieds-à-terre in Central London or as investment properties.

Jane's tiny, terraced house belongs to her sister who bought it the 1980s. When I met Jane in 2019, she had recently moved there with two of her three children. Her decision to live in this cottage was the result of a distressing downsizing process after a difficult divorce:

> I am so grateful that I can live here… I have two bedrooms. But my brother is staying in the second bedroom, so one child is sleeping with me, the other in the kitchen. I did not buy any furniture. All my possessions are in my mother's garage. We've only got clothes, books and divorce files. I had out of necessity to return to England because my husband made me destitute. Without any money, without anywhere to live, he is taking everything.

Jane's life in Gregory Place follows a twenty-year marriage to the founder and CEO of an investment company based in the Channel Islands. They left the UK in the early 2000s to embrace a lavish 'non-domiciled' lifestyle, initially in Geneva and later in Milan. However, as their marriage deteriorated, Jane had no alternative but to return to London. At the time of our conversation, she was actively searching for employment, as being away for so many years had resulted in the loss of her network of friends. Jane believes that the close-knit 'village' community in which she resides may present promising opportunities to establish new friendships:

> Everybody says it's a community here, you see the same people every day passing by. I know my neighbours, I know people down the road, the lady round the corner, everybody says hello or good morning … When somebody's husband died two months ago, I knocked on the door and joined for coffee … my daughter babysits for the children of our neighbour opposite, and we would take each other's post. Here *people care* [her emphasis] … I tell you what I think it is. It is quite small here, coffee shops are less international… no, better, let's say the shops have the same owners for years and years. So, every day you walk past, there's the same guy … If you go to Starbucks, you get different persons every single day.

Jane is adrift in her new reality – having been once been extraordinarily wealthy – and finds security in her current accommodation. The quaint 'village' tucked away behind St Mary Abbots encapsulates her sphere of public familiarity. It is within this space, that fluid encounters and durable engagements are performed (Blokland, 2017:131). Here she enacts both practically and symbolically her through repeated discursive practices.

Like other residents Jane finds Kensington a safe place. She regards North Kensington as unsafe and describes her fear of going there:

> You see, I have to drive my son to tennis, which is over in Ladbroke Grove, near the Grenfell Tower. It's known for not being a safe area. It's personal experience. When my son plays tennis, there are some gypsies who hang out. They are gonna beat you up when you are finished with tennis, so the children are escorted by the tennis instructor and another person back to the main club. Unless you go for specific purposes, if you do not live in that area, there is no real reason to go there. In terms of safety, you see when your son gets his Babolat tennis racket, dressed in his Babolat tennis uniform, he stands out, he is different.

<u>Lexham Gardens Mews</u>

Lexham Gardens Mews, where Elena lives, is a small cul-de-sac nestled behind grand Victorian developments in the south-eastern corner of Kensington. Initially, it formed part of a network of mews that provided stables for the families residing in Lexham Gardens, one of Kensington's largest Victorian garden squares (Hobhouse, 1986: 289-299). Overlooking the mews, the imposing silhouette of Point West tower rises above the Cromwell Road, creating a striking contrast with the pastel-coloured small-scale architecture of the dwellings=(Fig. 24).

Elena appeared surprised when I revealed that her home was mentioned in the diary of Virginia Woolf's husband. As a young boy, he would be sent down to the mews to tell Dennis the coachman at 'what time the brougham was wanted'[7] (Woolf, 1960: 26, 29). Many residents of mews cottages have only a vague understanding of their homes' original purpose.

Inside Elena's cottage, the two original doors that once provided entry for the horse and carriage have been converted into two large rectangular windows with the entrance door situated between them. The shutters on the windows are constantly kept closed, even during the day: 'if it were me, I would keep everything open, but my husband is English, and he does not want people to see what's going on, but I can cope with it because we have light coming in from the rear windows'.

Elena, a charming Italian lady in her fifties, works in the financial service marketing sector. She and her husband, Anthony, have resided in Kensington since the early 2000s. Anthony works

Fig. 24. Lexham Gardens Mews, with the height of Point West in the background. Image by author.

[7] A brougham is a type of horse-drawn carriage.

as technology industry consultant. During their initial five years in Kensington, they lived in a flat in the prominent apartment block on Cromwell Road that overlooks Lexham Gardens Mews:

> We could not afford buying anything else here in Kensington with our budget, you know ... We finally managed to move to Lexham Garden Mews when my daughter was two years old. We did not carry out any refurbishment, not even redecorated it, just the new carpet, but we need to have works done sooner or later… all the plumbing and electrical system are so old, ideally, we could dig for a basement under the garden… but then we should move out and rent somewhere else and it is going to be expensive and time consuming. Personally, I would not mind moving a little further to the west into a modern house, Chiswick, or Fulham, provided it is north of the river…

Elena belongs to the Italian nobility, her husband on his mother side is related to the Royal family. However, she remarks that belonging to the aristocracy is not enough to be considered upper class in England. 'From an English point of view', she identifies herself as middle class:

> There are people who are much more aristocratic than us who lead more an affluent life; I mean, we do not have a 50,000 pounds club subscription and we do not go to the tennis club every Sunday, so from an English point of view I suppose we might regard ourselves as middle class … because you know to be upper class here in England you need to be born upper class and know all the social codes but you also need to have the money to keep and preserve them.

Elena clarifies that they chose Lexham Gardens Mews due to their desire for independence and an outdoor space, all within a 'limited budget'. Additionally, they needed to reside in the catchment area for their children's schools:

> Both our children went to Our Lady of Victories [a catholic primary school on Kensington High Street], we live at the border of the church catchment area, you know, just past our mews, we are out. If we were not living here, it would have been impossible to send the children to that school.

Elena's statement reminds me of the observation of Father Johnathan at St Mary Abbotts that numerous families in Kensington attending church primarily to secure a place for their children at the right school:

> There are families where both partners are bringing home objectively enormous amounts of money, and then spending almost all of it on their children's schooling and having the right cars to fit within the neighbours. Although they are quite well off, they struggle to keep up with Kensington lifestyle.

From this perspective, a mews dwelling presents a good solution for a family like Elena and Anthony's, who, despite their financial means, find it challenging to match the lifestyle expectations of Kensington. Their mews cottage offers a blend of the privacy associated with an independent house with a sizable garden at the rear, albeit with a relatively compact living space (approximately 140 square metres spread across two floors, a size comparable to Maria's maisonette in Cheniston Gardens or Shian and John's flats in Holland Park):

> Although it is a house, it is of the right size, before, when the children where younger they slept together, and we had a live-in nanny/maid in the third bedroom. Now they have their own bedrooms, and we have a cleaner once a week. My daughter would like a bigger house, like those of many friends of hers, where they have an underground area where they can meet.

Elena's daughter's aspirations remind me of a remark made by Cecilia, an Italian high flying hedge fund investor who lives in a maisonette near Hyde Park:

> You know, paying school fees for two children is tremendously expensive, but what is even more demanding is coping with their aspirations. When they grow up, they aspire to share the same lifestyle as their school mates …. my two daughters, now in their teens, find it perfectly normal to spend £500 in one go just to go out with friends on a Saturday night.

Elena emphasises that she appreciates the cottage precisely because it is small, which allows her family to remain closely connected in what she describes as 'a compact space'. Based on her description, it seems that the 'mews lifestyle' cultivates a sense of togetherness with residents knowing their neighbours and engaging in frequent interaction. The mews consists of a total of ten houses, all of which have been owner-occupied by the same families for at least fifteen years apart from a recently arrived young couple, who are tenants:

> There is an Indian couple, another Italian, a few Spanish, English on the other side… we are all well acquainted … we have our WhatsApp chat, but we are not intrusive … I mean if I need something, I knock on my neighbours' doors, but not every day … We know we can rely upon each other…'

She opens the rear door and invites me to see their back garden. I notice that they have torn down the fence separating their property from their next-door neighbour's, creating a seamless and open space between the two:

> During the summer we enjoy barbecues in our joint gardens. Also, with the others, we are all friends, we organise summer barbecues on the front in the cobbled street … Christmas parties and other events … When the children were younger, we left the door open and let them out in the mews to play with the other children. We felt safe. You know, living in a mews is like living in a small village, a village within the city.

Elena's experience in Lexham Gardens Mews suggests that mews life cultivates a sense of inclusiveness. Despite the physical boundaries that surround the area, which may initially evoke the seclusion of a gated community, these boundaries actually promote shared practices and habits among the residents. They contribute to the overall social harmony within this community of ordinary wealthy middle-class families.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed my ethnographic research in four distinct sectors of Kensington to explore the residential configurations that characterise the areas where the super-

rich go unnoticed and the ordinary rich prevail. In these ordinary wealthy areas, the properties are relatively more affordable compared to the single-family houses of the super-rich. Flat conversions, apartments, cottages and mews are among the prevalent types of dwellings.

Through the examples of flat conversions in Cheniston Gardens and Airlie Gardens, I have shown how individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds live in close proximity to one another within the same street or even the same building. By analysing their stories through a Bourdieusian lens, I have uncovered how distinctions between residents are shaped by a unique combination of wealth type, residential choices (such as property type, tenure, and length of stay), habitus, and cultural and national backgrounds.

In Cheniston Gardens, long-term middle-class British residents like Maria and Glenda, who moved to Kensington between three and five decades ago when converted flats were still relatively affordable, coexist with owner-occupiers and tenants of various nationalities and backgrounds, including students and a diminishing population of people on low incomes who live in bedsitters. Airlie Gardens, on the other hand, features PT's and N's upscale maisonette with stunning views of one of Kensington's most beautiful private gardens, which sharply contrasts with the noisy student accommodations where Charlie lives. In both ordinary rich contexts, the presence of super-rich residences goes unnoticed and is largely ignored by the ordinary wealthy residents.

The way in which long-term residents of various nationalities describe the place where they live reveals a strong sense of elective belonging. For many, the choice of a converted flat represented the fulfilment of a social and lifestyle aspiration that would have been impossible to achieve in one of the exclusive areas of Kensington. Their residential choice reveals elective belonging (Savage et.al., 2005) and a feeling of entitlement to moral ownership of the place. Their freedom to choose, even if constrained by affordability, is a marker of middle-class status (see Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). As Savage (2010) highlights, this form of belonging is different from 'dwelling', as the focus of these residents is on living in an environment suitable for 'people like us', privileging the symbolic meanings of their place of residence (Benson, 2014). Their middle-class anxiety (Skeggs, 1997) about mixing with short-term residents and Airbnb lodgers reflects the fear that the presence of such individuals might undermine the overall respectability of the area and consequently the social status they have attained as residents of one of London's most prestigious residential neighbourhoods.

On the other hand, Camden Hill Court offers an example of a different type of residential environment. The apartments in this area are primarily occupied by wealthier individuals who not only have the means to purchase a home but who can also afford the high costs of maintenance and service charges. Mrs D describes this social class as a 'solid middle class,' where the term 'solid' signifies a distinction in terms of wealth as well as cultural and social capital. In Mrs D's case, belonging to the solid middle class of Campden Hill Court is rooted in her family's long-standing ties

to the area and the academic and symbolic capital derived from the achievements of her distinguished ancestors.

Lastly, mews and cottages represent another type of residential configuration for the ordinary wealthy. The enclosed nature of the cases presented in this chapter foster a sense of neighbourhood based on the concept of 'village.' These places promote inclusion and a shared sense of community among residents, while also allowing for the preservation and transmission of middle-class values. From this perspective, this type of village differs from the enclaves of the super-rich described in Chapter Four, where the boundaries of alleged villages or gated communities serve as protection against external threats, encouraging insulation and segregation, but they do not foster inclusiveness. The concept of village as enacted within mews and cottage enclaves can be understood via Pahl's notion of the 'village in the mind' (Pahl,1965; 1966: 305; see also Benson and Jackson, 2012; Butler and Robson, 2003), suggesting that the 'village' is an imagined construct that encapsulates and therefore preserves and reproduces specific middle-class values (Tyler, 2003).

Overall, the substantial presence of these ordinary wealthy surroundings reveals a residential pattern where the social make-up of the neighbourhood is far from being a socially homogeneous quintessential elite enclave as its reputation suggests, but rather a mixed social environment where middle and upper-middle-class values and lifestyles prevail. The variety of dwellings and lower level of desirability of buildings located on busy thoroughfare, cater for an ordinary wealthy population that is rich-enough to afford living in Kensington but has very little in common with the super-rich of the exclusive enclaves. In these multifaceted residential environments, class distinctions are generated by a combination of lifestyle choices and trajectories rather than by hierarchies of wealth.

CHAPTER SIX – COSMOPOLITAN BELONGING IN KENSINGTON

This chapter explores how transnational flows and trajectories intersect with Kensington's social patterns, examining the various ways the residents engage with narratives of otherness and difference, and how such narratives resonate within the contexts of their personal biographies (Savage et al., 2005). Drawing on a practice of writing cities that focuses on how mobility (Urry, 2007; Watt and Smets, 2014), place, identity and relationships are managed across time and space, the analysis conceptualises neighbourhood as an 'extroverted' place, whose identity is shaped, reworked and expanded through 'entanglements' of history, people and place (Hall, 2012).

The notion of 'cosmopolitan belonging' is an empirical conceptual tool that describes the different types of belonging generated by the dialectic relationship between people and the wider world, providing 'a way of understanding the ongoing relations between people and social formations […] across distance and time' (Jones and Jackson, 2014). As deployed in this chapter, cosmopolitanism is not connected to the hyper-mobile elusive lifestyle of the super-rich, who live in a sort of a glamorous bubble disconnected from place (Bauman, 2000), but is, on the contrary, a 'cosmopolitanism embedded in place' (Jones and Jackson, 2014; Watt and Smets, 2014). It describes the way people belong to a place and their engagement with diversity and difference. In fact, as Jones and Jackson argue, 'cosmopolitan belonging means belonging (or not) to different places at different times or to several places at once. This belonging (or not) remakes places as well as people' (Jones and Jackson, 2014: 5).

In this chapter, drawing on the concept of cosmopolitan belonging as a practice embedded in place, the various ways in which national identifications, affiliations and orientations are imagined, navigated and performed by the residents of Kensington are examined, along with how they are entangled with classed identities and with the process of neighbourhood-making in an elite neighbourhood. From this point of view, the residents' narratives provide clues to the articulation of a nuanced picture of cosmopolitan belonging in Kensington, where the concept of cosmopolitanism is associated with a variety of attitudes and visions of the world.

A first type of cosmopolitan belonging is connected to the way in which memories of the empire are reworked and absorbed into British residents' narratives. In this understanding of cosmopolitanism, the Others are produced by exerting control over them. Control is maintained through a patronising attitude where the hierarchy of belonging is dictated by the selective allocation or denial of tolerance (Back et al., 2012; Wemyss, 2009). A second type of cosmopolitan belonging is generated by a dialectic relation with another place, whether it be the ancestors' homeland, or the country in which transnational residents were born and bred. In the first case, classed identities and self-perceived statuses are negotiated through a dialogue with diasporic experiences. In the case of transnational residents, their social identity is regulated by a delicate

balance between ‘embedding’ in the new country (Mulholland and Ryan, 2022) and the choice of forms of mobility that imply just a ‘partial exit’ from their national society (Andreotti et al., 2015).

The multiple connections between Kensington and the wider world resonate in the narratives of the residents I met for my research. Their stories invariably return to imagined or lived landscapes connected to ‘another place’, to which they attach emotions, moral values, projects, and affects. Their cosmopolitan connections follow inward and outward trajectories that expand from Kensington towards the outer world. The ‘other place’ acts as a counter-landscape as it stands out in dialectical opposition to the place of abode and at the same time complements it. The ‘other place’, either near or distant, wide or enclosed, is where people actually spend or have spent part of their life. It is the place they look for, or where they plan to or just dream of returning sooner or later.

Through the examples of cosmopolitan belonging presented in this chapter, evidence is provided that the way people connect to the wider world not only shapes the way they perceive their own social belonging but also the way they are perceived by other individuals. From this point of view, I argue that cosmopolitan belonging in Kensington is connected to processes of differentiation, distancing and closeness between individuals, where people’s national and ethnic backgrounds play a crucial role in the construction of social identities. Ultimately, by referring to experiences of cosmopolitan belonging, the research is positioned under the conceptual framing of ‘situated intersectionality’, which does not allow for unidimensional social divisions but rather recognises complex and mutually constituted configurations of social identities (Benson, 2020).

Cosmopolitan belonging as a colonial legacy

Cosmopolitan belonging in Kensington has its roots in the Victorian era, when a cosmopolitan attitude, supported by an extensive network of colonial connections became a prominent characteristic of middle and upper-middle-class social identity. During this time, Kensington’s Museum Quarter played a significant role in promoting and propagating Britain’s imperial projects in its colonies through the exhibition of colonial artifacts (Barringer, 1997). The creation of the Imperial Institute and the success of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition further strengthened the imperial narrative associated with Victorian Kensington (MacKenzie, 1984).

Walking through the Victorian streets and squares of Kensington, one can find reminders of forgotten episodes of colonial history inscribed on heritage blue plaques. For example, the plaque at 18 Melbury Road, near Holland Park, commemorates the visit of Zulu King Cetshwayo, who stayed there in 1882 during his visit to London to meet Queen Victoria and Prime Minister Gladstone.

The biographies of Victorian Kensington residents reveal a rich network of connections with the British Empire. Census records often include retired army officers who had spent their lives in the colonies, as well as wealthy landowners with extensive properties in various British colonies,

from India and Africa to the West Indies. The everyday familiarity with a world that was at the same time far away and near contributed to the construction of a cosmopolitan habitus that bridged the gap between Britain and its colonial territories. This colonial habitus, that in the postcolonial discourse is bound to violence and dispossession (Jacobs, 1996; Said,1978; Schwartz, 2011), facilitated interaction with individuals of different ethnicities, races and religions, and gave residents the privilege to engage with diversity.

As decolonisation accelerated in the aftermath of the Second World War, the cosmopolitan habitus shaped by the empire gradually transitioned from an everyday experience to the realm of memories (Jacobs, 1996). Memories of empire were reworked and absorbed within the Kensingtonian tradition (see Chapter Three), a legacy passed down to subsequent generations of middle and upper-middle-class British residents.

Considering this context, it is not surprising that many stories of belonging collected from Kensington residents of British background involve memories of the empire. For instance, Mrs D's father served in the colonial legal service, leading her to live in Bermuda for a decade. Jane was born in Jamaica and spent her early years there, moving back to London at the age of ten. Sam's mother was born in Shanghai, where she met his father, an electrical engineer from Leeds.

Although Victoria herself does not have a colonial background, she grew up during a time when the colonial imagination still had a significant presence in Kensington. In her childhood, the house next door to where she lives in Phillimore Gardens was the home of the General Commissioner of the Government of Northern Nigeria in London. The Jordanian Embassy down the road was a reminder of the political struggles that resulted in the country's independence from British rule.

As Victoria and I walk along the High Street towards Phillimore Gardens, she fondly reminisces about her childhood visits to the Commonwealth Institute, located on the southern edge of Holland Park, which opened its doors in the early 1960s:

> It was a futuristic architecture, with a spectacular copper roof … the only thing that was left with the new refurbishment … it was just round the corner from our house, my father used to take me there almost every Sunday… I was fascinated by that display of Commonwealth culture …. art, dance, music … The front was here facing the High Street … it was covered with a forest of flags, one for each member of the Commonwealth; the flagpoles and the flags have long gone but look at the names, they are still here [pointing at the names engraved on the pavement, Fig. 25]

Fig. 25. Slabs with names of Commonwealth countries in front of the Commonwealth Institute, now Design Museum. Image by author.

As successor to the Imperial Institute, the new museum was a definitive statement indicating that the United Kingdom was leaving behind its imperial history and embracing the emerging Commonwealth (Commonwealth Institute, 1969; Wintle, 2019). Victoria's imagination as a young girl was captivated by that display:

> There were dedicated spaces in the galleries for each of the Commonwealth countries with objects, raw materials, dioramas, murals, photographs…. But the most amazing thing for me was the big map of the world in the entrance hall. It had a rounded shape, the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth territories were white, the rest of the world was red. That was my first experience of the world's geography.

That map with the contrasting colours representing the Commonwealth nations and the 'Others', served as a visual representation of a cosmopolitan belonging rooted in the memories of empire that Victoria's father was passing down to her.

However, that display of British supremacy over the 'Others' was short-lived. As in a metaphor for the precarious stability of the new post-colonial political order, poor drainage caused the roof of the museum to leak, resulting in damage to the exhibitions, floors and ceiling. Eventually, the entire display fell into neglect. In 2002, the building was vacated, and it was later repurposed as the new Design Museum, which opened to the public in 2016.

> The closing down of the Institute was an irreparable loss for Kensington and a sign of the loss of the British values that have characterised our neighbourhood for decades … you see, everything is changing

> here … When the pet shop on Abingdon Road disappeared…, it was a real loss for the area, in Holland Park it is full of paid dog walkers, they deal with all the grooming through their own companies, the owners are just too busy, they do not have time to do it by themselves … (Victoria)

Against the backdrop of nostalgia for British traditions, where the loss of the Commonwealth institute is regarded as on a par with the closure of the pet shop on Abingdon Road, we can understand Victoria's public opposition to the ban of the trade in antique ivory:

> that trade needs to have a voice … No-one wants to condone modern-day poaching, and it is vital that we separate our support of measures to combat poaching and slaughter with an appreciation of antique ivory, going back hundreds of years.

Victoria's gaze on the wider world appears to be imbued with a patronising sense of superiority that is reinforced by British traditions. She embraces the idea of engaging with the global community, but only on the condition that it aligns with her privileged viewpoint of British cosmopolitan belonging. This view is rooted in the recollection of the past empire, during which the British held dominion over their territories' social order. Victoria produces the Others by exerting control over them. This control is maintained through the application of a patronising postcolonial attitude, reminiscent of the 'Invisible Empire', where the hierarchy of belonging is dictated by the selective allocation or denial of tolerance (Wemyss, 2009; Back et al., 2012). However, when confronted with individuals or groups beyond the reach of her control, Victoria feels challenged:

> I don't know who lives in Kensington anymore! First, it was with the Arabs in the seventies, … in the 80s and 90s it was the Americans, and then the Europeans and the Russians, and now the Chinese …

Seen from the perspective of cosmopolitan belonging, we can argue that Victoria perceives the arrival of people from other nations as a threat because they undermine her assumption of British supremacy in Kensington. To establish control, she is constantly keeping an eye on the newcomers, classifying and ranking them, and tracking down any potential wrongdoing she might spot in the surroundings:

> The house opposite me on the corner with Upper Phillimore Gardens is having a major rebuild and causes me concern … it certainly looks strange, but if we had to comment on the *'strangeness'* of our fellow residents we would never get finished (Victoria's email correspondence with the Director of Planning and conservation RBKC, July 30th and August 24th, 2004).

In this perspective, the Halloween celebration is a prime example. Victoria perceives this tradition as being introduced to the Phillimore by Americans in the 1980s, which has since transformed into a popular tourist attraction in Kensington. Every year, the elaborate decoration of her house becomes the focal point of the street, featuring a colossal black spider with its hairy legs creeping along the stuccoed bay windows. This dramatic display can be interpreted as an attempt to exert control over her unfamiliar neighbours by appropriating and enacting their imported tradition on the facade of her quintessentially British home (Fig. 26).

Fig. 26. Halloween decorations in Phillimore Gardens. Image by author.

Parallel stories of cosmopolitan imaginary and identity

While sipping tea in Shian's living room, my attention is captivated by an antique harmonium, which stands out amidst the contemporary furnishings of the flat. Shian remarks, 'It belonged to my grandparents, and it holds a special place in my heart'. Intrigued by this exquisite piece of craftmanship, I take the chance to enquire about her ethnic and cultural background:

> My family's origin is from the north of India, Punjab, but I was born and grew up in Portsmouth in the south of England, but I did not grow up in an Indian community, actually where I grew up there was no diversity, *we were the diversity* [her emphasis].

Despite being born a British national, Shian found herself needing to distance herself from the sense of diversity associated with her ethnic background in order to establish a sense of belonging. To ascend the social ladder and assert her status ('I am self-made, I didn't go to public school') she felt compelled to separate herself from the diasporic experience of her family. This could explain why she feels detached from any notion of community, both in relation to her past in Portsmouth and her present life:

> In London I met a few women who are very similar to myself in terms of strong connections to India, but they are not British, we are very good friends, but it is a personal friendship, private … *no community* [participant's emphasis].

Shian's strong denial of any form of community belonging suggests that from her point of view, the concept of an ethnic community is associated with forms of segregation that do not align with her self-perceived status and could potentially jeopardise the social position she has achieved. Consequently, her connection to her Indian roots in London appears to be confined primarily to her private sphere.

This does not imply that Shian lacks an emotional bond with her background and traditions, however. Naming her son Hassan, a family name, is seen by Shian as a profound manifestation of her attachments to her Indian roots. In fact, she emphasises her close ties to India:

> I visit my relatives in India very regularly. I am incredibly close to some of my family, and we try to see them at least once a year; we were there in July for a wedding, we have a lot of Facebook, Facetime and then physical contact.

Shian's story resonates with Ana's experience of cosmopolitan belonging. First-generation British in a Serbian family, she grew up and studied in Oxford. Her family's migration to the UK began with her grandfather, a refugee from socialist Yugoslavia, followed by her father, who arrived in his twenties and built wealth through buying and reselling or renting out dilapidated properties as a plumber.

Like Shian, Ana embarked on a similar journey to establish her identity independently of diasporic connections. With her father's assistance and a mortgage, she purchased a flat in Cheniston Gardens, one of the more affordable addresses in Kensington, possibly one of the few she could afford within her financial means. Despite the somewhat neglected and ordinary state of her dusty flat, the neighbourhood's prestige takes precedence over comfort and aesthetics. Interestingly, an inconspicuous detail disrupts the shabbiness of her living room: four metal figurines of mounted warriors discreetly positioned on the ceiling against the cornice. Just as Shian's harmonium serves as a tangible link to her family's country of origin, Ana's figurines offer a similar connection within the privacy of her home. However, unlike Shian, Ana is not closely acquainted with her extended family due to long-standing disputes over land ownership.

At the age of 46, Ana recently got married for the first time to an Irish Catholic, who was happy to marry at the Orthodox Cathedral in Bayswater. Over 150 guests gathered for the reception at a prestigious venue near the Cathedral. The celebration featured a blend of Irish step dance and Balkan wedding dance, becoming a grand family reunion despite previous feuds and conflicts. This event served as a day of reconciliation for the family and as a moment for Ana to proudly display her Balkan identity in public before returning it to the private sphere.

Although their circumstances and individuals involved differ, Shian and Ana's narratives of cosmopolitan belonging have in common the process of negotiating between coexisting identities. One identity revolves around British nationality, while the other reflects transnational ethnic and

cultural ties. In both cases, cosmopolitan belonging traverses class lines and contributes to shaping a multifaceted sense of social belonging.

The cosmopolitan belonging of the diasporic elites

I met Cezary, a Polish architect, at a reception in the prestigious settings of *Ognisko Polskie* [the Polish Hearth Club] in South Kensington, after a book presentation on the Polish diaspora:

> When I arrived in London in the early 1980s, I was one of the youngest members of the club, …in those days some of the founding members were still active in the organisation. One was my then Polish wife's uncle, who worked for the Polish section of the BBC and was not able to visit Poland for something like 35 years, and exactly in 1980 it was his first visit to Warsaw, because of Solidarity and changing politics. He came to my studio, and he wrote an invitation for me. So, I came to London and lived with him in Kensington for a while. In those first years I met lots of Polish aristocrats and they adopted me because I was young, you know, they had come here after the war, they were running away from Communism.

Cezary is quite a successful architect, with a portfolio of projects and works carried out all over the world. He lives with his two teenage sons in a modern house he designed as his home and studio near Portobello Road, where I was invited to hear the rest of his story. What emerged from our conversation was an ambivalent feeling of belonging to London and the UK in general:

> I have lived in this area all my British life, and this is my home and I have restaurants, newsagents, libraries, bookshops, cinemas, I have English friends, but I do not feel I belong to this nation. You see, I have been looking for somewhere else for nearly 40 years … I nearly went to live in Brazil, I nearly went to live in India, Africa. My wife is from Cuba, and I spent a bit of time in Havana, but I couldn't find a better place than London. But the intensity is tremendous, this country sucks your blood, sucks your money, sucks everything out of you, your energy as well.

Cezary's cosmopolitan attitude exemplifies a form of belonging often encountered in the stories associated with diasporic landscapes. These narratives frequently share a common characteristic: a geographical imagination that encompasses one or more significant places, in addition to their current place of residence. This 'other place' refers to the land where these people have either spent a part of their lives, where they currently reside or to which they aspire to return in the future.

In our conversation, Cezary highlights the social advantages he derives from his social status:

> Well in England, you might have noticed this, it helps a lot because this society is class divided, and I can access any social context because my accent is foreign. If I was educated here, probably I wouldn't venture, because I wouldn't be comfortable because they would judge me on the basis of the way I speak, my accent and anything else…

However, shortly thereafter, his perspective shifts, and begins to discuss the subtle discrimination he has faced throughout his life in Britain:

> When I was young, I never had an English girlfriend. And it is the same today … I make competition and I win competition, but I am still an outsider. I have clients who say they want a local architect … You see the most successful architects here have 'connections', which I do not have.

Cezary's limited social networks are not bound solely to the professional sphere; they also extend to his acquaintances and friends.

> I am not a great fan of the English people, although I have English friends. One of my best friends lives in Luanda in Angola. You know I lived there for five years, another good friend lives in Dorset. Claudia, my partner, lives in Clapham. So, I do not have a network close to my area. In fact, it is quite sad.

The fact that Cezary does not mention any significant connections with other Poles living in London may initially appear surprising, considering that Poland ranks among the most common countries of birth for foreign-born individuals residing in the United Kingdom, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Polish communities are predominantly concentrated in West London, particularly in areas such as Ealing, Hammersmith, Fulham and Acton. These communities have formed well-established, self-sustaining enclaves featuring Polish shops and cultural centres that cater specifically for Polish immigrants (Kusek, 2015; 2017). Recent research suggests that closed, self-sustaining communities are often observed in the migration of both skilled and unskilled labour migrants, potentially resulting from a combination of limited cultural and economic capital alongside strong social capital (Kusek, 2017:714).

However, Cezary's identity and life trajectory differ significantly from this type of migration. Like the Polish aristocrats who fled Communism immediately after the war, his cosmopolitan belonging aligns with elite migration which is characterised by substantial wealth, social status and cultural capital. These migrants do not typically settle in their national communities in inner or outer London but choose to become 'internationals' in the elite neighbourhoods of Central London, where they can cultivate connections with British culture. This is precisely the purpose of *Ognisko Polskie*, the club where I met Cezary. Established in 1940 and inaugurated by Prince George, Duke of Kent, the club maintains a strong Anglo-Polish tradition. Most events are conducted in English rather than Polish and are open to non-members.

Another example can be found within the Armenian community. Although the presence of Armenians in the neighbourhood is irregular, an annual Armenian Street Festival takes place in Kensington every June. During this event, the Armenian community from Ealing congregates at the small church of St Sarkis in Iverna Court to pay tribute to their contested nation (Fig. 27). Built in 1923 by Calouste Gulbenkian, a British Armenian who amassed a vast fortune in the petroleum business, St Sarkis symbolically represents the presence of a wealthy Armenian elite in Kensington. The church was intended as a final resting place for his remains. Not far from St

Sarkis, the Armenian Embassy was established in 1961 due to the passionate efforts of another member of the Armenian diasporic elite, a dentist who resided and practiced in one of the few remaining single-family houses in Cheniston Gardens (Amit Talai, 1989; George, 2009).

Fig. 27. The Armenian Church of St Sarkis in Iverna Court. Image by author.

Cosmopolitan belonging and embedding over time

Mulholland and Ryan have suggested the concept of embedding to analyse how cosmopolitan belonging is negotiated by transnational residents through differentiated and relational processes, in which migrant dynamics of belonging can be enhanced, maintained or withdrawn in time and space; in particular, they apply the concept of embedding to the analysis of French migrant belonging in London (Mulholland and Ryan, 2014; 2022; Ryan and Mulholland, 2014; 2015).

In Kensington French born residents make up 5.4% of Kensington's population. They are perceived by their British neighbours as a category apart from the other transnational residents, a primacy gained through their number as well as through the rooted relationship between the two countries:

> There are a lot of nationalities, and all live pretty well, pretty harmoniously with each other, they are mainly European, in particular French, because they have got good facilities for schools for their children, so the French dominate (Tony, Iverna Gardens)

The great majority of French nationals in Kensington are highly skilled and economically successful individuals who have dual nationality and benefit from the proximity between the two

countries, which facilitates transnational relations in both directions (Barwick and Le Galès, 2021; Favell, 2006; Mulholland and Ryan, 2014, 2022; Ryan and Mulholland, 2014, 2015). Although they are distributed across the whole neighbourhood, the French tend to concentrate in the southeast of Kensington, were they make up a conspicuous cluster that radiates from South Kensington into Kensington, incorporating part of the Queen's Gate ward. This wide area is to all effects a French enclave with dedicated facilities and institutions, including the French Embassy and private schools, notably the prestigious Lycée Français Charles De Gaulle, which offers separate curricula in French and English from primary school to A level.

Although the existence of a 'French bubble' across two RBKC neighbourhoods suggests a tendency to a form of migrant enclavism, Mulholland and Ryan (2014) understand 'migrant Frenchness' as swinging between two complementary modalities of belonging. On the one hand, French nationals have a perceived need to transfer 'home points' to the country of settlement in the interests of 'finding comfort' through co-national forms of belonging; on the other hand, there is an aspiration for a cosmopolitan engagement with the settlement location, which stands in opposition to the parochial identity orientations and performances traditionally attached to the South Kensington enclave.

From this point of view, embedding can be fully understood by following the trajectory of a migrant family over the years. Pierre and his family are an example.

Pierre moved from Paris to London with his family in his mid-forties, first as senior manager and then CEO of a global insurance company. He and his wife Marie became British citizens and invested in a mid/long-term life project that included the French/British education of their two daughters (who also have dual citizenship) who attended the Lycée Français and high ranked English Universities. However, Pierre didn't buy a property to live in, preferring a rented house in Melbury Road, Holland Park. Although they were fully settled in the UK, they had never felt it was a permanent life choice. They kept their apartment in Paris to go and visit relatives and friends over the years, thinking they might move back to France in some undefined future. This opportunity materialized in the post-Brexit scenario of business relocation to EU capital cities, primarily to Paris (Mulholland and Ryan, 2022). In 2022 Pierre was appointed president and CEO of the newly established French branch of a British global broker:

> My dad never felt he really belongs here. My family never built true friendships in London, most of their relationships were just on the surface … the real connections have always been with the family and friends in France. He bought this flat for me and my sister because we both have a job and live here now and it made sense because it was a good investment … but whether this is a life choice for me, to be honest I do not know, it depends, … (Sophie, Pierre's elder daughter, living with her sister in a converted flat in Cheniston Gardens).

The examples of Pierre and his daughter provide evidence of how embedding is not an achieved, static state but is inherently processual. It can be increased, maintained or withdrawn across time and space and can therefore be fully understood only from a long-term perspective, as Mulholland and Ryan (2022) highlight in their work on French nationals in post-Brexit London.

Transnational belonging between embedding and partial exit

The European professionals who come to work in London in highly skilled professions share similar trajectories and patterns of cosmopolitan belonging. Some arrive at an earlier stage in their lives, typically in their twenties. Initially, they often share an accommodation in a flat, but their lifestyles tend to improve rapidly due to fast career advancement in their respective fields. Eventually they can establish themselves in spacious properties in some prime location in Kensington. The turning point for many of these transnational individuals occurs when they start a family. Setting down with a stable partner, whether of the same or a different nationality, represents a commitment to emotionally invest in a life centred somewhere specific. For those who choose to remain in London, this entails navigating a relationship of distance and proximity with their home country.

When I first met Thomas and his wife in 2015, they resided in a two-bedroom flat adorned with antique paintings and a small balcony overlooking Cheniston Gardens. Thomas had recently retired, and had plans to sell the flat and return to Switzerland. A year later, when I reached out to him, he responded via email:

> Yes, we moved back to Lugano mid-March [2016]. We have still some friends here. Life is just the opposite than London. It is provincial, quiet, lovely weather…. Obviously, we miss London, but we often visit our son and four grandchildren who live in Camden.

As with Pierre's story in the previous section, Thomas' long-term migrant life embedded in Kensington came to an end. However, in neither case have their ties been severed, as they maintain a special bond with London through their children. From this point of view, I argue that this allows for the continuity of their transnational identity in place through the process of social reproduction entrusted to the next generation.

A different approach in terms of cosmopolitan belonging and embedding is manifested in the choice of many EU transnationals who opt for superficial embedding in their London experience.

Giovanni is a highly skilled Italian professional whose family background is in a small town in Northern Italy. When we met in 2019, he was in his early thirties and lived on his own in Troy Court, one of the large modernist blocks of flats on the northern side of the High Street. His stylish two-bedroom flat was situated on the 8th floor, offering a spectacular view of Holland Park and the iconic roof of the Design Museum. He had rented the flat through *Casa Londra* (London Home), an

estate agent specialising in buy-to-let properties owned by Italians. During our conversation, he mentioned that he held a managerial position at Deutsche Bank:

> I started working with Deutsche Bank in Milan in 2010. In 2014 I moved to London as a manager in their wealth management department, so I have been living in this flat for almost four years. I have been very lucky to find it as I like everything of the style, … it was made by an Italian interior designer, and you can tell it!

Giovanni cherished his home, considering it a quiet and peaceful retreat after long days of work in the City. His typical routine involved returning late in the evening and leaving early in the morning. He found the second bedroom to be particularly useful for accommodating guests, especially his parents, who would visit occasionally. From his words, it seemed that his residential routine created a somewhat insular existence. He had little knowledge of his neighbours, with whom he had had only sporadic encounters in the elevator. His awareness of the surrounding area was limited to a 200 metre walk from the underground station to his building, Waitrose just across the street and the Design Museum and Holland Park at his doorstep.

Despite living in London for four years, his strongest bonds and friendships were still in Italy, primarily between Milan, where he had studied and lived for ten years before coming to London, and his hometown. As a matter of fact, he regularly travelled to Italy on weekends and holidays. Giovanni's focus in London revolved around his career, and he did not express any special attachment or sense of belonging to his London home and its surroundings.

Giovanni's experience and lifestyle can be understood within the framework of a type of cosmopolitan belonging characterised by a partial disengagement from his country of origin. The concept of transnational belonging as a partial exit from the national society was developed by Andreotti et al. (2015) based on the observations of transnational upper-middle-class individuals from Italy, France, and Spain working in banking and finance in London. These individuals maintain strong ties to their home countries, typically centred around family and friends. They navigate a complex dynamic of distance and proximity between the two countries, but they do not fully settle down in London.

However, a partial exit from the national society does not necessarily imply a short stay in the new location. In Giovanni's case, his London experience lasted nine years. However, in January 2023, he relocated back to Milan, advancing to a higher position within Deutsche Bank. His trajectory shares similarities with other young Italians I have come to know through my son Ludovico, who has been working in finance in London since 2020 and shares a rented place in Kensington. Ludovico and his friends adore London and immerse themselves in its vibrant cultural scene, all while enjoying fulfilling careers and substantial salaries that would be unimaginable in Italy. However, the majority of them aspire to return to Italy eventually, taking advantage of the

benefits provided by a recent Italian law known as 'Rientro dei Cervelli' [8](Return of the Brains), which incentivises the repatriation of 'human capital' by exempting 70% of income tax for five years. They believe that London is not an ideal place to raise a family. As Ludovico keeps repeating to me:

> If you want to keep a high social status and lifestyle as a family, you need to send your children to private schools here, and they are unaffordable. In Italy we have excellent schools and a better quality of life.

Only time will tell whether these highly skilled individuals will fulfil their aspiration to return or end up staying in London. From this perspective, time becomes a crucial factor in analysing transnational belonging.

Cosmopolitan belonging and ageing

The long-term effects of embedding can be observed in the experience of cosmopolitan belonging of two North American residents. North American nationality represents the largest and most rooted group of 'white non-British' residents. Their familiarity with the country is grounded in the shared language and Anglo-Saxon heritage and is further strengthened by the 'special relationship' established between the two countries after the end of World War II (Dumani, 2016; Marsh and Baylis, 2006). For many Americans living in Kensington, particularly women, the decision to settle relates to marrying a British citizen and starting a family. However, ageing in the UK can pose greater challenges when they do not have the support of family connections with British individuals. Research on the dynamics of belonging and place over time increasingly examines how individuals navigate and make sense of specific locations as they age, revealing that migration-related residential choices can be impacted by age-related factors (Ryan et al., 2021). From this point of view the experiences of Sarah and Susan are useful cases in point.

Sarah's cosmopolitan belonging in the Phillimore was not easy at the beginning. She was aware that Victoria, who lived just opposite, was sending inquisitive e-mails to the Council because she was worried about the works carried out by her 'strange neighbours':

> Initially, there was not that great feeling, you know, we were regarded as the typical foreigners coming from America and changing everything

After Sarah's family settled into their new home, they gradually became acquainted with the local residents, including both English and international individuals. However, Sarah's circumstances have since changed. Following the breakdown of her marriage, she has moved away from the Phillimore and relocated to Islington. In Islington she now lives independently and feels deeply immersed in what she considers to be a more vibrant and 'real' environment.

[8] art. 44 D.L. n. 78/2010 (as modified from D.L. n. 34/19)

According to Sarah, she finds that people in Islington build more genuine relationships in comparison with her experiences in Kensington.

Nevertheless, Sarah acknowledges that, regardless of which London neighbourhood she was living in, among both her neighbours and her wider circle of friends, her interactions with English individuals have been influenced by their perception that her stay in the UK would be temporary:

> We are conscious, and we have always found the English people always expected we would leave eventually, and I always had the feeling they thought it was not worth the while to know us too well because we were moving on.

Sarah's feeling about the British attitude towards Americans finds parallels with what Ryan and Mulholland report about the French describing British people as being reluctant to form deep connections with someone they believe will leave within a couple of years (Ryan and Mulholland, 2014: 158).

During our encounter, Sarah repeatedly expressed her longing for New York, where her three children currently reside. Although she did not have immediate plans to leave London, her perspective on residential choices might be influenced by her stage in life. As Sarah enters a new chapter of her life, she may consider her residential options from a different perspective compared to her previous experience as a young, super-rich American mother living in Kensington with her family. Sarah's feeling of cosmopolitan belonging in Islington is different not only because she finds the place more vibrant and authentic, but also because she herself has changed. At this stage, her consideration of her migrant trajectory may be influenced by the prospect of aging and the potential pull to return to her home country.

The fear of aging in the UK is reflected in Susan's narrative of cosmopolitan belonging. In her mid-seventies when we first met one another, Susan resides in a small one-bedroom flat in Vicarage Court, a late Art Deco block of flats on Kensington Church Street. After a life split between London and the vast landscapes of Wyoming's Rocky Mountains, she settled more permanently in London in 2004.

Susan's flat and lifestyle do not portray that of a wealthy American migrant. Her living room is dominated by a large desk buried under layers of books, papers and objects. Instead of a sofa, there is a large armchair filled with various items, indicating that she is not prepared to receive visitors. The walls are adorned with shelves displaying stuffed animals of different shapes and sizes, some resembling real animals and others fantastical creatures, stacked one on top of the other. The windowsills showcase a mix of newspaper clippings, cream tubes, mugs, plates, cards, fruits, tiny plants and a glass ball with a snowstorm. It is an artificial landscape where objects take on new meanings in relation to one another and to the sole human being who interacts with this phantasmagorical world – Susan herself.

> I do not regard myself as Londoner, but as 'an American in London, and this feeling is connected to my health and to my relationship to the UK health care system. The older I get, and my eye problems increase, the more I feel as an American in London. In the past I could afford a private insurance, but now I have to rely upon the NHS. I feel like an American using the UK NHS system. My home is here now, but I can consider going back there at some stage.

Susan's health issues began shortly after she settled in London, and they have become her primary concerns. Her impairments significantly impact her daily life and interactions with the outside world. Many of her relationships now have to navigate the limitations imposed by her illness. As a result, Susan's everyday experience consists of a range of encounters with people who display either compassion or hostility towards her:

> The other day there were two well-groomed ladies standing near me at the bus stop. I had my white walking stick. One lady hit me by mistake while boarding the bus …instead of apologising she reacted 'ha ha, I was going to knock down a blind lady!'

As our interview concludes, Susan points to a fabric bag hanging from a shelf with the motto 'The future is yours. Make it'. Four years have passed since the interview, and I still encounter Susan occasionally on Kensington Church Street. Now approaching her eighties, she has come to the realisation that her connections in the United States have been lost, and she will likely forever be an 'American in London'. Her narrative exemplifies how time intersects with migrants' trajectories and their process of embedding in a foreign country. Ageing and illness can further deepen one's sense of belonging and relative immobility compared to earlier stages of life, until eventually returning to their home country becomes nearly impossible or, conversely, represents a safer haven at the end of a migrant's life.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how cosmopolitan belonging intersects with Kensington's social patterns, examining how narratives of otherness and difference resonate within the contexts of the residents' biographies. The idea of cosmopolitanism I have applied to my analysis is not connected to the hyper-mobile elusive lifestyle of the super-rich who live in a sort of a glamorous bubble disconnected from place (Bauman, 2000), but is, on the contrary, a 'cosmopolitanism embedded in place' (Jones and Jackson, 2014; Watt and Smets, 2014) where classed identities and belonging are produced within the process of place-making.

As a practice embedded in place, cosmopolitan belonging intertwines with processes of differentiation, distancing and closeness, where people's national and ethnic backgrounds play a crucial role in the construction of their social identities. From this point of view, the stories collected

from the residents return a nuanced picture of cosmopolitan belonging in Kensington, associated with various attitudes to and visions of the world.

A first type of cosmopolitan belonging exemplified by the case of Victoria, intersects with a colonial attitude (Jacobs, 1996; Said,1978; Schwartz, 2011) where the memories of empire are reworked and absorbed within the frame of a Kensingtonian tradition and handed over as a legacy to the next generations of British middle and upper-middle-class residents. This type of cosmopolitan belonging often goes with an attitude of patronising superiority nourished by British traditions, where control over the Other is accomplished and regulated by 'granting or withholding … tolerance' (Wemyss, 2009; Back et al., 2012).

A second type of cosmopolitan belonging regards the dialectic relation with another place or country. This relation may involve negotiating between two coexisting national identities intersecting with classed distinctions. In the case of Shian and Ana's parallel stories, one identity stems from the British nationality they have been born and bred with; the other reflects family habitus and ties with an ancestral homeland. Of a different type is the cosmopolitan belonging embodied by Cezary, which illustrates how, with diasporic migrants, Kensington intersects with an elite migration characterised by a high level of wealth, social status and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

To analyse the cosmopolitan belonging of transnational residents, I have applied the concept of embedding (Mulholland and Ryan, 2014; 2022; Ryan and Mulholland, 2014; 2015), which describes how cosmopolitan dynamics of belonging can be enhanced, maintained or withdrawn in time and space. As the stories of Pierre and Thomas highlight, I demonstrate that embedding can only be fully understood from a long-term perspective (Mulholland and Ryan, 2022). Time shapes and changes people's cosmopolitan embedding according to different life stages. A choice initially based on a 'partial exit' (Andreotti et al., 2015) from one's original national background may evolve into a long-term embedded option or remain a short-term transnational experience. Similarly, as demonstrated through the examples of Sarah and Susan, the dynamics of cosmopolitan belonging evolve with age and changes in household composition. Children leaving the family home, retirement, ageing and illness (Ryan et al., 2021) can all impact residential choices and sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Analysing neighbourhoods in the longue durée

This thesis is intended to make an ethnography of Kensington based on empirical evidence provided by this wealthy London area, contributing more broadly to understanding how the social dynamics of elite neighbourhoods unfold.

The decision to take a qualitative approach to the study of Kensington aligned itself with a robust stream of neighbourhood studies inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Henri Lefebvre (1991) that have awarded place a critical role in the study of social contexts, arguing that neighbourhoods are not just geographical settings but are shaped through practice and the ongoing processes through which class and place intersect (Bacqué et al., 2015; Benson, 2014; Benson and Jackson, 2013; Bridge, 2003; Butler and Robson, 2003). As with many of these works, the core concepts of 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984) and belonging (Savage et al., 2005; Watt, 2009) have provided the analytical tools to analyse classed identities in place.

The main argument of the thesis is that Kensington's identification as an elite area is not a recent occurrence driven by the inflow of global capital into the housing market after the 2008 financial crisis, as social scholars tend to assert (Burrows and Knowles, 2019), but, on the contrary, it needs to be traced further back in time. To explore this topic and provide evidence supporting my argument, I have introduced the concept of 'longue durée' as an analytical tool to explore how the relationship between people and place evolves over time (Ingold, 1993; Pulini, 2015, 2019, 2022; Tilley, 2017).

A longue durée approach (Braudel, 1958; Tilley, 2017) represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the elite in contemporary urban surroundings. By exploring the multiple temporalities of the built environment, it acknowledges nuanced social distinctions at specific moments in history (Pulini, 2019; 2022; Tilley, 2019: 19). Furthermore, it puts forward an innovative methodology for studying neighbourhoods, which entails conceptualising the built environment as an ongoing process that changes and evolves through a dialectic relationship with its inhabitants. Understanding such a process and the aspects of social change embedded in it is crucial to tackling the distinct character of a neighbourhood. By embracing such an approach, I have demonstrated that the reputation of Kensington as elite area rests upon a multifaceted social process that has unfolded over time and is peculiar to Kensington. Against this background, I have also demonstrated how in Kensington the socio-spatial struggle between the 'merely wealthy' and the super-rich, described in the sociological literature as the consequence of the influx of global capital in the property market after 2008 (Burrows and Knowles, 2019), had already begun some forty years earlier.

My research over the longue durée traces the trajectory of social change in Kensington, highlighting how an aristocratic tradition, linked to the presence of a royal residence in the area by the end of the 17th century, has been picked up and reworked as symbolic capital in the Victorian era and handed down as a mark of distinction to successive generations of British upper-middle-class residents, who are referred to in this thesis as 'Kensingtonians'.

Adopting a Bourdieusian perspective (Bourdieu, 1984), the Kensingtonian identity can be described as a 'habitus' through which individuals forge their class belonging and develop their sense of the world. Each successive generation of Kensingtonians inherits and adapts rules, moral values and privileges passed down from the previous generation, akin to the concept of a Maussian gift (Mauss, 1954). This ongoing process fosters a tangible connection between generations over time (Bennett, 2014), while simultaneously contributing to class reproduction based on the privilege and right to reside in Kensington.

Furthermore, the research has shown that class identity in Victorian Kensington revolved around the concept of 'respectability'. From this point of view, drawing on Skeggs (1997) and Strathern (1992), I argue that respectability represents a form of shared social capital (Bourdieu, 1984) as an essential principle of an individual endowed with moral authority in Victorian society, particularly concerning the woman's role (Wilson, 1991).

By examining the transformation of Victorian single-family homes into bedsits (Briganti and Mezei, 2018; Cartwright, 2020; Delany, 2018), I have demonstrated that such units in Kensington attracted predominantly middle-class tenants, primarily female, reflecting the emergence of the 'modern woman' (Braybon,1981; Mulholland, 2017), and showing how gender came to play a significant role in shaping classed identities. The fact that bedsits were prevalently occupied by a middle-class white British population seems to be pattern specific to Kensington, which from this point of view is quite different from Notting Hill and North Kensington, where bedsits were occupied in the same period by a population from disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minorities (Glass, 1960, 1964; Martin, 2005; O'Malley, 1970).

Overall, my research demonstrated that Kensington remained a white middle and upper-middle-class British neighbourhood throughout the aftermath of the Second World War, juxtaposing a 'respectable' population of bedsitters with a diminished class of Kensingtonians who resisted the attractions of the new middle-class London suburbs, and had the resilience to reside in exclusive areas where single-family houses remained untouched by the trend for conversion into smaller units, or in large apartments constructed from the early 1900s to cater for the demands of modern living. Council houses were a rarity in this residential and social setting, with tenants being carefully selected from the white, aged, working-class London population to minimise disturbance to their Kensingtonian neighbours. The coexistence among white British middle and upper-middle-class individuals and households of these different social identities, although painstakingly negotiated,

represented the continuity of a tradition already existing in the Victorian era, when boarding houses existed alongside single-family homes, as two distinct ways of constituting neighbourhood.

An incremental process of neighbourhood change

Against a backdrop where Kensington after the Second World War was a predominantly white British middle and upper-middle-class stronghold, we can fully comprehend the social change in the neighbourhood from the late 1960s. By then, two different social groups had begun adding to the complexity of Kensington's social patterns: one was a new generation of young middle-class individuals who aspired to live in the city, and the other was a new British and wealthy international elite. The former settled in flat conversions and purpose-built flats, and the latter began purchasing single-family homes in the most prestigious parts of the neighbourhood.

The first group was driven to the city by the aesthetic appeal of urban living (Bridge, 2001) and by the emerging job opportunities that were the drivers for gentrification to take root in various areas of inner London (Atkinson, 2000; Bridge et al., 2012; Butler and Hamnett, 2011; Butler and Robson, 2003; Glass, 1964; 1973; Hamnett, 2003; Hamnett and Williams, 1979). However, I have argued in this thesis that the class replacement and displacement process in Kensington differed both in features and scale from the typical process of gentrification observed elsewhere in the city. Almost exclusively, gentrification in Kensington involved flat conversions rather than single-family houses (Hamnett, 2001, 2003), but more importantly, did not include upgrading the area to middle-class status. As this research has highlighted, Kensington was already a middle class and upper-middle class neighbourhood. From this point of view, the picture that emerges is radically different from what was happening in the same years in nearby Notting Hill, where young gentrifiers were joining a disadvantaged local population among which ethnic minorities prevailed (Atkinson, 2000; Glass 1960; 1964; Martin, 2005).

Following a perspective introduced by Butler and Lees (2006) and more recently taken on by Burrows and Knowles (2019), in my study I have argued that the social change that occurred in Kensington by the late 1960s and early 1970s can be regarded as a form of gentrification that generated micro-distinctions of class within the neighbourhood. Specifically, the distinction was between a new generation of middle-class owner-occupiers of flats and an existing population of middle- and upper-middle-class Kensingtonians and bedsitter tenants. These social groups had distinct forms of capital – both economic and cultural (Bourdieu, 1984). While the Kensingtonians were preserving the legacy of a tradition, the newcomers shared a rhetoric of residential choice based on the rejection of suburbia as a lifestyle and affirming the inner city as a place to belong (Benson and Jackson, 2013). However, despite their different lifestyle and aspirations, they represented nuanced class distinctions within the frame of an all-encompassing British middle class.

The evidence from my research shows that the purchase of family homes by a new wealthy elite began to occur in Kensington in the early 1970s, coinciding with the influx of foreign capital into the property market. As illustrated by Mrs D's recollection of the arrival of numerous Americans in her surroundings, discussed in Chapter Three, the Kensingtonians regarded the newcomers as inappropriate intruders who brought a new lifestyle centred around consumerism and glamour into a quintessential British neighbourhood. The narratives of those who witnessed their arrival exude ill-concealed hostility to a lifestyle colliding with the close-knit ties and lifestyle embedded in the upper-middle-class English lifestyle. This clash with lifestyles connected to different nationalities also marked the beginning of friction between 'old money' and 'new money'. The arrival of a new wealthy elite in Kensington marked a discontinuity in the process of social reproduction of a traditional upper-middle class embodied by the Kensingtonians. Once more, however, the change generated by their arrival can hardly be framed as gentrification, unless gentrification is regarded as a process connected to distinctions in lifestyle, tastes and aspirations (Butler and Lees, 2006; Burrows and Knowles, 2019). In other words, gentrification in Kensington did not generate class displacement but rather forms of slow replacement that created frictions, shifts and discontinuity in the process of social reproduction of the middle and upper-middle class.

However, what the arrival of both the young gentrifiers and the wealthy elite did mark was the beginning of a shift in the perception of a 'home' from dwelling to commodity. This shift gradually unfolded over the following decades, experiencing peaks and troughs characterised by periods of declining values, speculative bubbles and severe slumps, of which the latest notable one occurred in connection with the 2008 financial crisis.

Against this background of incremental change, the increased presence of super-rich global investors after the 2008 financial crisis and the luxification of the built environment it generated, do not represent the onset of an abrupt or recent process, as hinted in most of the sociological literature on the super-rich, but is rather the outcome of a process that had started more than forty years earlier with the transformation of the home into a commodity with the arrival in Kensington of the early investors. Likewise, the research has shown that the ongoing socio-spatial struggle between the 'merely wealthy' and the 'super-rich', usually regarded as a post-2008 social feature (Burrows and Knowles, 2019), started right at the beginning of the process of luxification of the built environment, as a distinct feature of a long trajectory of social change.

However, what has changed since 2008 in Kensington is not only the excessive size of new architecture (the scale of which surpassed anything seen in previous decades) but also the pace of change. From this perspective, the period from 2008 to the present represents an acceleration of an incremental residential and social change that had been underway for many years.

Making class in elite neighbourhoods

By framing the study of the elite at the scale of a neighbourhood, this study enabled me to examine how processes of place-making and classed identities occurred at a smaller scale in different sectors of a neighbourhood, and to identify the unique characteristics, trajectories and activities that distinguish one sector from another.

Based on my analysis of Kensington's built environment, I argue that to understand the social configurations of an elite neighbourhood, we need to look at the distribution of the dwelling types in place. As my analysis of Kensington's dwelling geography reveals (Chapter Two, p. 39-41) a concentration of single-family houses hints at the presence of an elite enclave. A few of these elite clusters correspond to areas with outstanding grand mansions that – already in the Victorian era – were prestigious sectors aimed at the upper-middle class, as with the Holland Park development, the Phillimore estate or Kensington Palace Gardens. Other clusters of single-family homes were originally less prestigious and were transformed into elite sectors with the increasing luxification of the built environment over the years, as in the case of the Victoria Road area. In the rest of the neighbourhood, where single-family houses are the exception rather than the rule, various types of dwellings coexist at a short distance from each other, including converted flats, apartments, purposed built blocks, mews and cottages. In these areas, the socio-economic configuration of the sector is more mixed.

While the residents of elite enclaves are quite likely to be economically positioned among the wealthy 'one percent' of the world's population (Forrest et al., 2017a; Hay and Beaverstock, 2016; Piketty, 2014), in the more mixed sectors of the neighbourhood, the 'ordinary wealthy' prevail. The concept of 'ordinary wealthy' was introduced by Mike Savage and colleagues to encompass a more significant portion of the population, estimated at around 6 per cent, within the elite category (Cunningham and Savage, 2015; Savage et al., 2013; 2015;). However, in my analysis, I describe as 'ordinary wealthy' the individuals and households whose lifestyle and residential choices differ from those of the residents of exclusive enclaves, but who still have sufficient wealth to reside in an elite neighbourhood.

Through the analysis of three of Kensington's elite surroundings, in Chapter Four I have provided evidence of the existence among the elite enclaves of distinct social groups who differ from each other not only in terms of wealth or cultural and social background but also in the way in which they participate in the process of neighbourhood-making.

The first type of distinction juxtaposes absentee residents' lifestyles with the lifestyles of those who actively participate in neighbourhood-making. This social pattern, which compares the lives lived by those who are largely absent and only fleetingly present with those of engaged households, has long been recognised as typical of elite contexts by social scholars who have highlighted the differentiation between 'those who move between multiple residences and those who have chosen London and live there more extensively, often with children attending expensive and prestigious private schools' (Atkinson, 2016: 1310). This distinction also confirms that class

identity in place goes beyond wealth (millionaires vs. billionaires, old money vs. new money) and involves dynamics linked to lifestyle choices and cultural and social backgrounds (Butler and Robson, 2001; 2003; Jackson and Butler, 2015; Jackson and Benson, 2014). Building on reflections on the way the wealthy inhabitants of the world's most prosperous cities engage with their surroundings, I argue that an elite lifestyle centred on the 'family home' is a form of belonging that enables the super-rich to 'appear unremarkable and thus concealed by the kind of normality they can achieve in these areas' (Atkinson, 2016: 1314).

The research has also shown that in the clash between 'new' and 'old' elites, widely discussed by scholars dealing with elite social dynamics (Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Webber and Burrows, 2016), not only does 'new money' aggressively displace 'old money', it also erases any trace of a dwelling's style and décor. The voracious appetite for change displayed by the newcomers obliterates or distorts the canons of taste that were intrinsic to the Kensingtonian habitus passed down from generation to generation. Contemporary interiors or fake Victorian aesthetics replace Morris-style wallpapers and faded upholstery in a dramatic overlap of taste and dislikes. Likewise, differences in taste and lifestyle are often the trigger for long-lasting feuds among the super-rich, particularly concerning the excavations of underground extensions that foster a 'luxified troglodytism' (Baldwin et al., 2019), which clashes with an above-ground family home lifestyle.

My research findings in Cheniston Gardens suggest that in the ordinary wealthy sectors of elite neighbourhoods, the properties are relatively more affordable compared to the single-family houses of the super-rich and include flat conversions, apartments, cottages and mews. In these ordinary wealthy surroundings, individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds live close to each other on the same street or even within the same building. People constantly negotiate their own place in these areas by comparing themselves with their neighbours.

By adopting a Bourdieusian lens (Bourdieu, 1984), I have demonstrated how class distinctions in ordinary wealthy surroundings are shaped by unique combinations of wealth, residential choices (property type, tenure, and length of stay), habitus, and cultural and national backgrounds. In these surroundings, long-term middle-class British residents who moved to the neighbourhood between three and five decades ago, when converted flats were still relatively affordable, negotiate their residential space alongside both owner-occupiers and tenants of different nationalities and backgrounds, including students, as well as a dwindling low-income bedsitter population.

The issues at stake in the conflicts between ordinary wealthy residents indicate that it is the cultural and social differences between neighbours that often trigger or exacerbate disputes. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual framework (Bourdieu, 1984), Intolerance of the tastes of people from different cultural and national backgrounds reinforces self-identities through difference: 'I am Italian (or English, French, or American), and I am not like him/them.'

The people living in ordinary surroundings tend to team up against 'difference' whether it be the disrespectful tourist or the isolated super-rich residing in a single-family house at the bottom of the street. Through their middle-class belonging, they maintain the signature of their authority over other residents, who they regard as 'inappropriate' for their area (Benson and Jackson, 2012; Blockland, 2009). In this context, linking back to the principles of the Victorian code of behaviour, 'inappropriate' refers to anything too 'excessive', that collides with the residents' middle-class respectability. Middle-class respectability rejects and disdains the excess of the 'luxification' brought about by the super-rich with their underground basements in other parts of Kensington; likewise, it rejects and disdains the overcrowding that comes along with rental studios and Airbnb. The fear of mixing with short-term and Airbnb lodgers reveals middle-class anxiety that the presence of these socially diverse groups might undermine the overall respectability of the street. In other words, the fear of mixing brings together a 'fear of falling' (Ehrenreich, 1989) from the social status they have acquired as residents in one of London's most prestigious residential neighbourhoods.

Apartments represent a different type of ordinary rich residential environment compared to converted flats, as they cater for more affluent individuals who can afford not only to buy or rent but also to maintain a home with high maintenance costs and service charges. Mrs D, a resident of Campden Hill Court, describes her class identity as 'solid middle class,' where 'solid' signifies the wealth and symbolic capital associated with her Kensingtonian habitus. In her case, this solid middle-class status is grounded in her family's longstanding connection to the area and in the prestige derived from the scientific achievements of her distinguished ancestors.

Residential choices and belonging

This ethnography of Kensington shows how the choice of living in an elite neighbourhood reflects circumstances and motivations that vary according to the type of tenure, the residents' social status and individual trajectories. A few patterns were discernible in the experiences of belonging I observed.

The 'rooted elites,' who practice a 'family home lifestyle,' seem to ground their residential choice and sense of belonging not only on the symbolic capital they can achieve by living in an elite neighbourhood but also on the excellent reputation of the local private prep schools, highlighting the pivotal role of education in the transmission of class distinctions and social reproduction (Bacqué et al., 2015: 140-148). A different type of belonging, simultaneously 'elective' and 'selective' (Savage et al., 2005; Watt, 2009), can be observed among flat dwellers living amongst the uber-wealthy in elite enclaves. In this case, choosing Kensington over 'chaotic' Notting Hill may reveal the aspiration of 'becoming elite' by living side by side with billionaires in one of the most coveted residential areas in London.

In ordinary wealthy surroundings, place belonging seems connected to the sense of respectability and moral values attached to Kensington as a quintessential white British middle and upper-middle-class stronghold. The way long-term residents, irrespective of their nationality, describe Cheniston Gardens reveals a type of belonging that is both 'elective,' as it is embedded with a strong feeling of attachment (Savage et al., 2005), and 'selective', because they ultimately discarded more affordable middle-class residential neighbourhoods in order to live in Kensington, which fulfilled their aspiration to belong to one of the most prestigious residential neighbourhoods in London.

Place belonging is also reflected by how the residents draw boundaries around their areas. Boundaries can be drawn to protect oneself and to exclude others. In this thesis, I have taken up from the respondents the idea of place as a 'village,' which was a recurring theme in their descriptions. In the elite enclaves, the villages correspond to circumscribed areas within the broader perimeter of the neighbourhood. They are embodied by the uniqueness of the location and the features of the buildings and fostered by traffic plans aimed at keeping the area free from cars and pedestrians. The understanding of elite residential geography as villages creates a symbolic landscape made of spaces of privilege and relative insulation. Elite villages favour the ability of the affluent to withdraw into enclaves that are 'guarded' by invisible ties of collective discursive practices that the residents incorporate into their routines. Villages work against external threats and are consistent with the high value ascribed by elites to privacy, quiet and an absence of social contact, themselves seen as badges of status (Atkinson 2006; Atkinson and Flint, 2004: 890). Conversely, in ordinary wealthy contexts, the idea of a 'village' does not usually apply, and the residents typically refer to their residential environment as 'my street' (Cheniston Gardens) or 'my building' (Airlie Gardens, Campden Hill Court). The small clusters gathered in mews and cottages tucked away from main roads and pedestrian paths represent an exception to this pattern. In these areas, referred to as 'villages' by their residents, a village atmosphere is enhanced by the small size of the buildings, which fosters the symbolic meaning of village as a 'place apart' maintained through the residents' discursive practices, which is reminiscent of Pahl's conceptualisation of the 'village in the mind' (Pahl, 1965; 1966; Butler and Robson, 2003; Benson and Jackson, 2013).

My study has also explored the various ways in which cosmopolitan belonging is entangled with classed identities and with the process of place-making. The understanding of cosmopolitan belonging deployed in my study does not deal with the hyper-mobile elusive lifestyle of the super-rich who live in a sort of glamorous bubble disconnected from place (Bauman, 2000), but is, on the contrary, a 'cosmopolitanism embedded in place' (Jones and Jackson, 2014; Watt and Smets, 2014). It describes how people belong to a place and involves their dialectic relation with otherness and with the other place.

By dealing with the cosmopolitan belonging of transnational residents, I have embraced an approach over the longue durée to the analysis of how migrants' 'embedding' might vary throughout

the life course. Time can shape and change cosmopolitan embedding according to different phases of life: a 'partial exit' (Andreotti et al., 2015) may become a long-term embedded choice or, conversely, a short-term transnational experience. A life course approach is not common, especially in the study of elite neighbourhoods, given the tendency to associate their population with a fleeting and rootless existence (Bauman, 2000). It reveals that embedding is not an achieved, static state but an inherent and processual one. It can be increased, maintained or withdrawn across time and space and can be fully understood only from a long-term perspective (Mulholland and Ryan, 2014; 2022; Ryan and Mulholland, 2014; 2015).

A lifetime perspective can also be useful when considering how ageing affects embedding, as well as in general the life choices of international migrants. In the cases of Sarah and Susan, I examined how the dynamics of cosmopolitan belonging changed with age, how they were navigating and making sense of specific locations as they aged, thus revealing how migration-related residential choices can be affected by age-related factors (Ryan et al., 2021). By following their life trajectories as these emerged from their narratives, it is possible to observe how belonging evolves with age and variations in the composition of the household: children leave the family home, retirement arrives, and with advanced old age illness might mean further embedding to the extent that returning to one's country of origin becomes almost impossible or, conversely, appears as a safer harbour at the end of a migrant's life.

Conclusion

By embracing a qualitative approach over the longue durée, I have analysed how aspects of change and continuity in residential patterns are reflected in the current social make-up of Kensington. Analysis of the intertwined relationship between the built environment and the processes of place-making has led to understanding of the current residential and social patterns of the neighbourhood as the outcome of multifaceted social processes that have unfolded over time.

A situated approach over the longue durée not only enables the detection of social dynamics that are unique and site-specific, as is the case with the 'Kensingtonian tradition' evidenced by my research, but also reveals distinct trajectories in the processes of gentrification and luxification of the built environment. Such an approach illustrates the multiplicity of situated habitus and social configurations across the neighbourhood over time and makes it possible to read the present through the lens of the rhythm of social change.

Through my research I demonstrate how an approach to place in the longue durée can reveal nuances and differences in the social dynamics of Kensington, providing evidence of the existence of a combination of 'elite enclaves' and 'ordinary wealthy surroundings'. By focusing on classed identities as the outcome of the active process of neighbourhood-making, I have also highlighted how class distinctions in elite neighbourhoods do not necessarily mean power relationships based on wealth. On the contrary, they revolve around distinct lifestyles, tastes, distastes, and

peculiarities associated with differences in social and cultural background, particularly in connection with education (Bourdieu, 1984). Furthermore, by investigating how class distinctions intersect with belonging (Savage et al., 2005; Watt, 2009), my research has shown how belonging in a London elite neighbourhood is intertwined with the highly transnational background of the residents and reflected in distinct cosmopolitan attitudes (Jones and Jackson, 2014) and types of embedding (Ryan and Mulholland, 2014, 2015).

Overall, with my ethnography of Kensington over the longue durée I propose a novel approach to the study of neighbourhoods that advocates the need for deeper attention to the role of time in both the process of neighbourhood-making and the life course of individuals. It is a call to step back from the abstracted character of most discussions of cities and to focus on the people themselves and the materiality of the built environments they inhabit. In fact, 'through the buildings in place we can understand the people and through the people the building' (Tilley, 2019).

An ethnography of elite neighbourhoods over the longue durée contrasts a clichéd image of these places that is derived from the aggregate of social statistics and consumer surveys data. It eschews the abstractions of many urban studies of the elites in an attempt to return to the materiality of the real.

A characteristic of this approach is that it works at the small scale, as it requires a fine-grained focus. As a matter of fact, there is no possibility or prospect of producing an ethnography of an elite neighbourhood in its totality. However, a small-scale approach can add to its understanding by considering in detail the constellation of places within it.

This thesis aims to encourage such an approach in the belief that it can contribute to developing a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the entangled intersections of the materialities and socialities of everyday in London, because – to conclude with a quote from Chris Tilley 'the city touches people physically, sensually, socially and culturally' (Tilley, 2019: 57).This is the 'other way of telling' that with my research I aspire to stimulate and promote.

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