

Living Room:  
Refusing the demolition assemblage on a London housing estate

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In loving memory of Pinar

## Abstract

This thesis takes the demolition of a public housing estate located in the south of London as its object of study, analysed through situated, engaged, visual methodologies. The demolition analysed here is the result of a long-term municipal urban regeneration scheme which proposes a redevelopment predicated on a public land sale, an increase in building density, an increase of private ownership and 'intermediate' rental solutions, and a reduction of social housing. Using the conceptual apparatus of critical urban theory which understands housing estate regeneration/demolition as a form of accumulation by dispossession and privatisation which results in gentrification and displacement as a starting point, the thesis aims to analyse demolition as an assemblage composed of processes that unfold across domains, sites, scales and temporalities. A selection of these are covered in the thesis: specifically, the areas of the law, infrastructural managed decline, financial and symbolic devaluation are foregrounded. The privileged location through which the demolition is analysed is the space of the home, and a focus on home *unmaking* runs through the work, while my main interlocutors, collaborators and epistemic partners are those residents who enact forms of refusal towards the regeneration/demolition. Particular attention has been paid to Right to Buy leaseholders and their specific understandings of value creation and investment in processes of home making and *unmaking*. An attention to the relation between property and citizenship rights, and histories of racialised exclusions is an additional central framework of the thesis. An array of visual methodologies were employed to engage with residents and their refusals, and the resulting interactive documentary aims to visually reflect the demolition assemblage in a form that highlights its non-linear, iterative and conflictual modalities.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Open Doors

The first time I visited Aysen, the door to her flat was open. I had walked around the foot of the building, struggling to locate the entrance to the lift, as many first-time visitors to the Aylesbury estate do. When I finally found it, I consulted the large plaque hanging in the open lobby that summarises on which level of the building each flat is located, before entering the lift and slowly starting my ascent. Once I exited on the eighth floor of the imposing structure, I looked left and right down the long corridors extending from both sides of the lobby, peeking through the heavy fire doors to locate the correct flat, the triple digit number scribbled on a crumpled piece of paper stuck to the back of my phone. When I found the right door, I was surprised to find it open.

By open I mean not just unlocked, or on-the-latch, but propped open by a tree stump that Aysen had placed between the frame and the heavy-duty door. As a polite visitor you'd still want to stand on the wide corridor, knock and wait to be invited in before entering, which is what I did on that first day and continued to do over the years as I became a regular at her flat. I used to knock on the open door - "Aysen, it's me, Caterina, can I come in?" and invariably she would respond "Darling just come in, the door is open, the door is always open here!". I would then take off my shoes in the entrance hall, before stepping into the luminous and warm living room, where Aysen would beckon me to sit on one of the comfy sofas, whilst she headed for the kitchen shouting "Turkish tea? Coffee? What can I get you, my darling?"

I was introduced to Aysen Dennis through a connection initiated by my doctoral supervisor Isaac Marrero-Guillamón. I was interested in researching the experiences of residents living in a public housing estates under threat of demolition in London: as increasing numbers of the capital's numerous estates were (and still are) earmarked for regeneration via demolition, around 2014 a lively housing justice scene emerged that argued and acted against the displacement and dispossession that working-class residents of estates were facing. I understood the demolitions, and the activism against them, as a key site for analysing housing and spatial justice in the contemporary city. Isaac put me in touch with two academic researchers, Richard Baxter and Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia, who were looking for a filmmaker to document a meeting between two of the architects who had worked on the design of the Aylesbury Estate in South London, and a group of residents and housing activists who had been organising against the regeneration, privatisation and demolition of that estate, amongst which Aysen was an active and prominent figure. So it was that I showed up at her door with my camera and microphones in hand to help

document the conversation that was due to take place in her front room. That first meeting became the start of my doctoral fieldwork and set the tone for much to come.

On the occasion of that meeting, the architects John Nichols and John Crallan visited the estate that they had helped to design when, fresh out of architecture school, they had joined Southwark Council's planning department as it started on its one of its flagship council housing construction schemes in the late 1960s. Richard and Melissa had organised for the two architects to meet with a group of residents to speak about the origins of the estate. The residents were hoping that the architects might share information that could inform their anti-demolition campaigns. As the group sat in a circle on Aysen's sofas and floor, the conversation went on for many hours, touching upon a wide range of issues, spanning from architectural theories, interior design detailing, to what everyday life at a height, with a spectacular view, was like. The meeting was at once surprising, emotional and informative for everyone. It brought to life details about the origins of the modernist mass housing scheme, at a time when the local authority had decided it would proceed with its demolition, and residents were starting to be moved out. In turn, the architects were surprised to hear about the love the residents had for their flats, despite the lack of upkeep and neglect that the buildings had been subjected to by the local administration. The negative press that the housing complex had received since its construction had left them embarrassed about their work there, and hearing about the many positive aspects of the buildings' design was unexpected. The group continued to talk as the afternoon light faded, and the view from Aysen's panoramic ribbon windows changed to a nighttime cityscape of twinkling lights and glowing London skies.

The residents that gathered in Aysen's living room that day were a diverse group, each with their own outlooks and agendas, and with differing tenancy statuses – some council tenants, some homeowners – and living in different areas of the estate. What united them was the wish to stop the demolition of the estate, which, they argued, would produce the displacement of the current, mostly working-class and racialised population, and the gentrification of the area. Everyone argued from their own perspective and position, but there was a general consensus in the room that, while investment into the built environment was very much needed, the preferred option for those present would be to remain in their current homes, with the local authority as the landlord or freeholder. While many other residents who I met since had exhausted their hope in a liveable Aylesbury, and wished to move out as soon as possible, those attending the meeting that day were all arguing for a refurbished and publicly owned estate.

As I entered the field as a researcher and filmmaker, I also aligned myself with this general position vis-à-vis the demolition, and it was on these grounds that I was able to carry out my work. I started to conduct my research on that day, and have continued to do so until the time of writing, with the understanding that I share an underlying critical analysis about the way the demolition of



housing estates in inner London operates as a mechanism of social cleansing. This has certainly shaped my research in fundamental ways, and directed me towards some residents, and away from others. If Aysen opened her door to me as a researcher and supporter to join in a diffuse critical community, other (metaphorical) doors remained closed to me, including those of residents who did not want to be involved in any more research. Academic research, surveys and community consultations have been part and parcel of the life of the estate throughout its history, and, as a resident put it to me once, “people here are ‘consulted-out’”. This fatigue with overexposure to external requests for information therefore meant that I often encountered a weariness or reluctance towards engaging with me as a researcher. This informs the shape, content and focus of what follows. When fully built, the Aylesbury estate housed about 7000 people – when I started researching, two small parts of the estate had been demolished and rebuilt, while other parts were, to follow official terminology, in the process of ‘being decanted’. Despite this, many thousands of people still lived there, and I do not claim here to reflect the views of the residents as a homogenous group. The core of my research is with those involved in various forms of what I call ‘demolition refusal’ (more on this further in the introduction) – an ample term that includes many diverse positionings but is nonetheless critical of the municipal plan to regenerate the estate via demolition.

My scholarship therefore is placed within a tradition of critical housing scholarship that concerns itself with the privatisation and demolition of housing estates from a critical perspective. I am indebted to the work of scholars whose work has analysed the demolition of social housing estates in London in great detail, and has interlaced critique, research and activism (e.g. Watt, 2008, 2009b, 2009a, 2021; Campkin, 2013; Lees, 2014; Lees and Ferreri, 2016; Watt and Minton, 2016; Rendell, 2017; Ferreri, 2020; Lees and Hubbard, 2020, 2022; Lees and White, 2020; Lees and Robinson, 2021). Similarly, I arrived on Aylesbury with a critical position in relation to the demolition, and with an underlying commitment to housing and social justice.

As I forwent the stance of neutral researcher and positioned myself in the field, I also confronted the ethical questions of conducting research as an outsider on an over-researched housing estate which has over the decades received more than its share of negative press and scholarly attention. I entered the field as a stranger to the estate, despite having lived for many years in the borough, and as an educated middle-class white woman with an undoubtedly partial and limited understanding of inner-city working-class life. The rural workers colony my grandparents lived on in Austria and where I spent my summers bore little resemblance to inner London, nor did the middle-class suburb where I grew up in Italy. By the time I started research, however, I had spent ten years in London and had learnt first-hand much about housing insecurity, transience and unaffordable rents, as I moved in and out of a variety of sublets, including on several housing estates across South London, without however ever feeling embedded enough in any location to

develop neighbourly networks. This background with which I entered the field, of an outsider with some limited experiences of estate living, and with my large share of social, cultural and financial privilege, shaped the way I approached my presence in the field.

Two years after the meeting with the architects, I moved into the flat of a council tenant whom I met at Aysen's, Laura. She was able to help when I started my doctoral fieldwork proper and coincidentally also needed to move home, as my partner and I could not afford to rent at the exclusionary rental prices that inner London commanded. When Laura offered for us to move in with her as lodgers at a very affordable rent, this not only allowed me to carry out fieldwork in a more immersive way, it also solved a very real and burning issue of our own housing situation. Two years later, when our daughter was born, our changed circumstances allowed us to get our own place, and we moved out. During fieldwork I was thus lucky to live in a two-bedroom flat on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of one of the four Aylesbury high-rise buildings, an experience which gave me an insight into everyday life on the estate, allowed me to become close to my neighbours, develop friendships and participate in official meetings and informal gatherings, as well as to experience first-hand some of the issues that residents face with disrepair and disinvestment. While living on site was crucial in making aspects of fieldwork possible, it was however clear that I was not impacted by the demolition plans, displacement risk and stigma associated with living on the estate, in the same way my neighbours were. It was imperative that I thought deeply about the research methodologies I wished to employ, to avoid the pitfalls of extractive research in a setting marked by deeply unequal power relations.

## **1.2 Collaborative Methodologies**

Aysen's 'open door' is not only a helpful metaphorical image to represent my involvement with a specific segment of the Aylesbury residents, it also represents a methodological guiding light that has shaped and informed my research approach. Alongside more conventional campaigning techniques, Aysen utilises her own life and home as a way of conveying her critical message. As a feminist, Aysen makes a point of opening her home and blurring the boundaries between the private and the public, the intimate and the political, and positioning herself in a lineage of feminist thought that sees theorising and action as inseparable and intertwined (hooks, 1994). Opening her living room to neighbours, activists, friends, comrades, researchers, journalists and curious onlookers is part of her active life. It is part of her commitment to challenging the ways in which the estate that she lives in, and the people who live in it, have been demonised and stereotyped in public discourse and the media, as a way of questioning the need for its regeneration, privatisation and demolition. She teaches through doing and acting, and 'opening her home' and blurring the boundaries between the domestic and the public is part and parcel of this political praxis.

This approach resonates with feminist, and post and decolonial critiques that question the ethical foundations of social research, and anthropological research in particular. Black and indigenous feminist thought has been a leading influence on the now widespread drive towards non-extractive research approaches, and underlies much of subsequent theorising on the topic (e.g. Patricia Hill Collins, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). An anthropological critique of extractive research approaches has led to a rethinking of the epistemological and methodological foundations of the discipline. This has translated in a drive towards a form of research at the service of the people researched (e.g. Lassiter, Goodall and Campbell, 2004; Lassiter, 2005; Field, 2008; Fluehr-Lobban, 2008), and one that attempts to overcome the division between subject and object, and expert and lay, local and indigenous forms of knowledge. Collaborative forms of research have emerged from these critiques as a commitment to the people social scientists work with, a commitment that goes beyond the 'do no harm' ethical guiding principle, but that requires an active stance of solidarity and support. Central to these drives is an attempt at overcoming the separation between researcher and researched, which is highlighted by the new terminology used as informants and subjects become collaborators, consultants, co-intellectuals (Lassiter, 2005), respondents, public(s), epistemic partners (Holmes and Marcus, 2008), colaboradores (Rappaport, 2008). In discussing collaborative activist anthropology, Hale (2007) argues for the epistemological superiority of research that emerges from situated and committed positions. For one, 'having a position' ensures a degree of transparency and discussion around it. Moreover, collaboration always entails challenges; groups are never homogeneous and stable, and 'taking a stance' is often a contentious issue that puts one in front of contradictions, internal power struggles, diverging aims within the groups one collaborates with. The presupposition of an alignment between researcher and subject is a "felicitous convergence" fallacy (Hale, 2007, p. 113). While convergence is a never-realised-ideal, the contradictions that emerge through the work of collaboration are however opportunities for insight which can produce more critical and rounded analysis than a conventional participant observation would (Hale 2007).

When I stepped through Aysen's door I entered informed by a collaborative ethic shaped by the critical tradition described above. I found myself in a field in which collaboration and solidarity was a well-developed vernacular into which I had to fit in and find my place, and which shaped me in turn. Throughout my fieldwork – which exceeded its dedicated time and bled into the pre and post-fieldwork years - I was involved in campaigning efforts alongside residents, as a supporter, helping out in various guises: I took minutes, made videos, recorded meetings with officials, attended demonstrations, and more. Some of the commitments that started during fieldwork, personal and political, have continued to the time of writing, and a few will surely continue in the future, as relations of mutual reciprocity have been spun. By doing this, I joined a large network of numerous other filmmakers, journalists, students, academics and artists working on the estate, both residents and outsiders, whose activities can be described as para-ethnographic (Holmes and Marcus,

2008) or engaged research. Moreover, the residents themselves were deeply immersed in research activities into the rehousing and demolition processes. In this context, my research is but another piece in a mosaic of information and knowledge developed by a wide array of people in a collaborative manner: my epistemic collaborators and guides have been the many residents and housing campaigners whose own research practices, activism, writing and thinking I have learned from and am indebted to: Aysen and Laura of Aylesbury Tenants and Residents First (later Fight4Aylesbury), Felix, Prudence, Tony, Anne and Judi of Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group, Jerry of 35% Campaign, Chris of Southwark Notes, and Liba, Melissa, Alessia, Michael and Jason of Fight4Aylesbury<sup>1</sup>, with whom I have collaborated, contributed to and been in exchange with since starting my research. They have been and continue to be invaluable interlocutors and friends who have informed this work profoundly. I am grateful for their feedback on drafts of this thesis. Of course, all mistakes remain mine.

I therefore arrived at the Aylesbury estate thanks to my supervisor Isaac's crucial help, through a network of committed researchers and activists, and with my video camera in hand, and these two elements proved in time to remain central to my practice there. That first day marked the start of a long-term involvement with residents and activists around the estate and beyond. I will now turn to another element also framing this research, the long-standing tradition of critical housing demolition studies.

### **1.3 Academic Literature on Housing Estate Demolition**

The central object of my research is the demolition/regeneration of the Aylesbury Estate. The demolition of housing estates is a widespread phenomenon that affects a growing number of locations across London, as well as aligning with global trends of urban land privatisation and welfare retrenchment. If we understand the urban as a fundamental way in which contemporary racial capitalism (Melamed, 2015) organises itself, then we can see that the dynamics that shape the changes in property and land allocation in urban areas, and the attendant processes of displacement, dispossession and eviction that they produce, are important sites for understanding both the urban, and the contemporary condition more generally.

I understand demolition/regeneration of social housing as a form of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005), a term that redescribes and updates those processes that Marx termed primitive or original accumulation. These are often violent forms of extraction of resources and wealth from arenas outside of capitalist formations, such as the enclosures of common land,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis I follow contributors' wishes regarding the use of their names and surnames; I use real names for those who have explicitly told me this is fine, and pseudonyms for those who have requested them, and for those who I have not been able, for various reasons, to recontact.

colonial expansion, and the slave trade. Harvey suggests that such processes, rather than occurring once as a mechanism to put the capitalist mode of production into motion, are ongoing, and are necessary for capital to avert its inherent and periodical crises of accumulation. Neo-liberal privatisations are prime contemporary forms of accumulation by dispossession, and in particular the privatisation of public housing estates in Britain, initiated by Thatcher's neoliberal policies after her rise to power in 1979, is a key example that Harvey provides to exemplify the dynamics he describes (Harvey, 2005). Critical housing scholarship understands urban regeneration schemes as initiated by New Labour from the late 1990s onwards, of which the Aylesbury project is an example, as a form of State-led accumulation by dispossession (Lees and White, 2020), as I expand on in more detail in chapter 3.

Neil Smith's *The New Urban Frontier, Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996) posits urban land and property as an important site of accumulation by dispossession, where the dispossession hinges upon exploitable rent gaps between the value of land and its potential rent value, driven by devaluation. Gentrification, and the displacement of working-class residents, is thus a result of economic forces of production, rather than a result of middle-class consumer choice. For Smith the urban is in this sense an 'extraction frontier'. In the UK, the privatisation of housing estates, has been described as a State-induced exploitation of the rent gap created by the material and discursive devaluation of land (Watt, 2009; Lees and White, 2020). One form that this State-led accumulation by dispossession and exploitation of the rent gap has taken is that of urban regeneration, or "an urban policy involving spatially targeted reinvestment in and revitalisation of physically deteriorating, economically under-resourced and socially deprived areas – in this case public/ council/ social housing estates." (Watt, 2021, p. 1). Housing estates and low-income tenants have been defined as the "final gentrification frontiers in inner London" (Lees and Ferreri, 2016, p. 14). The mechanisms through which the dispossession, devaluation and extraction are enacted in the context of the *long durée* of the Aylesbury demolition/regeneration, are analysed ethnographically throughout the thesis, and are one of its central concerns.

Chakravarty and Ferreira Da Silva (2012) argue that theories of accumulation by dispossession and extraction frontiers need to be expanded and complemented with an analysis of how they "have been mapped onto previous racial and colonial (imperial) discourses and practices" (2012, p. 368). While the authors' focus here is on the territories of financialised housing, debt and subprime mortgages, I argue that their proposition applies to the study of housing estates under regeneration/demolition in the UK, where class has been privileged as the central analytic. In section 1.5 I will expand how histories of racialised spatial exclusion and understandings of race and class are included into my framework.

If these analytics represent a political economic framework within which my work on the demolition/regeneration of the Aylesbury Estate is placed, the literature that draws on ethnographic and in-depth qualitative research about council estate residents' experiences of regeneration in London provides a more granular perspective. A prime focus for both scholarship and activism centred on housing estate regeneration/demolition has been the effect on residents, council tenants, leaseholders and private tenants alike. The displacement of working-class residents (integral to the definition of gentrification) has been examined; as well as resistance movements against regeneration. Paul Watt's *Estate Regeneration and its Discontents* (2021), based on interviews with residents of numerous London housing estates undergoing what he calls regeneration-as-demolition, provides an exhaustive insight into the nuances of living through regeneration. This builds on Watt's extensive previous research and writing on specific housing struggles, such as the Focus E15 campaign (Watt and Minton, 2016), as well as foundational contributions to the theorisation of urban regeneration (for e.g. Watt 2009). Lees and her collaborators have researched and published widely on a number of aspects of the Aylesbury estate's regeneration as demolition, and residents and housing activists' resistance against it (Lees, 2014; Cooper, Hubbard and Lees, 2020; Lees and Hubbard, 2020). Dispossession and displacement are key concepts that describe the experience and its effects. Ferreri (2020) for example focuses on the process of resident 'decanting' as an integral part of municipal dispossession. She describes the experience that residents undergo as a "relational disarticulation" taking place "across a multiplicity of sites and relations" (Ferreri 2020: 1009). Displacement maps, visualising the geographical dispersions of those decanted and rehoused from the Heygate and Aylesbury estates, have been produced by campaign and activist groups in collaboration with engaged scholars (Southwark Notes *et al.*, 2014).

An important strand of research concerns itself with the discursive dimension of the devaluation of people and places that undergirds and shapes the physical dismantling of buildings and provides the ideological terrain that justifies the necessity of regeneration/demolition. Glucksberg (2013) has researched waste management and recycling on the Five Estates in Peckham, South London, and writes about the way residents become equated to waste in the frame of the regeneration project there, and how this symbolic overlap become a necessary precursor to their decanting and displacement. Campkin, in his influential *Remaking London. Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture* (2013), dedicates a chapter to the negative media and visual representations of the Aylesbury estate which, over decades, provided the ideological and discursive justification to the need to regenerate, and eventually, demolish it. He identifies Tony Blair's speech from one of the Aylesbury estate's balconies in 1997, just after being elected Prime Minister for the first time, as a key moment in which the term and concept of 'sink estate' became widely used and associated with housing estates across England and the UK. In a similar vein, Slater (2018) dissects the term sink estate, as invented by journalists and weaponised by free market think tanks, as a form of

“intentional ignorance production” (ibid: p. 879) which acts as a “semantic battering ram” (ibid: p. 881) that anticipates, justifies and creates the necessary ideological landscape for the subsequent regeneration/demolition of housing estates.

The discursive and symbolic devaluative violence that Campkin, Slater and Glucksberg analyse is closely entwined with material and physical practices and objects, and it has direct and material effects on people’s lives. A prime example of the linking of discursive and the material can be found in defensible space theory, as developed by Oscar Newman and Alice Coleman, who simplistically link specific architectural and urbanistic features of modernist housing with criminal activities. Defensible space theory has played a fundamental part in providing a negative critical reading of the spatial features of the Aylesbury, and an explanation for the need to excise features such as bridges and walkways from the build environment. I analyse this history in chapter 4. Less specific to housing estate demolition is the concept of home *unmaking* (Baxter and Brickell, 2014), which centres processes of ruination and destruction. A response to the focus on home making within the scholarship of the home, it instead draws attention to the material and immaterial dimensions of divested, damaged and destroyed dwellings. The concept is wide in scope, and encompasses for example destruction wrought by war, as well as more routine events such as house moves, which might affect most people over the course of their lifecycle. Analyses of home *unmaking* have included topics such as marital dissolution in Cambodia (Brickell, 2014), evictions of Roma homes in Romania (Lancione, 2017), the demolition of public housing in Puerto Rico (Arrigoitia, 2014), experiences of LGBT home loss in natural disasters across the globe (Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes, 2014) , as well as a historical analysis of home in Edwardian fiction (Saunders, 2014) .

In the context of social housing demolition, home *unmaking* is a useful concept as it allows for an attention to the material and immaterial processes that lead to the unravelling of the home, linking political and economic trends with everyday domestic life. Fernandez Arrigoita (2014) points out that *unmaking* shifts the focus to the destruction of the home rather than more generically, of buildings, which tend to be centred in analyses of demolition. This attention to the space of the domestic opens up space for a reflection on memory, affect, everyday life that can otherwise be lost and relegated to the background in political and economic analyses. The space of the home is central to this thesis, and the way ‘home’ is understood here draws on its porous quality: the private space of the home is permeated with ‘the public sphere’ and the world of economics, finance and politics. If the public sphere permeates the domestic, likewise the private space of the home does not end at its walls, windows and doors: home extends into the communal building spaces and into the neighbourhood and streets, business and community venues – so when we talk of home *unmaking*, we also talk of the *unmaking* of spaces, trajectories and relations beyond the confine of the four walls of the domestic space. The porous distinction between interiors and

exteriors, between the domestic and the public, is explored in multimodal form in the interactive documentary *Living Room* which accompanies this thesis.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

In the previous sections I have introduced my field site, my overall methodological and ethical approach, and the literatures and debates that I am in conversation with. I will now make explicit the questions that guide my inquiry into the demolition of the Aylesbury estate. My overall aim is to bring an ethnographic and anthropological sensibility to the study of housing estate demolition. In the first instance this led me to ask questions about the meaning of demolition in the context of my research: What constitutes demolition? How is it carried out? What dynamics and instruments shape it? What is the materiality and temporality of demolition? How is demolition best conceptualised? These questions are directly linked to my second concern, namely, the identification and analysis of acts of resistance, dissent and refusal towards the demolition. I ask: at what junctures do residents and other actors encounter the demolition? Where, when and how do they enact forms of dissent and refusal towards it? How is dissent and refusal manifested, enacted and communicated? What effect do these acts produce? What kind of subjectivities emerge from the refusal to demolition?

While the focus of the thesis is a specific case study, I am also interested in the way my findings can support an approach to the study of the urban beyond the specificities of demolition.

Additionally, in the thesis I set out to understand the role that audiovisual research can play in the context of demolition refusal. I will outline my research questions about the ethics and epistemologies of visual methods in chapter 2.

#### **1.5 Contributions to the Research and Critique of Regeneration/ Demolition**

My research aims to complement the existing knowledge of housing estate regeneration/ demolition by expanding the focus in two ways. The first is that I conceptualise demolition as an assemblage: demolition, rather than being a singular event, is an articulation of non-linear processes that intersect, compound, and are in tension with one another, across different locations, times and relations. In particular, related to this is a concern with the specific temporalities of the demolition assemblage, which unfolds over an extended period of time and in turn contains specific temporal orientations within itself. The second contribution concerns the actions taken against the demolition assemblage that a range of residents have organised over the course of the project's long duration, and that I understand as instantiations of 'refusal'. I conceptualise refusal as rooted in dynamics of racialised special exclusion, and legacies of colonial histories, that, I argue, are constitutive of the demolition assemblage on the Aylesbury Estate, and on other inner London public housing estates. I will now discuss each of these in turn.



The demolition assemblage is an analytical term that I use to point to the technical, bureaucratic, judicial, political, discursive and material elements that are activated to make the physical, material demolition of a building possible. These include for example the creation of a mediatic consensus around the necessity for demolition; political decision making; bureaucratic mechanisms of rehousing; public enquiries; public and resident consultations; the creation of charitable initiatives; house sales; evictions; house moves; the erection of fences and the discontinuing of post codes. The agents that are implicated in these various dynamics are residents, council workers, politicians, journalists, activists, squatters, as well as trees, rats, foxes, pigeons, concrete blocks, heating systems and door locks, amongst others. In this sense, demolition is not limited to the physical dismantling of building structures, but it is rather determined by the co-existence of various forms of demolition work that partially depend on one another.

My aim here is to use aspects of the theoretical apparatus associated with assemblage urbanism and combine them productively with the concepts derived from the critical urban studies tradition with which I have opened this section, such as privatisation, accumulation by dispossession, and State-led rent gap. I follow the suggestion by Brenner et al. (2011) who argue that the key concepts of radical urban political economy should continue to be used as integral frames of reference in empirical and methodological moves towards assemblage thinking. In particular it is the focus on the processual and relational; the attention granted to the agency of human and non-human agents; an understanding of assemblages as composed of heterogeneous materials and sites that are helpful in approaching the Aylesbury demolition as an assemblage (McFarlane, 2011).

A focus on the processual element of demolition brings to the fore time as a central matter of concern. The extended temporality of the Aylesbury demolition - approved as a policy in 2005, and only executed to a minimal degree at the time of writing, 19 years later in 2024 - affords insight into the diverse temporal orientations that unfold within the demolition assemblage. Demolition work is continuously stalled or postponed, by, for example, changes in the national or global economy, or by the actions of recalcitrant residents who refuse to be 'decanted'. However the demolition assemblage also hinges upon distinct anticipatory temporal moves, for example in financial projections and financial viability assessments, or in the removal of pedestrian bridges, or in residents' work of archiving and evidencing disrepair in preparation for future court cases. Throughout the thesis I pay attention to these temporal orientations as they emerge in each of the chapters.

The epistemology for an anthropological study of time proposed by Laura Bear (2014) informs my analysis. Bear brings together Gell's anthropology of time with Marxist-informed approaches: Gell's understands time as existing in three forms: "as a non-human timespace phenomenon (...); as a

social framing of time; and as a personal experience of time” (Bear 2014: p. 15). To make sense of time humans develop ‘time maps’, and it is the social, shared ones that are of interest to anthropologists, posits Bear. Marxist informed approaches are in addition helpful in making sense of conflicting experiences of time, and in particular the articulation between the abstract time of capitalism and its power to shape value in the world, and the different and diverse “rhythms of social time”. They therefore contribute to an understanding of conflict and change in relation to time: in fact, she argues, modern time is characterised by “unprecedented doubt about, and conflict in, representations of time” (Bear 2014: p. 6). State institutions are often implicated in conflicts around representations of time as they become the node where bureaucratic time becomes entangled with other, unaligned, time articulations. Anthropologies of state planning for example find that the timescales and complex time maps of urban planning produce friction when confronted with “the lived horizon of a citizen” (Abram, 2014, p. 137).

Paying attention to the discordant and conflictual temporal orientations of demolition informs my work in two distinctive ways. First of all, the extended and uncertain temporality of demolition allowed a shift of focus from the moment of displacement (a key analytic of the regeneration and gentrification literature) to the time preceding it: my focus in this thesis is on the residents’ *life within demolition*, a suspended, protracted time in which everyday life continues to be made and remade, if in greatly adapted circumstances. I am not alone in pointing out this particular temporal dimension of urban restructuring: Ferreri (2020) underlines the drawn out, temporally extended act of decanting; Watt focuses on council housing residents “living through regeneration” (Watt 2021: p. 13), while Paton writes of gentrification in Glasgow as “everyday and enduring. It is lived with as standard” (2018, p. 1). Others have remarked on the slow violence of regeneration induced displacement, which is then punctuated by sudden accelerations (Cooper, Hubbard and Lees, 2020). Others yet have observed the ongoing and layered nature of displacement, for example for those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017 (Rozena, 2022).

With my particular emphasis on ‘living within’ I wish to point to a focus on continuities that accompany the ruptures that a large, destructive infrastructural project entails. Continuing to reproduce everyday life in conditions of demolition (where demolition, once again, needn’t be simply the physical disassembly of a building, to be felt and real) requires ongoing forms of labour to reproduce, repair and maintain the social and infrastructural networks and relations of everyday life. Ringel (2014) in his ethnography of a fast-declining town in Germany emphasises the work that associations of citizens perform to maintain social institutions in the face of an uncertain and shrinking future. This resonates with Graham and Thrift’s interest in maintenance and repair (2007). Their focus is on material and infrastructural urban systems, and they call to for social theory to attention to the ongoing labour of upkeep, rather than what they call moments of assembly. I content here that within the demolition assemblage, the work of reproducing everyday

life continues, even within the changed circumstances and with an uncertain future horizon. Similarly, even as the state plans for a building's demolition, it has to continue to provide a range of services, in however limited, imperfect and shrinking form.

Concomitantly, the focus on demolition as processual and taking place in conflicting timespaces, opens up the possibility of interventions and interruptions: it makes legible moments and sites where disruption might be possible, and demolition plans could morph or be distorted, if not completely aborted. McFarlane refers to this as the "potentiality" of the urban (2011:p. 209) that assemblage urbanism makes available, against predetermined trajectories or outcomes. Assemblage urbanism, and more in particular the actor-network-theory out of which it emerges, has been criticised for its potential to, at its worst, erase relations of power, or make them illegible in a maze of close-up detail where all elements are flattened in horizontal relations (Madden, 2010). However I point here to its potential to identify nodes or sites where relations of power are acted out and become dense, and where there might be potential for their disruption.

In this sense I aim to foreground the possibility of agency within, despite and beyond the neoliberal nexus of dispossessive violence that undergirds the demolition. In this frame the agentive subject that is found is not (or at least, not only) the revolutionary subject organised in recognisable political formations of the left, but rather resistance to/within the demolition assemblage can take on new forms. I choose to describe the range of actions, sentiments, gestures and organising against the demolition assemblage with the concept of 'refusal'. Tina Campt glosses refusal as "a generative and capacious rubric for theorising everyday practices of struggle often obscured by an emphasis of collective acts of resistance" (2019, p. 79). There are continuities with anthropological theories of resistance - from Abu Lughod (1990) onwards - that understand resistance as taking place outside of the traditional realms of organised politics. I prefer however to employ the term refusal, for it contains a sense of negation that I believe more aptly describes the sensibilities and practices at play here. Throughout the main chapters of the written thesis and the interactive documentary that accompanies it, I identify instances of resident refusal towards the demolition assemblage expressed in both collective and individualised forms. In chapter 4 I focus on resident efforts to contain infrastructural managed decline; chapter 5 is about collective organising to contest an expropriation in a quasi-judicial setting; in chapter 7 I develop the concept of financial refusal; in the i-doc I devote a segment of a squatter occupation that took over a vacant building in 2015. Throughout the thesis I also point to more diffuse and less spectacular instances of resident dissent and refusal towards the regeneration/demolition, which might at different times include acts of negation, such as not responding to letters and phone calls, and not engaging with the council-led rehousing process. I argue that this collection of diverse collection of practices constitute a diffuse refusal towards the regeneration/demolition that remain invisible if we only focus on organised expressions of dissent.

Additionally, I reference and follow this particular tradition of refusal because it is rooted in a tradition of Black theorising that criticises the reification of Black dispossession (McKittrick, 2011). It accompanies the centring of race as an analytical category, that conjoins with a class-based understanding of the subjectivities that are formed within the demolition/regeneration assemblage. The centrality of the refusal analytic aims to foreground the processes of racialisation that are imbricated in and, I argue, constitutive of the demolition assemblage. In this thesis I contend that the fact that many of the Aylesbury residents, and in particular many of the Aylesbury leaseholders, are racialised, and many are racialised as Black, is of significance to the way the regeneration/demolition takes shape and to the way residents make sense of it and refuse its logics. Several recent contributions to the literature on housing estates renewal underline the centrality of racialisation to regeneration/demolition schemes, most notably Perera (2019), Elliott Cooper, Hubbard and Lees (2020) and Thoburn (2022) thereby rectifying a focus on class as the primary conceptual frame of analysis in the UK estate regeneration literature. Through the thesis I argue that the way the regeneration/demolition assemblage operates, the dynamics of life within demolition and residents' refusal to demolition are related to the way residents are racialised and to their life experiences as former colonial subjects, post-colonial migrants and people of colour in contemporary Britain. An overview of my framework on the relationship between class, racialisation and housing estate regeneration/demolition is in place at this stage.

## **1.6 Formations of a Racialised Urban Working Class**

Theorisations about race, class and their articulations are abundant and complex. My aim here is to provide a necessarily summative outline of my framework and the way it shapes my ethnography, rather than a comprehensive overview of the existing literature and debates. I understand both race and class as ongoing, processual formations, rather than stable identities: however, the way they are produced and reproduced, and their histories as analytics are profoundly different. In the Marxist tradition class analysis has been rooted in theories of labour, and in a basic contradiction between the interest of capital and labour, in a model marked by the industrial European context in which it was developed. This highly influential scheme has been criticised for not accounting, for example, for the unpaid reproductive labour traditionally performed by women in the home, as per Marxist feminist critiques (Federici, 2021). It also needs considerable updating to reflect contemporary, post-industrial organisation of society and labour. Certainly the subsuming of characteristics that shape people's lives, such as gender, race, sexuality and so on, as second-order analytics that simply qualify and inflect class, does not help us in making sense of much contemporary phenomena.

When we understand class as a formation, rather than a form of identitarian static belonging, we can start to make sense of its articulation with other formations. Skeggs argues that class is formed, “produced, lived and read”, through “systems of inscription, exchange and value” (2015, p. 4). Inscriptions mark bodies – certain bodies are fixed and rendered static by those inscriptions, while others are freed and gain mobility. Relationships of exchange – whether financial or immaterial – create subjectivities and attribute connotations (positive or negative) to them. In this exchange process value is created or lost. Within this combination of value, inscription and exchange, notions of class as well as race, gender, sexuality, are articulated and combined to produce particular subjectivities (*idem*). This articulation is important in an analysis of contemporary housing estates in inner London if we understand the creation of a widespread and diffuse public housing system in the UK as part of its post-war welfare provision, as being based on notable and systemic exclusions. Anthropologist Insa Koch argues that the project of council estate construction needs to be seen as a State-building project, and as such, it rests upon ideas of ideal and deserving citizens for whom it is designed, and from which those categorised as undeserving are excluded (2018). In chapter 6 I outline some of the ways in which exclusion along racialised lines marked the housing landscape in the decades after the war, and how black and brown settlers from colonies and ex-colonies who moved to the UK in this era were denied access to council housing, either through exclusionary allocation policies, direct racist violence, and also paternalistic and punishing everyday management strategies.

Therefore, the provision of quality and affordable housing for the working class, while being part of the social-democratic post-war settlement, is also predicated on a separation between a deserving portion of that class, and an undeserving one. The determination of racial difference contributed to creating a division between those deserving and those undeserving. Once Thatcherism rang the death knell on council housing, materially and ideologically, a reversal of sorts occurred. Privatisation, the push towards private ownership, and the residualisation of council rentals on the other (so that now those considered most in need got priority for council housing allocations) produced a situation where council housing became associated with those most undeserving. In this way, council housing, rather than only being a form of housing for those considered working-class, instead became also a producer of class, by inscribing negative value on those associated with the housing estate. We see that space becomes implicated in the formation of both class and race, in that bodies and spaces come to mark each other in a circular system of exchange that produce value laden judgements. As the housing estate became in UK hegemonic public discourse a charged place, framed as a site of poverty, criminality and social exclusion, its residents became equally marked as deviant or lacking. This is inscribed in a material and tangible way in, for example, the very infrastructures constitutive of estate buildings’ inhabitation. In chapter 4, *Interrupted Flows*, I map the history of the pedestrian walkways and their demolition onto a geography of value that overlays architectural structures with bodies and moral-legal judgements.

The characteristics of the space are inscribed on those who live it, and vice versa (Mills 1997). This marking of the public housing estate is part of a history of spatial marginalisation of low-income neighbourhoods that can be traced back to early industrialisation, as we will see in more detail in chapter 6, and it cannot be understood fully without accounting for the imbrication of class and race in its history.

Race as a system of classification rooted in biological difference between human groups, as developed by theorists of pseudo-scientific racism, has been conclusively and widely disproven and debunked. In this sense Stuart Hall defined race as a “discursive construct”, and a “sliding signifier” (1997). However, the lack of a scientific basis to a system that differentiates, ranks and ascribes various degrees of humanity does not eliminate the system’s existence: if race’s grounding in biology is entirely spurious, the effects of racial categorising and ranking are tangible and material. In this sense, I understand ‘race’ as a system that differentiates and creates ranked categories as determined by a confluence of social, historical, cultural and economic forces. This process is best described by the term racialisation, which points to their iterative character that is continually renewed in material and immaterial forms, at different historical junctures, as unstable and contested formations that are struggled over. These iterative formations of race are closely intertwined with class formations, as is extensively demonstrated by Shilliam’s historical account of the racialisation of the “undeserving urban poor” in England since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (2018). Conventional analyses of class in the UK posit the existence of a native industrial white working class that encountered migrant, settler and (post) colonial subjects after the second world war. I rather understand the formation of the working-class in the UK as inherently shaped since its emergence during the Industrial Revolution by a relationship with the colonies, and therefore inherently racial since its inception (Virdee, 2014; Shilliam, 2018). The racialised urban working class that inhabits the Aylesbury Estate (more on the particular composition of the groups I worked with in the next chapter, *Our Own Sky Garden*), and their rights claims on home, inhabitation, community and property, are in this thesis seen within this framework. In chapter 8, *Home Investments*, I analyse how attribution of exchange, inscription and value (cfr. Skeggs 2015) are related to the contestation of property values, and how ideas of ‘deservingness’ (cfr. Shilliam 2018) shape this conflictual field.

Further, my understanding of the formations of race and class is also shaped by Katherine McKittrick’s work on the way dispossession and impoverishment are reproduced and reinforced by academic and creative work that takes immiseration as its central focus, in a way that reiterates and reinforces dispossession, even when the intent is rooted in a critical and liberationist stance. McKittrick identifies a coupling of blackness with marginality that does not leave space for a line of flight and that effectively works to reproduce “bifurcated-segregated” modes of thinking. She writes:

Analyses of racial violence require the conceptual and thus material subordination of the black/non-white human to extra-human violence which positions the ontological stakes of liberty as decidedly oppositional to black sense of place. (2011: 953)

With this McKittrick indicates that academic research into anti-black violence can discursively reproduce the very categories it aims to criticise by remaining locked into a binary way of thinking that posits black inferiority as a discursive starting point. In particular, research on 'urbicide' and urban poverty is taken as an example of these mechanisms.

As a corrective McKittrick puts forward the notion of a "black sense of place" (with reference to Doreen Massey's concept of "sense of place"), a concept that encompasses the power relations of race and geography, but that includes and centres the cultures of resistance and the lines of flight that are crafted and always present within spaces of racialised violence (2011). I attempt to respond to McKittrick's critique through the concept of 'refusal', as outlined above, to foreground the ongoing co-existence of the making of everyday lives and spaces, dispossessive processes and the creation of community within acts of refusal and claim-making. The production of everyday lives and spaces punctuates the thesis at different points, either through the use of vignettes that include details that exceed a narrative function (such as the one that opens this introduction); through the use of photographic images that accompany the text, not always as direct illustrations, but rather of reminders of the situated nature of the claims made in the writing. Similarly, the interactive documentary included moments and interludes of day-to-day home making. Further, the creation of "a black sense of place" is also present in the plethora of example of acts of refusal that run through every chapter of the thesis.

Wrapped up in the creation of 'black space' and refusal is also a recognition of the position and investment of residents towards the regeneration/demolition, which includes moments of collaboration with the very processes of dispossession. When I started the doctoral research, I assumed that I would focus my attention on tenants and renters. While my relation with tenants like Aysen and Laura remained central in shaping my understanding of life on the Aylesbury and of the activism against the regeneration, over time I found myself increasingly involved with a group of organised leaseholders – the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group (ALAG). I researched extensively with ALAG, acting as the group's secretary for a period. The main case studies that run through this thesis emerge from this engagement. The particular position of being a leaseholder on a publicly owned housing estate, which instigated debates about notions of private and public interest, means this is a particularly fertile area of inquiry. It is particularly interesting to reflect on the role that home ownership has on one's class identity, social positioning and understanding of home. In this sense leaseholders on housing estates inhabit a liminal social position, having made

use of the main mechanism of housing estate privatisation, the Right-to-Buy policy, while still being marked by the spatial stigma of living on an estate. One central requirement of the demolition assemblage is to repossess the properties of the leaseholders, and leaseholders therefore find their trajectories of social mobility threatened by the regeneration/demolition. In this context racialised Right-to-Buy leaseholders also find themselves invested by ideas of deservingness and undeservingness that are integral to the very formation of race and class in the UK. The key focus of this thesis is exactly on the mechanisms of home repossessions and expropriation, and, crucially, on leaseholder's acts of refusal of them, in a frame that accounts for the complicated class and racial positionings expressed in such refusals.

## **1.7 Thesis Outline**

Chapter 2, Visual and Multimodal Approaches to the Study of the Demolition Assemblage, introduces and frames my approach to visual research, and to the interactive online documentary (i-doc) that constitutes the practice-based element of this thesis. In this chapter I ground my visual approach in questions of ethics and responsibility, and in the history of collaborative, co-creative relational documentary practice, taking the work of one resident curating visual counter-narratives to the regeneration/demolition as my starting point. I discuss the ideas that underpin my decision to create an i-doc, and I locate my work within an existing body of work with which it enters into conversation. At the end of this chapter, I suggest that this could be a good moment to engage with the i-doc, although this remains at the discretion of the reader/user.

Chapter 3, Our Own Sky Garden provides contextual information and locates the Aylesbury estate both geographically and historically. It describes the estate's physical location, central yet peripheral, from the point of view of a group of residents, who observe, mimic and comment upon their proximity and distance from a luxury high-rise in the financial city which is part of the view from their home windows. Taking this as a starting point, the chapter traces the historical trajectory of the borough of Southwark, and of the Walworth neighbourhood, where the Aylesbury is located. An overview of the construction of the Aylesbury estate and the national context of social housing provision in the UK is given, while an in-depth discussion of the architectural principles of high-rise modernism integrates this introduction in chapter 4. I include a textual timeline, whereas a multimodal timeline is included in the I-doc, where key dates are enriched by audio, video and photographic documentation.

The subsequent four chapters each engage with an aspect of the demolition assemblage ethnographically: the managed decline of infrastructural systems; the legal defence of property repossessions; the history of racializing housing exclusion; and the investment in home and the struggle around the determination of its value. Each is an inquiry into a problematic where



conflicting temporal orientations; acts of refusal; and histories of racialisation intersect in different ways. Moments of resident-led refusal drive the ethnography, which include organised anti-repossession campaigning as well as individual responses to the pervasive lack of upkeep and maintenance on the part of the local authority.

Chapter 4, *Interrupted Flows*, concerns itself with the institutional negligence, managed decline, mediatic demonisation and anticipatory demolition of building infrastructures: specifically, I engage with the network that delivers running water and heating to the estate, and the pedestrian walkway system. Both infrastructures were fundamental to the very architectural, social and urbanistic concept of the estate, and for each I provide a historical grounding to its importance which also complements the historical overview provided in chapter 3. Through a close focus on these two infrastructures, the chapter therefore affords both a historical insight into the ideologies behind its construction, and an insight into residents' efforts at refusing and living alongside infrastructural decay. Rather than being the 'problem to be solved', as popular representations of council housing resident depiction might have it, in this chapter I claim that one of the main issues residents face is the lack of upkeep and maintenance of the buildings they inhabit on the part of the local authority, which I understand as a form of institutional negligence and anticipatory demolition.

Chapter 5 is the first of three chapters which take the efforts of homeowners to refuse the buybacks of their properties as their main object of inquiry. In order to carry out the regeneration/demolition plan, the local authority needs to reacquire those formerly publicly owned flats that became privately owned through the Right to Buy scheme. Despite involving only a minority of homes, this process of 'land assembly' – as it is known in technical land-development language – is a financially onerous and complex operation, and one that homeowners greatly resent and resist in a variety of ways. Chapter 5, *Into the Lions' Den* focuses on the mechanism of property expropriation, or compulsory purchase, which, whilst putatively being a measure of last resort for the acquiring authority, is a measure that casts a long shadow over all buy back offers and negotiations. The homeowners who entered into the public inquiry analysed here were under threat of expropriation and used their statutory right to have their case heard by a government-appointed inspector to determine the public interest case behind it. The homeowners drew on a large network of supporters to self-organise a legal defence during the inquiry, and over the course of the chapter I present, in a summary form, the key arguments that residents, academics, and housing campaigners presented to criticise the regeneration/demolition, as well as the expropriation of private homeowners. While the legal case revolved around the issue of expropriation of privately owned homes, the arguments presented by the team of objectors (the residents' and their supporters) encompassed a much wider set of concerns, and fundamentally questioned the public interest inherent in the regeneration/demolition as a project as a whole. The

chapter therefore presents a wide range of arguments critical of the very concept of urban regeneration in a situated and embedded form.

Chapters 6 and 7 shifts the focus to a different group of homeowners – who I call the ‘Northchurch Three’ - and follows their buy-back negotiations as they take place during and after the inquiry at the centre of chapter 5. While the chapters follow a chronological order, it might appear as if the events fold back on themselves, and that a step back is taken in the order of negotiations. However much this might appear counter-intuitive, this non-linear logic reflects the way that the phased regeneration plan unfolds, with areas of the estate being ‘activated’ for decanting and buy-backs at different times, so that not all residents will go through the same experiences concomitantly. The regeneration/demolition timeline can be visualised as a set of recurring loops rather than a straight line. Therefore, after having witnessed the First Development Site homeowners argue against their expropriation in a legal setting, chapter 6 opens with the Northchurch Three homeowners interrogating their own expropriation timeline during a council meeting. Pointing to the case of a second-class postal stamp used to send important official documents, the homeowners and the local media create a metaphor of second-class citizenship. This, I argue, has traction because it references a history of racialised housing dispossession that has its root in the very formation of the nation state and citizenship in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which linked citizenship rights to property ownership rights, from which non-white and working-class subjects were excluded. I claim that contemporary citizenship is shaped by the struggles and rights claims of those formerly excluded, both in the imperial past and in post-war London. In this light, the claims of Aylesbury leaseholders can be seen less as examples of claims to possessive individualism, and more as refusal of what Roy has defined ‘racial banishment’.

This discussions segues into chapter 7, Home Investments, which is framed around the Northchurch Three’s collective negotiation of the buy-back of their flats. Over the course of the chapter, I develop the concepts of home investment and financial refusal, where the first frames the shape and poignancy that the second takes. I conceptualise investments as a convergence of financial and emotive concerns which congeal in the purchase of property. Investing in homeownership is a response to a financial calculus situated in contemporary geometries of labour, welfare, saving, and inserted into ideologies of possessive individualism and neoliberal ideas of success and personal achievement. Concomitantly it also encompasses the material shape and geography of everyday life, and the affective, familial, neighbourly networks that are spun in and around the space and time of the home. I also argue that for those who have experiences of migration, and home/life re-making across geographical distance, and those who have experiences of historical and personal exclusion from housing due to diffuse racism, the constitution of home and its purchase takes on an additional weight and power. In addition, investing in property also entails ‘becoming invested’ by ones’ home in turn, and its value, or lack

thereof, reflecting on the homeowners. The financial valuation of the properties is a major source of contention and the arena where all these interconnected strands intersect. This is where ALAG and the Northchurch Three put into force activities, positionings and strategies that I call 'financial refusal'. These are explored ethnographically in the second part of the chapter.

In addition I use images throughout the text where they complement and enrich the written word. Apart from these illustrative images, I have also inserted short visual interludes between the chapters, which are less directly linked to the text and which serve as visual counterpoints. The first visual interlude that the reader is about to encounter is an extract from a blog curated by a resident, featuring images taken by herself and her neighbours. In chapter 2 I go on to discuss this set of images and why I chose them.

## **Visual interlude #1**

From <https://aylesburytenantsfirst.wordpress.com/>. Reproduced with permission from the site's curator with the request for readers to click on the link and visit the website.



<https://aylesburytenantsfirst.wordpress.com>

A living room on the 8th floor of Wendover



WE LIVE HERE NOW AND WE LOVE OUR HOMES



<https://aylesburytenantfirst.wordpress.com>



Opposite the part - Danesfield garden



Room to make a mess

<https://aylesburytenantsfirst.wordpress.com>



Artist's residence in Arklow



## 2. Visual and Multimodal Approaches to the Study of the Demolition Assemblage

### 2.1 Introduction

In a world saturated by still and moving images, the production and circulation of visual material cannot but be included by researchers of the social in their analysis of contemporary life (Collins et. al. 2017). This is ever so more the case in a setting like the one central to this thesis, where images play a fundamental role in shaping the very field of inquiry, and have very real material effects that inform urban planning policy, policing, and allocation of public funds. The use that has been made of the Aylesbury estate as a symbol, for example, of the failure of architectural modernism as well as of the failure of Tory policies in the 1980s and 90s, was tethered to the production of what has been called a 'sink estate spectacle'. This 'spectacle' was shaped by representations circulated in the printed press, TV and film, and later increasingly the web. It also underpinned the implementation of urban regeneration policies as initiated by the first Blair government (Campkin 2013). Therefore, a vital part of my research practice has since the outset been the use of visual and multimodal methodologies. These are an intervention into an existing visual and representational discourse and an analysis of modes of counter-representation.

In this chapter I will introduce my approach to the visual; the ethical questions I faced; the films that shaped my thinking and practice, and that represent the field within which the practice-based element of this thesis is situated; the theories of visibility that underpin my overall approach and the ways in which I have incorporated specifically the use of video with research collaborators. The questions that have guided me are: what kind of approaches to the visual can contribute to a critical analysis of social housing demolition and resident displacement? How can the visual help us investigate and understand demolition, displacement and refusal? How can a filmmaking practice be political in this context? How can that be done effectively in a field so pervasively saturated with entrenched visual representations that reify their subjects into narrative straightjackets? How do we avoid reproducing such closed representations?

When I first started fieldwork, I planned to create a feature length documentary film as the practice-based element of this thesis. As I continued to develop my work, I learnt about the practice of online interactive documentary making (i-doc). I realised that an i-doc would be an interesting form through which to assemble and disseminate a part of the material I had created, rather than a linear long-form documentary film. This choice was driven by my interest in exploring non-linear storytelling as a way of conveying a particular sense of time. It also gave me the option to mirror the structure of the 'demolition assemblage' in visual form, and to feature a multiplicity of voices



and forms. The i-doc I created - *Living Room* - is an online interactive documentary that asks the user to make choices about what materials to view, and in what order. Starting from a virtual living room, users select a pathway amongst many possible, within the architecture of the site. The pathways intersect with the themes developed in the thesis' written chapters: the law, housing campaigns, house stories, walkways and the media. In the second part of the chapter, I will discuss theories of interactive documentary and *Living Room* fits in with these.

## 2.2 Curating a Photographic Counter-Archive

While the creation of images is central to my practice, I will start with a reflection on images taken by the residents of the Aylesbury Estate, rather than myself. While I wrote this chapter, I did what I have done many a time before: I opened a popular internet search engine on my phone, entered Aylesbury Estate as a search term, and filtered for images. As I scrolled down the page, a distinctly uniform type of image predominates: concrete grey high-rise buildings that extend horizontally across the urban landscape.

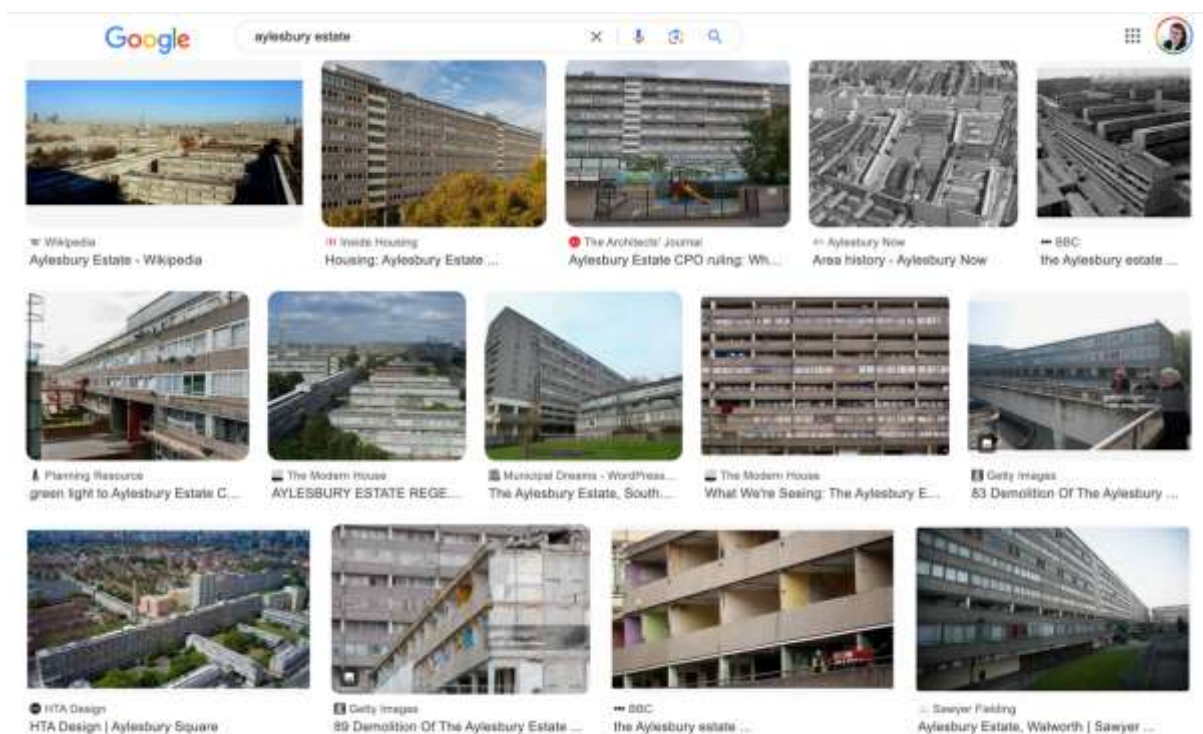


Image 1 Screenshot of a Google image search using the key word 'Aylesbury Estate'. Accessed 15/10/2024

The shots taken from a high vantage point (including several aerial ones) highlight the size of the estate, with many identical buildings extending far into the frame and beyond it. The photographs framed from low vantage points emphasise instead the vertical extension of the high-rise blocks. The past and the future appear too: I retrieved some black and white archival images; and a few CGI projections of the planned development come up as well. Overall, the impression one is left

with is of a uniformly grey urbanscape dominated by concrete. The modernist architecture privileges straight lines and rational geometries: many of the images on display make use of these characteristics to produce aesthetically balanced frames that use perspective lines, angles and the repetition of patterns to emphasise size, extension and uniformity. Echoing Campkin (2013), Laura, the resident I first introduced in the introduction, argues that this type of image-making conveys ideas of failure and neglect, which in turn justify regeneration/demolition projects.

Laura is a teacher and part-time musician who has lived on the Aylesbury since the early 1980s. Over the years she has been active in a range of diverse resident groups – her efforts have taken many different forms, including as an active member of her a Tenants and Residents Association, as well as a housing organiser and song-composer. Her main concern has been to both improve and maintain the living conditions of the estate, as well as critique the regeneration programme and stop the demolition. She is a theorist and practitioner of connections. Her analysis of the situation on Aylesbury brings together the realm of politics and history with an understanding of the everyday issues that concern the very materiality of the building she inhabits: the water, the heating, the lifts and the rubbish chutes. A student of Buddhism, her spiritual journey certainly contributes to the way she understands the world and her place within it. I have learned and continue to learn from her, about housing but most importantly about seeing connections between realms and spheres. Laura is just as attentive to the vagaries of a neglected housing infrastructures, as well as to the power of imaginaries and art. Over her years spent campaigning for the rights of Aylesbury residents, Laura has paid particular attention to the question of representation and the power that narratives have in shaping the way the material world takes form. As part of her campaigning activities, in the mid-2000s Laura set up a blog called Aylesbury Tenants and Leaseholders First which collected her writings, and which she uses as a tool for organising.

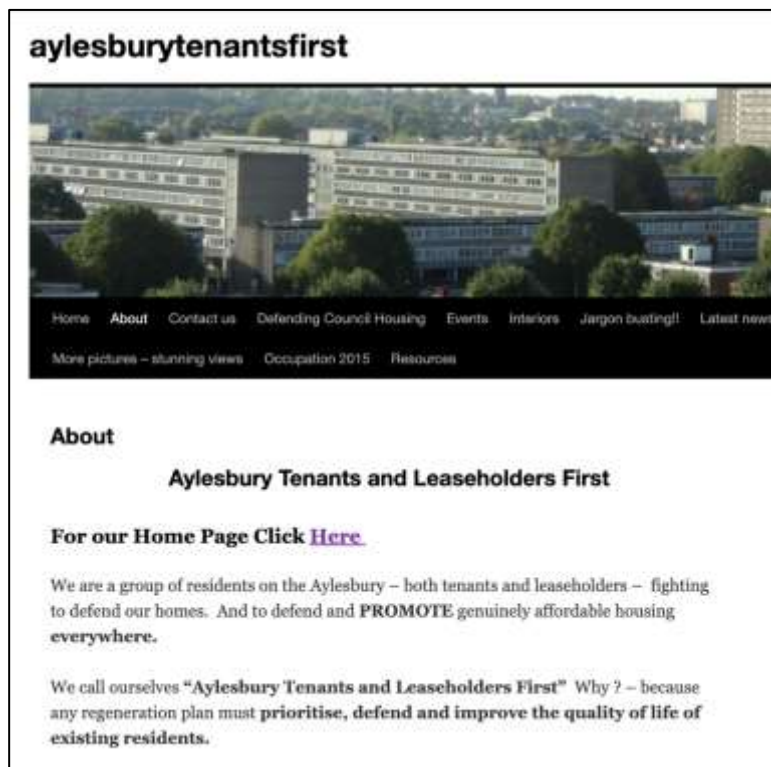


Image 2 Screenshot of the About page of the Aylesbury Residents and Leaseholders First blog. <https://aylesburytenantsfirst.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 15/10/2024

The blog provides a platform for publicising events, talks, demonstrations, and meetings, and for disseminating critical literature. It also includes a photographic project aimed at redressing the negative portrayals of the estate in the media. Laura’s curated counter-archive is a response to the predominance of images such as the ones that a Google search brings up, and an attempt at creating a more positive image of the estate. She argues that a key arena for the debate around regeneration/demolition is in the sphere of the imaginary. The narratives of architectural failure are heavily mediated by image, and a visual corrective will, according to Laura, disprove some of the arguments for the regeneration/demolition. To do so Laura collected and published images that residents took of their living environments, with a focus on low-key domestic interiors, gardens and environmental portraits. The heading on one of the webpages reads: “Newspaper images of the Aylesbury show the facade of the buildings. This is the place to show some images of Aylesbury from the inside – where residents spend their time.”<sup>2</sup>

A selection of the photos published on the blog are reproduced as a set just before this chapter, with permission from Laura. I have chosen to reproduce them as a visual interlude, with their original captions, so as to retain the sense of them as a curated archival collection that is clearly not authored by me. The full set of images can be viewed at this link: <https://aylesburytenantsfirst.wordpress.com/>, on the menu tabs ‘Interiors’ and ‘More Pictures –

<sup>2</sup> <https://aylesburytenantsfirst.wordpress.com/pictures/> accessed 14 October 2024.

stunning views!'. Laura asked me to encourage readers to click on the link to visit the website, to appreciate it in full, and to move it up search engine hits.

The photographs privilege interiors, often shot on inexpensive cameras and on phones, sometimes with little attention to aesthetic framing conventions and photographic formulae. They portray mundane details of people's living spaces; they are taken by a range of residents, each with their own sensibility, and as such there is little aesthetic continuity between them. The photos of exteriors are mostly shot from the interiors of flats, and they show an interest in the sky, in the cityscape, and in the trees. As a collection, they ask viewer to make space for the heterogeneous lives that unfold within the buildings, and to allow for surprises and unexpected encounters.

The question about how the Aylesbury estate is represented and talked about, what metaphors and images are used to discuss it, and who gets to speak about and for it, is a recurring one. On the first day that I spent filming in Aysen's flat it came up repeatedly, with residents asking where my footage would be displayed, and how. One participant, who will remain anonymous given his reticence to engage with me, asked not to be filmed, motivating his concern with a question about the politics of representation at play – himself a black artist and filmmaker, he did not want a white outsider to be in control of the way he was represented. As I anticipated in the previous chapter, while I was welcomed by Aysen and others, some residents preferred not to engage with me, and were at times suspicious or indifferent. While some of these sentiments were alleviated with time, as friends vouched for me and I became seen as a trustworthy person, others remained distant. Others yet became close friends but put boundaries on their participation in certain activities, such as filming. Laura is a case in point: images of her face are far and few between in my work (although she does occasionally appear), but her contribution features in a myriad other ways. In the example I opened this section with, she features as the creator of the blog and curator of the photographic counter-archive. I take a cue from her approach in how I introduce images into this thesis. Introducing the spaces central to my research through this particular set of images emerges from a methodological and ethical decision to curate the information that the reader receives, and the order that they receive them in.

The production and circulation of images of housing estates and their residents are dominated by visual tropes that continue to reconfirm them as spaces of marginality and deviance. This is especially true for high-rise brutalist housing estates: the topical images favour exteriors captured using wide angles that emphasize large sizes and the uniformity of the architecture, thus suggesting non-human scales and dehumanising spaces devoid of individuality and interest. Such imagery, even when it privileges architectural form over human form, nonetheless conjures an image of a specific demographic when used in the UK context. Images of high-rises and concrete architecture become a stand-in for poverty, racialised minorities and crime. Using such images as

a first introduction to the estate would be a way to evoke the tropes of poverty and marginality without needing to put them in words, in a sort of silent conversation with the reader in which information can remain unspoken, whilst being firmly placed in their mind through the images.

As a writer and as a visual practitioner, I consider relying on such a strategy as ethically questionable, because it would contribute to re-inscribing the negative visual tropes it relies on, and it would posit them as a common language between writer/creator and reader. The critical import of the text would not be an effective strategy to undo the associations that would have been created by these images in the mind of reader (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón, 2021), but they would remain present as a spectral presence to haunt and inform the rest of the text. Rather than being an iconoclastic statement rooted in a fear of the power of images, I understand this as a conscious choice to curate the way a field is presented to a reader of anthropological literature in a way that does not replicate a discourse of housing estates as sites of alterity. It is a necessarily limited and imperfect attempt at a different visual 'way in'. I am focusing here on the importance of the 'opening' because of course any introduction is also a statement of intent and an indication of an ethic and an epistemology. Thus my choice of introductory images is also to be read as a theoretical and ethic stance that grounds my work, in the same way a textual introduction provides a theoretical framework to my thesis.

### **2.3 An Ethics of Accountability**

How then to carry out research using visual methodologies in a field in which the production and dissemination of image is such a contested and charged question? In addition, how was I to do that as an outsider to the field?

Questions about the ethics of image-making have been an integral part of the history of visual anthropology, and of ethnographic filmmaking in particular, with practitioners and theorists writing extensively on the subject. In the early 1990s David MacDougall stated that

About twenty years ago anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers began to feel uneasy about the unchallenged dominance of the author's voice in ethnographic descriptions. Both began to open their work more fully to the voices of their indigenous subjects. The intervening years have seen a tendency towards dialogue and polyphonic construction in ethnography. (1994, p. 27)

Arguably, Rouch's shared anthropology and his ethno-fiction, films such as *Moi, un Noir* (1958) and *Jaguar* (1967), reveal a concern with aspects of authorship that he was starting to develop in the 1950s. Debates about the ethical implications of 'filming with others' have certainly intensified in more recent decades, as MacDougall's quote attests. Henley argues that in fact the discipline has been plagued with such a critical relationship with itself that its recent history can be read as

an ongoing struggle with and refusal of authorship (2020). While this reading might be overstating the case, it certainly is right in detecting an ongoing area of reflection and concern.

Part of the shift in understanding our work as visual anthropologists has been a move away from conceptualising the ethnographer's work as that of a euro-American researcher making films about "their indigenous subjects", as MacDougall phrased it in the quote reproduced above. Trinh T. Minh-ha's writing and filmmaking has been and continues to be an influential contribution to a reconceptualisation of the work of film as a practice of 'speaking nearby', rather than *about* subjects of research (Chen and Minh-Ha, 1994). She also questions the boundaries between subject and object of research, and notions of authoritativeness – her work continuously challenges the viewer about their assumptions on who is a legitimate source of knowledges, and of what kind. It is not only within the discipline of anthropology that these discussions unfold: creators in the media and documentary space have put forward the concept of co-creation (Uricchio and Cizek, 2022), underpinned by similar concerns.

Collaborative and participatory forms of filmmaking and research have been one of the responses to ethnographic film's crises of representation. Rather than a distinct formula to solve what are arguably unresolvable questions of power, the desire on practitioners' part to experiment with their positionality, reflexivity and authorship has given rise to a lively constellation of works, practices and debates that continue to flourish and be central to the discipline. Integral to this constellation are critiques of what collaborative or shared anthropology and filmmaking can achieve, and warnings about considering them formulaic 'solutions' to the intractable issues of authorship, representation and perspective. Minh-ha for example already forewarned about the risk of using multivocality as a blanket solution, when "it is practiced accumulatively, by juxtaposing voices that continue to speak within identified boundaries" (Cheng and Minh-ha 1994: p. 440). Contemporary visual anthropologists working with participatory methodologies continue to reflect on the contradictions and limits of this set of methods and techniques, for example Boswall (2021) writes about the difficulties she encountered in making films with Mozambican women and in relinquishing authorship; and a panel at the 2024 EASA conference invited colleagues to reflect on the frictions inherent in "collaborative, participatory, co-creative interventions in multimodal research", with the aim to discuss the "complexities of collaborative work in multimodal projects, recognizing that valuable knowledge often emerges from the messiness of collaboration, which celebratory accounts may overlook"<sup>3</sup>. The popularity of the sessions and the passionate debates that took place on that occasion attest to the ongoing liveness of the issue.

To describe the genre of ethnographic film and documentary that grapples with these issues, Faye Ginsburg has coined the definition "relational documentary" (2018), which, she argues,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easa2024/p/14693> accessed 1/11/2024

incorporates an ethics of accountability. In a similar vein, feminist film critic Ruby B. Rich has called for a new school of documentary called the Extreme Wide Angle: a “kind of documentary that takes care to be legible to its subjects, that has an ethics of representation, that opens up the frame, steps back, and takes the context of social history into account” (2015). It is within this field of debate and inquiry that I place my work, and I will expand on the ways I have implemented an ‘ethics of accountability’ and an ‘opening up of the frame’ in my approach. Forms of collaboration have been one tool in my framework, and I will discuss them in detail later in the chapter. Before that, I briefly turn to questions of aesthetics.

Alongside a drive towards accountability, I have also been moved by a wish to experiment with aesthetic form within my practice. Rather than understanding the collaborative strategies and formal innovation as two incongruous ways of working that are ill suited to being used in combination, I am inspired by Chris Wright’s call for ethnographic filmmaking to incorporate “inventive formal aesthetics” (2020, p. 53) with relational documentary approaches. He writes:

I want to argue for the productive conjunction of formal creativity and relational strategies as a new expanded art of ethnographic filmmaking. Recognizing the relationships that are possible between the two suggests ways of working that pursue many kinds of creative and inventive formal aesthetics, but that are equally attentive to the dynamics, politics, and positionality of engagements, and the collaborative evocation of different, yet shared and connected, mediated and remediated worlds. (*idem*)

Aesthetic experimentation reflects a shift away from the conventions of documentary film that create the illusion of a seamless narrative reality that the film reproduces. Put another way, they are a critique of a realist tendency within the form that, building on the mimetic power of the camera, induces in audiences a type of ‘suspension of disbelief’ in which the crafted nature of the narrative on screen is forgotten. In contemporary documentary film this is best encapsulated in the re-inscription of the genre as a form of artful storytelling, in which a strong narrative, led by characters, drives the action forward, towards a resolution (e.g. Bernard, 2023). While this is of course the stuff of fiction film, this effect is augmented in the documentary form where of course the footage used is understood to be the raw material of life – i.e. – ‘real’, which is to mean, not acted. In the history of ethnographic filmmaking, the genre of observational film follows a similar logic, although in place of storytelling and character, centre place is here given to certain stylistic features (such as the long shot, the paucity of cut aways and close ups, and a certain durational approach that aims to mimic the rhythms of everyday life), which are understood to provide a transparency and a sense of non-interference on the part of the filmmaker. However much observational filmmaking has become almost synonymous to ethnographic film in certain histories of the discipline, I would rather argue that a tendency towards formal experimentation has run through its history and is detectable all along, although more readily so in the margins of the

discipline rather than its heartlands. I am thinking here of the work of prominent filmmakers such as Trinh T. Minh-ha and Rouch himself, as well figures such as Safi Faye and Chick Strand.

What do I hope to achieve by using the techniques and approaches used by art and experimental film, and leave the more over overt forms of documentary realism behind? Russell writes that “The utopian project of experimental ethnography is to overcome the binary oppositions of us and them, self and other, along with the tension between the profilmic and the textual operations of aesthetic form” (Russell, 1999, p. 19). By defining such a project as ‘utopian’, Russell points to its inherent un-achievability, and in fact in the text she follows on by touching upon the subject of failure and limitations in the examples she covers in her book. I suggest, however, that the attempt inherent in experimental ethnography is its openness to failure – rather than seeing this as a limit, it is in fact one of its main *raison d’être*. Refusing documentary realism opens the way towards strategies that, in their very form, expose the audience to (at times irresolvable) questions, problems and contradictions inherent within the project of making films within the complicated, power-ridden worlds within which we operate. Part of this task comprises letting go of the idea that any one film, in its bound, finite form, can in a perfect form present a ‘solution’ towards the plentiful issues that the very making of film, anthropology and politics conjure up.

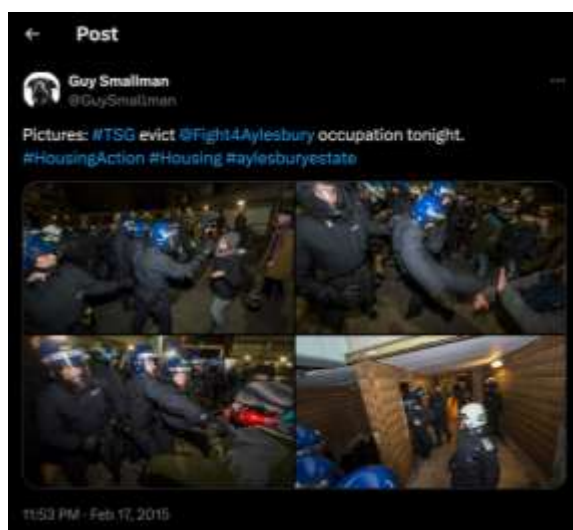
If there is a tendency amongst ethnographic filmmakers to look towards the traditions of the art and experimental avant-gardes (Russell’s 1999 is a case in point), my reference points and sources of inspiration come from a branch of experimental filmmaking that has a more overtly political approach and that aims to think about form and / in politics – to draw on a distinction drawn up by Peter Wollen (2018 [1982]), and whose impetus is of a Brechtian nature. The way that I used audio and video as part of research cannot be separated by this formal experimentation, and it is to an account of my research practice that I now turn.

## **2.4 Experiments in Collaborative and Experimental Research Methodologies**

After getting to know Aysen, Anne and Laura while filming the meeting with the architects that I wrote about in the introduction, I was invited back to a gathering where we discussed working together on films that could publicise the resident-led campaigns on Aylesbury to a wider audience. I started filming with Aysen and Anne at regular intervals, and soon after, a large national demonstration of housing justice was called. We attended as a group, and that same evening a group of squatters and housing activists occupied a block of empty flats in the area of the estate known as ‘the first development site’, which was in the process of being emptied of its residents and stood mostly empty at the time. Aysen became involved with the occupation, and during this phase I spent time filming with her as she engaged with the numerous meetings and outreach activities – these included weekly information stalls in the market, delivering flyers through



residents' doors, collecting signatures, and cooking food. Aysen also continued her engagement with the press, giving a high number of interviews – and we passed on some of the footage I shot during this phase to journalists for their reporting. Press interest became high because a series of police-led evictions occurred in quick succession, followed by demonstrations and actions, that gave the campaign a profile in this phase. Aysen and I found ourselves in the middle of the evictions, and I kept filming throughout, often in difficult circumstances, at night, in the dark, and close to police lines. The series of images (Image 3) by photo reporter Guy Smallman, who follows social movement events closely, appeared linked to in a Guardian article on the evictions, where I appear in the top left image, wearing a grey hat and black jacket. My video camera is not visible because I am holding it behind my back with my right hand, to protect it from the outstretched hand of the police officer in front of me. This image encapsulates much of the type of work I carried out in this initial phase: I became a sort of 'citizen journalist', recording events from the position of the occupiers, and sharing short explicatory clips on social media as a form of counter-information on the occupation's repression.



*Image 3 Screenshot of a post on twitter (now X) by photojournalist Guy Smallman, accessed 25/10/2024*

As part of this effort, I set up a video channel to which housing campaigners could link, and many of the videos were shared extensively on what was then Twitter, now X. The now defunct account Southwark Notes, which was highly regarded and connected to housing movements locally and internationally, was instrumental in sharing this work.

Some of this time was spent with Aysen, and some of it with a friend known as XChris, who is active in the borough-wide anti-gentrification movement as a writer, researcher and historian blogging on Southwark Notes, who was often sound recording alongside me. As the police moved in on the occupiers, local residents also came out of their homes to follow the events, watching on and commenting from the side-lines, and Chris and I spent time chatting with people and getting a

sense of their take. While there was concern over the militaristic turn of events, and fear about the presence of both police and squatters in the area, we were surprised to find that many we spoke to were critical of the decanting of residents, of the upcoming demolition and the overall, slow but palpable gentrification of the neighbourhood.

If I had started my journey with a commitment to my positionality as an engaged researcher, this phase clinched it – the already conflictual relation between the local government and those critical of the regeneration/demolition intensified with the strong police response, involving riot squads, arrests, and heavy-handed tactics, and my positioning within this polarised field was now firmly set. The materials that I shot at this time also had another life as I and a colleague edited them into a longer piece, which included some explicatory text panels to link the various segments, and shown at a housing campaigning event the following year. It is a version of this edit, with some changes to bring it up to date, that is now included in the i-doc in the ‘housing campaigns’ section. While the occupation was carried predominantly by squatters with scant previous links to the estate, and while the attempt to expand the campaign to encompass a wider network of residents in some way did not have an immediate afterlife, the film also shows meetings and conversation between squatters and residents. Even if the links created were in some way tenuous, the energy and public interest created by the squatters’ campaign, and its repression, reverberated across the estate in more subtle ways, and it certainly informed and fed into the leaseholders’ campaigns which were building up in parallel to the occupation.

Shortly after the occupation ended, the public inquiry about the compulsory purchase of the last leaseholders living on the First Development Site started. The inquiry is the focus of chapter 4, Into the Lion’s Den, and I write extensively about it there. What I do not touch upon in the chapter is my video work in that context, when I set out to film proceedings from the public gallery, with the approval and support of the resident objectors’ team. I was soon joined by filmmaker Nikita Woolfe, who at the time lived just outside the perimeter of the Aylesbury and was starting to work on what would later become her feature film *Concrete Soldiers* (2017). Nikita and I took shifts to make sure one of us was always present to film and then shared all the footage between us. Once the first phase of the inquiry finished, we uploaded the audio materials online, and the objectors’ team made use of some of it to write blogs. Nikita and I understood our role as an archiving and witnessing one. During post-Covid it became commonplace to livestream events such as these, but before, an inquiry of this sort was not recorded, on video, audio or even in notes, and our footage was the only mimetic record of the proceedings. Keeping a record of this sort meant that the objectors’ team could revisit testimony and information shared in that forum, and it provided the impression of a hard and fast piece of evidence that could be drawn on again if needed. In a context where residents housing campaigners have learnt from hard experience that all that is spoken by officials can be changed, retracted or denied at a later date, a record that they could

have control over gave some reassurance. The permission to film was not a given, and I had to apply for permission to the inspector. She grudgingly granted it, probably feeling that the 'public' nature of the inquiry would be compromised if she withheld permission. During the second hearing of the inquiry, led by a different inspector, permission to film for me was withheld in the first instance, but granted to journalist Marcus Renton who, despite working as a freelancer and not having secured a commission for his upcoming film, positioned himself as a professional who would be pitching his upcoming film on the Aylesbury to the BBC. The way he presented himself made him a credible journalistic source, whereas I was classed by the incoming inspector as a 'community filmmaker', working in collaboration with the residents, and therefore denied permission to document. On that occasion Marcus advocated for me, and I was once more allowed access with my camera, but eventually decided to only audio record with my Zoom recorder, which I sometimes left in the hands of resident friends in the audience when I had to absent myself.



*Image 4 Caterina filming in the inquiry's public gallery*

The resulting CPO inquiry media archive has been at the centre of a number of audiovisual experiments. After indexing the material using key wording, I was able to navigate the high volume of materials with more ease, which allowed me to create an edit of the proceedings. Rather than just reproducing the main arguments, my aim was to reflect on the adversarial nature of the inquiry, and on the exclusionary power of language to create a zone where those not initiated into the professional legal profession are marginalised. The resulting two short films, *CPO* and *Spiral*, are part of the i-doc and can be found under the thematic strand 'The Law'. In *CPO* the tripartite division of the screen aims to visually underscore the polarised positions in the room, and the use of a rolling transcript reflects the need for translation of the legal language employed in the inquiry room.

*CPO's* companion piece, *Spiral*, is instead a reflection on the embodied sense of vertigo of a lay onlooker. After days spent filming the inquiry using the camera locked on a tripod in a very controlled manner, one late afternoon I started slowly panning the camera in a circle. At first I did so to capture the spatiality of the room, because one of the conditions for filming set by the inspector was an injunction not to move from my chair. The slow pan allowed me to put into relation one side of the room to the other. I spatially located the objectors, the inspector and the administration's desks, but the pan also encompassed the public gallery, the workers and security guards hired to police the space, as well as the uncanny photographs of football matches that adorned the walls of the room that housed the inquiry. After an initial controlled pan, I slowly started increasing the velocity of the tripod's movement, until the pan took on a vertiginous quality. My own boredom with the proceedings, and the difficulty I experienced in maintaining the bodily restraint to sit still, holding concentration for so many hours on end, contributed to the need to film in a freer, and more expressive manner. Later, in the edit room, when I came across this piece of footage which so much differs from the rest, I layered it onto images and pans of the First Development Site. Layering the sound of the two settings added a further dimension to the resulting film, which, I think, expresses some of the vertiginous sense of distance between the impromptu courtroom, its languages and guiding principles, from the spaces that were discussed and that only appeared as spectral disembodied presences in the room.

While these experiments took place for the most part in the editing room (the pan was an out-of-character experiment that lasted a few minutes), my presence in the inquiry room with a video camera gave me a role, however marginal, within the objectors' team. It paved the way to more extensive, and fruitful, interactions – those precious fieldwork moments that take place in the interstices and that, in my experience, is where often insights are created, and relationships deepened and consolidated. In the case of the public inquiry, this happened during the lunch breaks, while waiting for the bus, or over a drink at the end of the day, while strategizing about the following one. In addition, Nikita and I uploaded the entire inquiry's audio onto a streaming site and made it available to the residents and campaigners, who used extract to accompany blog posts and reports.

The third moment of camera-led fieldwork relates to the negotiations for buy-back of the 'Northchurch Three' homes, which I write about in chapter 7, Home Investments. In this case, filmmaking took on yet another dimension. I started attending meetings of the Northchurch three households with the view to help out with researching planning documents and letter writing. Whilst doing this work, I reconnected with Anthony, the son of the Badu family, whom I'd met and interviewed a few years prior. Anthony is a filmmaker, then in his late 20s, and we decided to collaborate on a documentary piece on the Northchurch Three's story. We started shooting together whenever the families met amongst themselves and with council workers. While the

participants were happy for us to film with them, and were actively supporting us in the project, our presence with the camera took on a different significance when we started accompanying the group to meetings with the local authority. Our role then was less of an inobtrusive background presence, but rather that of highly visible observers wielding recording devices, which provided a sense of accountability, and a sense of 'publicness' of these encounters. In one way, we were part of the groups' negotiating power, with the recording devices providing an additional leverage to the discussions. Our presence, as filmmakers but also as active participants in the meetings with a voice, opinions and arguments, can be seen in the footage as we film each other speaking at various moments.

To add an additional layer to our film, Anthony and I started tentatively shooting our planning discussions, with the view to include those in the final edit. We also planned to carry out three group interviews, of which we shot only the first. Our efforts weakened during one of the many hiatuses in the story, and life trajectories took us both in different directions, him in a move to Ghana, and myself into a time of parental leave. We concluded the filming a few years later, when the Northchurch Three, having finally sold their homes to the local authority, gathered for a final celebration to thank all of those who'd supported them over the years. We never finalised the film we wanted to make together, and the edit I included in the i-doc (which can be found in Home Stories/Flats 68-80) is one possible cut made using the material we shot during this time. Anthony and I discussed this option before I finalised the thesis, and he reiterated that he trusted me to handle the material and edit it at that point in time. His feedback on the final edit is pending to a time when he feels able to engage with it.

In addition to the above, an important media-making moment came at a much later date, when in the early summer of 2022 Aysen invited me to meet Alessia, a documentary photographer living locally who had previously taken her portrait, and who had in the meantime become a close personal friend. Aysen had been thinking about putting on an exhibition in her flat for a long time, and in Alessia she had found a talented and willing co-creator. The two had started workshopping ideas and decided to involve me in the process. Aysen's wish was to create a display of the many years of housing campaigning on Aylesbury that she had been part of, as well as to make a tribute for her late sister Pinar who had shared the flat with her until her untimely death in 2019. The exhibition was to take place within her flat, whilst she continued to live in it. This was not such a radical departure from the way Aysen had been managing her campaigning and outreach work for years. As I describe in the introduction, Aysen had been inviting people inside her flat for years, to conduct interviews, to show off her space and to host. I have analysed her choice as a performative counter information strategy that aims to debunk common myths about the Aylesbury and housing estates in general. It also suggests a melding of politics and life within the domestic space from a feminist angle. The exhibition was to push this even further. Aysen had an ambitious

vision about the reach and effect that it would have. One of her aims was also to reinvigorate a rather dormant campaign against demolition on the estate itself. At this time, the First Development Site reconstruction, visible in the distance from Aysen's front window, was well under way. All of the original buildings had been demolished, and new builds were quickly being erected. Aysen could see a building site and cranes on the horizon every day. In between Aysen's building and the building site, low rise blocks belonging to regeneration phase 3 were still standing. Her building, in phase 2, was quickly becoming empty as tenants were decanted and rehoused at increasing speed. During each of my visits I would notice new shuttered windows, until only three inhabited flats remained on her corridor. Aysen was under increasing pressure to join the online rehousing system and to start bidding for a new flat. She refused to engage with the process whilst also being fully conscious that she would not be able to postpone engaging forever. A time would come where the Council officers would declare her 'intentionally homeless' if she refused to engage with the rehousing process, and they would be discharged of their responsibility to rehouse her. Aysen was not going to let this happen. She was also not going to leave without a large impactful gesture. The exhibition was going to make a splash.

If Aysen had a precise vision for what effect the exhibition would have, Alessia was developing an equally ambitious visual plan. The exhibition was going to take over the entirety of the flat, and materials would cover almost all the walls. As her ideas developed, in conversation with Aysen and myself, they became more and more elaborate. Over time it became clear that what we were planning was an installation that would completely transform the flat and that would encompass different media and sensorial realms. All this would be layered upon Aysen's existing living space, so that exhibition, home and life would blend into one another. After going through Aysen's archive of personal photographs and housing campaigning documents, Alessia started composing large and complex themed collages. Fragmentation and re-composition became the central visual and communicative strategy of the displays. In addition, the space of the flat contributed to the overall narrative as each room was assigned a specific theme: one corner of the living room was devoted to the history of the 2015 occupation; in the other corner hung a display of posters of anti-gentrification struggles from around the globe; the corridor was dedicated to links of solidarity with other housing campaigns and political struggles, such as migrant and anti-racist campaigns; the toilet became the space of the Council; and Pinar's life was celebrated in what used to be her bedroom. It was important to Aysen to dedicate her own bedroom to the theme of mental health and housing, as this is an often overlooked aspect of regeneration. A sub group was created to devise and install that particular room, which continued its work in parallel to us. I started fundraising, for it became clear that the project was not feasible on a zero-budget. Michael, a historian who had written a history of the estate (Romyn 2022), contributed texts and captions, and a short film on the construction of the estate that played in a one-person cinema that we set up in the bathroom.

Aysen and Alessia drove the project with their vision and dedication, and they were able to assemble a resourceful cast of collaborators and co-creators around them to realise and complement their ideas. Aysen was able to draw on the extensive network she had created during her years of campaigning. With incredible skill she activated it to contribute towards this increasingly complex effort. Whilst not without its difficulties and limits, the creation of the Fight4Aylesbury exhibition became a moment of rare and enchanted creative co-creation, drawing on diverse knowledge and skills. Every one contributor added what they could and wanted to under the expert guidance of Alessia and Aysen. The anthropologist or researcher does not need to drive a project at all times, for a collaborative relationship to be meaningful. My contribution was in many ways that of a cultural producer: I fundraised, managed the accounts, bought materials online, liaised with the printer and got t-shirts made. I also wrote, alongside Michael, some of the texts that accompany the displays, and I produced a 16-page exhibition booklet that was distributed to visitors. In addition, I set up and contributed to the Fight4Aylesbury social media channels, which were key in disseminating news about the show and attracting visitors. The agit prop videos I had created during the hot winter and spring of 2015 were on display on the living room TV, and a sound composition I had edited especially played on loop on the toilet. Whilst my contribution to the group has been very important, I found it liberating to follow the creative drive of others, and to find ways in which aspects of my research work could contribute to a different and greater aim. This shift in my role made it possible to think more creatively about working with others, once my research aims were not any longer central, and the creative drive came instead from my collaborators. The exhibition became truly a shared creation with the anthropologist being one of the team. Alessia and I used Instagram and twitter throughout the planning phase to fundraise and publicise the project, and even in the lead-up phase we received a good amount of press interest. Once we opened, the exhibition went viral, and over the course of a few months over 800 visitors came through Aysen's door. Aysen, Alessia and I contributed an article to the Urban Pamphleteer #11 about the exhibition (Sartori, Dennis and Gammara, 2024), and we are now in the process of building a website that will reproduce the exhibition and continue to expand it. The i-doc will eventually be hyperlinked to this website.

Alongside these four main phases of audio-visual research, I searched for ways to represent the everyday life on the estate through my practice. I found more difficult to do in a sustained way, as I experienced the presence of the camera as an interference when I was simply going about normal everyday life. In my own everyday life I preferred to nurture personal relationships, rather than trying to capture their richness on video. This was the one situation in which the presence of the camera became a hindrance for me, and one in which I felt the risk of turning my participants into characters in an objectifying way that did not fit with my overall ethos. In this sense I respected the wish, often unspoken but nonetheless expressed, of not bringing the camera into situations that

were purely sociable. In this ambit the media-making practices of my collaborators, neighbours and friends provided a useful way into the domestic: the selfies, lo-fi mobile snaps and my own 'visual notes' taken on my phone make their way into this thesis in a few of the visual interludes, as a trace of the sociality and relations that continue to unfold on the estate despite the demolition. Nonetheless, I continued to experiment with various ways of capturing the ambience of the spaces: I spent time filming and sound recording interior and exterior spaces and often in this material, the presence of residents is felt through objects and material culture. For example, in *House Stories*, the short film *Flat 76 - Kostas and Anna* uses images of the couple's flat layered upon an audio life history. The absence of images of the protagonists' bodies, and the privileging of their narrative voices, living space and everyday objects, aims to evoke their presence and direct the attention of the viewer away from the face and the body as the privileged sites of identification. The risk with this strategy is to reproduce an erasure, but the attempt I made is to see if subtracting the image of the body, and putting voice and living space in the foreground, would instead create a space to convey something about working-class housing estate life that is less readily available, and perhaps less objectifying.

The strategies, approaches and methods I have described are all part of an iterative, open-ended research journey that has a collaborative experimental core. It is anchored in what Criado and Estalella (2018) have defined as 'collaboration mode 2', an ethical and political commitment to the research participants'. However it also exceeds this mode. Criado and Estalella's (2018) theorise an additional collaborative mode which they call 'experimental collaboration', which describes an epistemic partnership between the actors in the research field, who grapple together with problematics and questions through the creation of 'fieldwork devices'. They write: "it is a form of engagement that entails field interventions through material and spatial arrangements that enable the articulation of inventive ways of working together" (2018: p. 21). Arguably, my 'relational documentary' strategies combines these two modes, as I used video as a fieldwork device to carry out anthropological research in an ethical and committed form. The questions that I 'grappled with' together with neighbours, friends and collaborators concern issues of representation (such as Laura's creation of counter-narratives to describe housing estate life outside of normative frames of deviance), conjoined with the articulations of demands for housing justice.

In each scenario that I described, our (mine and my collaborators') use of the camera represented an experiment in the articulation of these concerns. At times my own theoretical and aesthetic concerns were foregrounded, at others, those of privileged collaborators were. At time these aligned, and more often than not, we found points of connection or shared interest. Within that space an encounter unfolded and took its course, even when our concerns never perfectly and seamlessly overlapped. My different collaborators also each had their own distinct motives, aesthetics and sensibilities. For example Aysen's interest in an explicitly militant form of protest as



exemplified by squatting as a tactic was not always shared by other residents, who preferred to put forward their concerns in more institutional settings. As well as experimental and collaborative, the way I worked can also be described as multimodal, as understood by Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón when they write of anthropological work that utilises “a combination of audio, video, still images, performance methodologies and web platforms to iteratively, collaboratively and sensually *generate relations* with research participants, interdisciplinary colleagues, and others.” (2019, p. 220). It is relational generative capacity of multiple modes of engagement that in part I activated during fieldwork, and leaned into. Additionally, multimodality is also understood as the incontrovertible fact that the people we work with operate within complex ‘media ecologies’ as consumers and producers, and that our work as anthropologists takes place within these practices (Collins et al. 2017). Laura’s counter archive, Aysen’s exhibition, and more mundanely also the images and videos that were shared with me on messaging applications by neighbours, were integral to the media landscape of fieldwork and they were a means through which the latter could take place.

## **2.5 Review of Filmography**

I have circumscribed this filmography review to films about the housing crisis and the social movements that have emerged in response, principally in London. While I could have cast my net much wider, both in temporal and geographical terms, I chose focus on filmmakers who have been making work in the same historical and political context as I have, and with a similar ethos. In particular I have chosen films that experiment formally and thematically with how they address the housing question. This specificity helps to draw out the ways in which I have been influenced and inspired by these works, as well as the ways in which I have departed from their approaches.

According to film theorist Sborgi (2020), the films I review below are part of a tradition of British housing films with roots in the early twentieth century. This has seen a recent resurgence and acceleration due to the intensification of urban regeneration, housing estate demolitions, and crisis around housing accessibility and security. She argues that documentary has become the privileged mode of inquiry, although fiction and factual television have made their important contributions. I circumscribe my inquiry here to films that work predominantly across documentary and experimental film.

*Estate: a Reverie* (2015) is filmmaker and artist’s Andrea Luka Zimmerman’s swan song to the Haggerston estate in Hackney, east London. Zimmermann uses a combination of techniques, styles and registers to celebrate the last seven years of the estate before its demolition, a heightened time in which the buildings slowly emptied and community ties strengthened, despite and perhaps because of the decanting. The film, made during the time of regeneration/demolition,

however only tangentially directly speaks of it, preferring instead to foreground the ongoing presence of residents, their holding on to their homes for a little while longer. In an interview in 2018, Andrea told me that “the film (is) a refusal to be erased, (...) it’s saying; we haven’t gone away, this is our evidence, we are here regardless of how bad it might be”. In a write up of that interview, I wrote that “The film manages to skilfully navigate its status of ‘reverie’ for the utopian dream wrapped within the idea of municipal housing, or perhaps without falling into a naïve romanticism” (Sartori, 2018). While not overtly a film about the politics of housing, it is suffused by them and driven by a quest to reaffirm the working-class multicultural environment of the Haggerston estate. Andrea explained, “I wanted to show the richness of lives that are way richer than any of these narratives that exist within this much more financialised corporate driven environment”. The film is also made possible by the relationship of care, support and solidarity that Zimmermann had with her neighbours, especially the most elderly and vulnerable, who she shows in sometimes uncomfortable close-up. Stylistically the film combines observational sequences with interventions in public space and staged performative sections. Tapping into Zimmerman’s art practice, these include the enactment of a period piece on the roof of the buildings, overlooking the construction cranes of the ‘new London’ that is rapidly closing in, amongst others. Footage from the workshops that led to the creation of the performative elements of the film were also included; these give an important insight into collective processes. While some of the more performative elements of the film appear contrived, they also introduce an element of inventiveness that contributes to that sense of reverie that the title refers to.

*Estate: a Reverie* is a choral film, and the absence of a main protagonist (apart perhaps from the building itself), is a characteristic it shares with two other films: *Concrete Heart Land* (Ball and Novaković 2014), and *Home Sweet Home* (Colusso 2012). Both films are set on the Heygate estate in South London, not far from the Aylesbury and at the centre of a regeneration/demolition project and important resistance movement against it. While *Concrete Heart Land* is a thoroughly independent experimental production, *Home Sweet Home* had industry backing and aired on the French TV channel ARTE. It is a heterodox documentary that nonetheless relies on classical conventions of narrative and character development. *Home Sweet Home*, like *Estate: a Reverie*, relies on a proliferation of characters through which the viewer is taken through the history of the estate and its regeneration, including the activism that marked its final years. However, the point of view through which we encounter the residents and characters is that of the filmmaker herself, who narrates the film in the first person. She positions herself as a neighbour who is nonetheless a stranger and who, over the course of the film, becomes an insider, mimicking the trajectory of its intended international viewership. Through historical contextualisation, media footage, conversations with architects and local administrators, the experiences of the six resident protagonists are framed within the history of council housing decline and regeneration. Both

Zimmerman and Colusso's chose to mirror the multitude of lives that the estates contain by relying on multiple personal narratives through a choral form.

This polyvocality is a principle that I have included in my own work. A proliferation of resident voices is a strategy to convey what is undoubtedly a collective experience, within which individual and specific experiences unfold. Formally, this is reflected in the sound design that accompanies a selection of the static pages of the i-doc, where the edit braids together speech and ambient sounds from a variety of households. Here the film *Concrete Heart Land* provided some guidance. *Concrete Heart Land* is an entirely self-funded and independent operation set up by a duo of artists/filmmakers involved in the experimental video scene, and in grassroots political activism. It is a film that uses the techniques and the formal approach of structural film and applies it to a current and political contemporary issue. The soundtrack is integral to it. It is composed using a wide array of recordings that the filmmakers collected over the years during their involvement in local housing activism. Novaković and Ball work with a vast archive of sound recordings; they also use excerpts from other films, both existing documentary films shot a few years previously, to housing developer's marketing films, which they modify, reinterpret and mash-up; they use performance in the form of a chorus; and panoramas of the estate shot following a set of rules they set for themselves. While the images privilege landscape architectures over the human form, the narrative is driven by the sound composition and design.

Artist and filmmaker Ayo Akingbade is similarly inspired by avant-garde politically informed filmmaking. Akingbade works in 8/16mm analogue film and digital, and her oeuvre comprises short films that often cross boundaries between documentary and fiction. Her *Tower XYZ* (2016), *Street 66* (2018), *Dear Babylon* (2019), *Deadphant* (2020) and *Fire in my Belly* (2021) all in different ways address housing, gentrification, stigma and youth in London. *Street 66* is an experimental biopic of Ghanaian housing activist Dora Boatemah, who campaigned tirelessly for a regeneration of the Angell Town housing estate in Brixton, south-west London, that would genuinely benefit the residents rather than real estate developers and politicians. The short film retraces moments of Boatemah's life using archival material and 16mm footage, as well as audio interviews, to create a patchwork effect. It is a collage film with an unfinished feel, characterised by an open-endedness that does not constrain Boatemah's legacy in a hagiographic celebration but rather gives the audience a glimpse, necessarily limited, of a woman with tremendous energy and commitment towards housing justice. Boatemah's work, and Akingbade's rendering of it, are not simply defensive of social housing, but also creative and visionary. This is carried forward in a more direct way in *Dear Babylon*, an Afrofuturist documentary set in a near future, or perhaps in the present, where amidst riots (represented through footage from the 2011 London riots and the Grenfell tower fire of 2017) against the passing of the fictional housing bill AC30, a trio of young film students set out to make a documentary about the Lubetkin designed Dorset housing estate. Through the

experimental form of the films Akingbade creates a space for imagining other possible ways of structuring urban life, whilst also addressing directly the very concrete housing issues faced by working-class Londoners.

If the films discussed so far have all included – to varying degrees - an interest in formal experimentation, I now turn to a set of three films that follow more conventional modes of address to depict the housing justice movements in London and beyond. *We're Still Here* (2020), *Dispossession: the Great British Housing Swindle* (2017) and *Concrete Soldiers Uk* (2017) are review films that bring together characters and locations from across different geographies to develop an argument about housing, crisis and resistance, in an expository mode. They are however important in the way they approach voice and agency, so I will briefly review them here. Melissa Herman's *We're Still Here* is perhaps the most accomplished of these – the film is an impressive review of the housing justice movement 2014-2022 across the capital, and it weaves together interventions from an large number of campaigners. Shot from within the movement, the film privileges the voices and experiences of working-class organisers, and aims to give a contextualised overview of the numerous ways the housing emergency is contested. It includes segments on short-term accommodation, the Grenfell tower fire, amongst others. It is an informative film that combines interviews, campaigning footage and images from the capital's changing housing landscape. As the title suggests, the film very much centres resistance to the growing housing crisis, and reaffirms the presence of working-class activists and residents, rather than lingering on the sense of an ending.

Nikita Wolffe in her *Concrete Soldiers Uk*, while inspired by a similar urge to review the housing crisis across London, makes different choices. The film has a narrower focus on the gentrification through demolition of housing estate built with concrete. The main characters are the founders of the group ASH – Architects for Social Housing, who provide context and background through formal interviews. The film is narrated by a male disembodied voice. In her project summary Wolffe underlines that the film is shot “digitally but with old analogue movie lenses”<sup>4</sup>, through which she produces a shallow focus aesthetic. During the colour correction process she added a deep grey hue and strong contrasts. This creates an ominous feel, as if the workings of capital were made visible through this dark patina that suffuses the shots and from which there is little respite, and which can only be fought by war-like strategies – by the ‘soldiers’ of the title. While those directly affected by housing exclusion are present in the film, the main driving narrative is provided by the architects at ASH, thereby privileging an expert-led narrative. Released the same year, Paul Sng's *Dispossession: The Great Social Housing Swindle* has a wider geographical scope as it includes case studies from across the UK to review the regeneration and demolition of estates as a mechanism of gentrification. The less overtly political of the three, *Dispossession* is also the one that received the greatest exposure and public interest.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://filmfreeway.com/ConcreteSoldiersUK> accessed 3/11/2024

All the films that I have discussed have shaped my own work and approach. The existence of the last three films which thoroughly and convincingly provide a historical, political and experiential overview of the housing crisis and of the state of contemporary council housing in particular, means that I did not feel the need to repeat the exercise. While in the i-doc I provide some context via a timeline where key dates of national and local housing history are highlighted, my principal focus is on the case study of the Aylesbury estate. I focus on the way regeneration/demolition unfolds across fields and domains, at a more granular level. Hartman, Novaković and Ball inspired me to think about the importance of centring the voice and self-representation of residents. I chose to open the i-doc with a statement from Prudence, who addresses the viewer with a speech about the meaning of home. After the opening, residents' voices appear throughout the i-doc including in the ambient soundtrack, in written form in the Walkways photo essay, and in the short films.

Many of the films I reviewed are but one expression of projects that include other outputs and forms of address. *Estate: a Reverie* is part of the Fugitive Images project, for which Zimmermann and her collaborator David Roberts made photographic portraits, installations, exhibitions and books. *Home Sweet Home*, as we will see in more detail below, was further developed into an online interactive platform, and Paul Sng has curated a photographic book project related, if only tangentially, to *Dispossession*. This 'transmedial' tendency of projects developing across different platforms attests to both the need and desire to present work that exceeds the confines of a linear film. In a similar way, the materials that were developed as part of my fieldwork collaborations asked to be treated in a way that recognised their heterogeneity and the specific temporalities and fragmented experiences of the regeneration/demolition. The concept and practice of multimodality returns here as a useful concept to frame the development of my research practice beyond linear film, as it is made possible by a web-based interactive platform.

## **2.6 Living Room – Interactive Web Documentary**

In *Interactive Documentary, Theory and Debate* (2022) states that “interactive documentary represents one key, albeit fragile and highly experimental, field that seeks to explore the documentary idea in light of digital technologies and cultures” (2022: p. 2) Such an expansive definition includes a range of works and practices. A videodisc technology work from 1978 is often quoted as the first attempt “to digitally document an experience” using a multiscreen installation (Aston and Gaudenzi, 2012, p. 125); the hypertextual affordances of CD-ROMs were put to work in the 1990s to create interactive experiences. With the development of web 2.0 the field started to expand considerably, as the scope for responsive interactivity (a two-way relationship between user and machine) became commonplace. Whilst web 2.0 is central to the development of the

form, Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) however do not wish to limit the scope of the ‘i-doc constellation’ to the web, and include work such as performance, gallery installations and GPS art. During the 2017 I-Docs symposium, which had been running biennially since 2011, the organisers opened up the ‘i’ of i-docs to become a polysemantic letter that could stand for interactivity as much as for iterativity or immersion: virtual, expanded and augmented reality have over the years become part of this constellation too, as artists and researchers have started embracing such modes. Gaudenzi (2013) developed an i-docs taxonomy that includes hypertext- participatory and conversational i-docs, depending on the type of interaction and relationality between machine, user and creator that the project engendered. Beyond ontological definitions and taxonomies however, Gaudenzi argues that fundamentally, the i-doc is a “relational object” that “demands agency and active participation of some sort from more than one actant and therefore it does not exist as an independent entity – as it is always putting several entities in relation with each other” (Gaudenzi, undated<sup>5</sup>). Within such a wide-ranging universe of practices and techniques, discussions about the affordances of i-docs - about the processes and relations they make possible - are perhaps the most interesting.

Theorists and practitioners of i-docs have discussed a range of issues related to interactive web-based approaches to documentary. Important contributions include reflections on elements of continuity or rapture with linear forms and traditions of documentary making (e.g. Uricchio 2017; Nash 2021); on the possibilities of collaboration and co-creation that interactivity makes possible (e.g. Rose 2017; Cizek 2017, amongst many others); on the agency of the machine and of algorithms (High 2017); on interactivity as performance (Nash 2021); on a critique of traditional narrative structures and an opening to polyphony and polyvocality (Aston and Odorico 2018, Aston 2022). Kate Nash proposes that interactive documentary can be understood as a “socio technical assemblage” (Nash 2021:7), and this is of particular relevance to my work. What does she mean? It has become a relatively commonplace concept to understand documentaries as forces that ‘bring realities into being’, rather than representations of realities (Gaudenzi, 2013). Interactivity augments this characteristic further. In interactive documentaries, there is two-way relation between users and the work. This means that users can have play an active role in shaping the work, for example by choosing one option over another the users in effect co-produce one narrative structure amongst many possible. Users, technologies and makers co-create a documentary reality, in relation with each other, and as a process.

This resonates with my conceptualisation of the demolition as an assemblage that brings together actors, materials, processes and domains, as I explained in the introduction. *Living Room* therefore aims to introduce the user to the concept of ‘living within and through the demolition assemblage’ in visual, interactive and graphic form. The i-doc aims to give visual form to some of the relations

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<sup>5</sup> <http://i-docs.org/the-i-doc-as-a-relational-object/> accessed 24/10/2024

between these diverse actors, materials, discourses and policies. However, within this assemblage not all elements are equal, and not all perspectives are explored. The privileged point of view is that of the residents and the focus is on their life as it unfolds while these wider processes take place around them. 'Living within' is an ample expression that includes everyday material reproduction of life, as well as wilful interactions with the local authority, with the courts, lawyers, surveyors, housing activists and neighbours.

Whilst there has been an interest in the i-docs world towards exploring multiple points of view and differing perspectives, my approach here is to present elements of the demolition assemblage from the point of view of some of the Aylesbury residents who enact forms of refusal against it. In short, this is not a debate about the pros or cons of demolishing housing estates in Britain, but rather, a rendering of the experience of residents within this field, as mediated by my research and analysis. Residents are a heterogenous group in more ways than one – and in this sense, *Living Room* has a strong polyphonic element. There is no one central character in this story, with their own arch and hero narrative. The narratives that emerge from the various recombinant possibilities the i-doc provides, are rather a composite of the participants' trajectories. Everyone's stories and experiences overlap and diverge from one another to different extents.

When considering the co-production of meaning that interactivity allows, the possibilities opened by the hyperlink are central. Gaudenzi writes that:

The form of the interactive documentary is much more fluid, layered and changeable than that of the linear documentary. The cut is replaced by the hyperlink which immediately splits one form into multiple possible forms. The cut, that allowed the creation of meaning by establishing a fixed chain of events, is now an opening to possibilities where the intentionality of the author is replaced by a dialogue between the user and the possibilities that the interactive documentary system offers. (2013: 74)

The interactivity is expressed in the choice that users can make when selecting a certain pathway through the material – in *Living Room*, the main choice is made in the central living room when deciding on which object to click. When hovering on the hyperlinked objects, a tool tip appears that shows the theme or concept related to that particular strand of material. The users therefore can base their decisions on the objects and on a keyword. This openness allows for the material to be placed on a horizontal plane of importance, with no one aspect taking precedence. In linear filmmaking, the order within which the viewer is presented with visual information on screen carries narrative weight, suggesting a relationship between scenes that unfolds within the temporal framework of the film and creates its own logic.

The multiplicity and fragmentation that characterises the urban has meant that interactive online documentary has been particularly apt at dealing with urban space and with urban change.

Katerina Cizek's collection of projects collected under the *Highrise* umbrella is one of the most prominent examples of this particular genre – *Highrise* (2008-2015) is a collection of works comprising web documentaries, live performances, installations, participatory websites, books and more, that includes for example *Out of My Window* (image 5), an interactive 360° documentary linking high-rise living in cities across the globe. While not easily reducible to one genre, Cizek's work combines collaborative methodologies with experiments in online interactivity that both explore the possibilities of the technology as well as commenting upon the urban condition.



Image 5 Screenshot of *Out my Window*, Kat Cizek (2010). <https://katerinacizek.com/portfolio/highrise-the-collection/>, accessed 1 November 2024.

Colusso extended her linear TV documentary *Home Sweet Home* to the interactive online *Ghost Town* (2013–2016), which she describes as

“an innovative framework for developing new perspectives on urban experience. An immersive virtual environment housing the story fragments and memories of the Heygate Estate, it bridges the gap between storytelling and archive, with users able to ‘walk’ around a place that no longer exists and - transformed into archaeologists-of-the-recent-past – unearth its secrets and discover how it transformed over time”<sup>6</sup>. (Colusso, undated)

Colusso worked in a transmedia frame to produce different outputs with the material she collected as part of her research, and she was drawn to the i-doc because it supported an “idea of story as a spatial, navigable, interactive journey” (*idem*). I-docs allow for an exploration of space, or, as Harris argues, “these can be understood as investigations specifically into imaginaries of

<sup>6</sup> <https://pure.roehampton.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/ghost-town-chapter1> accessed 1/11/2024



spatiotemporality” (2017, p. 26), and therefore of relevance to geographers, and, I would add, to urbanists and urban anthropologists.

Angela Torresan, a visual anthropologist, for example, created a website to host her research films *Views of Vidigal*, based on the “idea of the view as a trope for the unprecedented, yet interrupted, process of favela gentrification in Rio de Janeiro”<sup>7</sup>. The interface to access the film is a rotating circle superimposed on a map of the city, so that there is “no specific point of entry, nor a prescribed sequence. They are designed to be selected randomly, to emphasise the flow of social relationships.” (*idem*). The relationship between the interface (the circle) and the concept of the view refers to both the idea of a multiplicity of views / ideas on the gentrification of the Vidigal, but it also references the spatial and imaginary importance of the expansive, 360-degree views that give value to the land on which Vidigal is built.

The spatial logic of *Living Room* references the space of the home. In particular it plays with the interface between the domestic interiors and the public space, and the bleeding into one another of the two dimensions. The central location of the i-doc is a virtual living room, the shared space of the home where the household socialises and receives guests. It is also the space where much of the ethnographic fieldwork for this thesis was carried out, either visiting friends and neighbours, or attending meetings where the living room was literally opened to become a space for organised politics, community mutual support, and socialising. From the virtual living room, the viewer/user can choose to click on any of six hyperlinked objects, or buttons, each corresponding to a strand of research and engaging with one aspect of the demolition assemblage. The six buttons are *home stories*, *walkways*, *legal*, *timeline*, and *media*, and they cover the separate, but related domains through which the demolition assemblage unfolds and is refused. Within each thematic strand a singular device is used to point to specific aspects of interest. For example, the *legal* strand uses material shot during the compulsory purchase public inquiry to reflect on the embodied experience of participating in such an event (cfr. *Spiral*), and on its power dynamics (cfr. *CPO*).

To produce a sense of continuity within the fragmented and heterogeneous material, recurring graphic elements and a consistent navigational architecture is provided. Gaudenzi (2017) urges i-docs creators to integrate design methodologies in their creative processes. If a traditional documentary film required direction, camera, sound recording and editing as the basic building blocks of its creation, i-docs ask for a different range of expertise. These can include graphic design, navigation design, user experience design, information architecture devising, and tech development. Forgetting for a moment that all these roles are specific and highly professional, and considering that as social scientists we too often work alone, Gaudenzi argues that design thinking means that an i-doc is most effective when the central concept and orientation is embedded in

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.angelatorresan.com/en/viewsofvidigal/project> accessed 1/11/2024

every aspect of the design and development. In this sense “The interface (...) becomes an essential conveyor of meaning: it positions users and dictates possible options” (Gaudenzi 2017: p.120). For example, the interface of *Filming Revolution* (Alisa Lebow 2018) is a very simple design that recalls a star filled sky: a myriad small colourful dots are placed dark background, and upon scrolling, they appear infinite. The backbone to the project is archival, and the interface neatly reflects both the sense of exploring a ‘constellation’ of practices and people filming the Egyptian revolution, as well as a sense of the complex and multiple relations between the entries based on themes/categories, people and projects that emerge upon clicking on any one of the colourful dots.

To create the graphic design of Living Room I collaborated with photographer Alessia Gammarota, building on her extensive experience of working creatively with Aysen and knowledge of the estate’s historical and social landscape. In close consultation with me, Alessia developed the overall visual concept of the site, and devised the elements of continuity such as buttons, colours and the graphic element that runs through the static pages, which emphasises the collaged, cut up style of the site overall. From a design point of view, the main challenge was to balance the concept of the fragmented style that juxtaposes sites, domains and themes, with the need for an overall coherence that would give a sense of wholeness to the project.

While *Living Room* accompanies the thesis, it is also a standalone work. With this in mind, I suggest spending one hour exploring the i-doc at this stage of the reading, before continuing to read the chapters that follow. When subsequently reading the individual thesis chapters, the reader can return to the relevant segment of the piece, if a second viewing is desired. The link to Living Room can be found on the next page.

## Interactive documentary

To access the interactive documentary *Living Room*, use this link web link:

<https://livingroomidoc.com/>

A stable internet connection and a computer or laptop are needed to watch the i-doc. The i-doc cannot be viewed on a mobile phone or tablet.

## Visual interlude #2















### 3. Our own Sky Garden

One evening my phone pinged with a WhatsApp message from my former neighbour Victoria, who lives with her sister and niece in a two-bedroom flat three doors down from Laura. The message read “*Taplow sky garden tea party with neighbours. I love my flat*” and it captioned a photo of four women sitting on chairs around a small table filled with drinks and snacks, raising their glasses at the camera (image 6). There was nothing unusual about the picture, were it not for the location of the tea party: the women had brought the chairs and table out from their flats and onto the wide public corridor that runs all the way along the length of the building, connecting flats, lifts and stairwells. A space of passage and transition had been repurposed into a living room, a space of neighbourly sociality. Victoria had even brought out some potted plants and candle-holders to decorate the windowsill. The drab and monotonous corridor had become, if only temporarily, a space to inhabit rather than a transitional area of passage.



*Image 6 A WhatsApp message from Victoria.*

Not only that: it had been transformed by the neighbours into a mirror image of the Sky Garden, a high-end indoor garden, located on top of a skyscraper known colloquially as the Walkie Talkie, in the heart of London’s financial city. The expansive views from the upper floors of the Aylesbury high rise buildings encompass the cluster of the City’s own high rises. It emphasises the estate’s physical proximity to the area linked to financial wealth accumulation and extravagant consumption, as well as the social chasm between the two locations. The much loved and coveted view is a source of joy and pride for residents, a visual reminder of how centrally located Taplow House is, just a stone-throw away from the heart of the City, but it is also a reminder of the spatial and class divides that are etched into the city’s geographies. Steeped in sarcastic humour, Victoria and her neighbours’ tea party was a gesture that pointed to their subordinate position in relation to the city’s wealth. However it also was a re-appropriation and re-affirmation of their space and their right to exist in the urban space.



*Image 7 The view of the City of London from Taplow House's corridor*

Historian Peter Ackroyd has described the borough of Southwark, where the Aylesbury estate is located, as marked by exactly this sense of spatial proximity to London's West End and the City, and by its distance to it, a distance that is symbolically and materially embodied by the river Thames (2000). This simultaneous sense of closeness and distance has accompanied the area throughout its history. It is reflected in the role that the south-east of London has had in the popular imagination, of a part of the city that is other, home to an urban working class that elicited at once fear and morbid curiosity, and yet one that is intrinsically part of it (Robson, 2000). Collins writes that

"outside the City and Westminster, Southwark is the capital's most ancient borough, but historically it has soldiered on as the poor whore across the water, housing the smells, the produce, the noise, the prison and leper hospitals those two boroughs wouldn't harbour" (2004, p. 10),

and Ackroyd that

"Southwark had become a kind of satrapy, thus ensuring that almost to the end of the twentieth century it remained a relatively underdeveloped and ill-regarded place" (2000: p. 691).

In the nineteenth century Southwark underwent a rapid process of urbanisation, becoming home to London's growing working class (Boast, 2000; Baxter and Darren, 2010). Victorian Southwark was widely described by writers, journalist and early social scientist as blighted by the common host of problems associated with urban poverty, such as overpopulation, high child mortality and crime, low literacy and life expectancy. Despite all the attention that the Victorian middle-classes lavished upon the area in its attempt to describe, reform, redeem and control it, Southwark's hybrid and

marginal status is reflected in the fact that it (and the south-east of London more in general) remains "chronically underhistoricised" (Robson, 2000, p. 42).

The Walworth neighbourhood develops along its eponymous high road, a busy shopping street lively with a variety of small independent shops, cafés and restaurants. The historic East Street market runs perpendicular to it. In the 1840s the first Irish immigrants settled in the area (Baxter and Darren 2010), and since then the street has been populated by small shops run by a white working class and migrants from diverse and varied backgrounds (Hall, 2012). The numbers of migrants have steadily increased over the decades, without any one nationality or region of origin ever becoming predominant. On either side of the main road lay residential streets. As the number of residents increased tenfold over the course of the nineteenth century (Boast 2005), high density, overcrowding and lack of open spaces became widespread. Many lived in converted mansion houses or in purpose-built tenement buildings, some of them erected by philanthropic associations such as the Peabody Trust and Octavia Hill, early predecessors to the welfare state. In the 1920s and 1930s a high percentage of all housing in the area was in such run-down condition that it was deemed unfit for human habitation (Baxter and Darren 2010). During the second world war the area was subjected to heavy bombing, which caused extensive damage (Charlesworth, 2000). Slum clearing programmes and the post war governments' focus on building homes (Power, 1993), resulted in the construction of a high number of council estates in Southwark's landscape. It was as part of this construction effort that two major housing estates were erected in Walworth: the Heygate and the Aylesbury. The size and imposing modernist architecture of these estates has earned them a place in the architectural history of the period, with numerous references found in architectural literature, although often critical ones (e.g. Jones and Woodward, 1983, p. 326). Certainly, the reception of architectural journals in the years following Aylesbury's construction was very negative, with one journal dubbing it a "totalitarian township" (*The Architectural Review* 1970, *The Architect's Journal* 1970).

The Aylesbury Estate was constructed between 1967 and 1977 (Campkin 2013), on a site that was historically Walworth Common, and that subsequently housed the Walworth Common Estate (Baxter and Darren 2010), which was then demolished to make space for the new development. The Aylesbury overlooks the large Burgess Park, which was developed between 1950 and 1980 on a site that previously hosted a working canal, light industry and housing (Charlesworth 2000). The Aylesbury Estate was constructed to provide housing for over 7,000 people, and it included a mix of low- and high-rise buildings, ranging between 4 and 14 stories, green space and communal walkways that were to act as zones of interaction between neighbours (Campkin 2013). Although the most common photographs of the estate focus on the higher buildings and on the imposing concrete architecture, the estate is also constituted of low-rise brick block, and green space is

abundant. I write in more detail about the Aylesbury's place withing modernist architectural history in the UK in chapter 4.

The construction of social housing in Southwark reflects national trends. On a national level, the post-war building effort meant that by 1981, 31% of all English households were living in social housing (Watt 2009: p. 215). In London, due to the high concentrations of low-income populations and the high cost of living in the city, the percentages were as high as 34.8% (*idem*). It is therefore clear that in the post-war decades, renting from the council represented a significant type of tenure amongst the working class: council housing provided an affordable housing option to a high percentage of the population in the country. Moreover, it is also important to note that Southwark was (and still is) home to a significantly higher number of people in council housing than average. After the construction boom of the post war decades, the investment in new social housing stock progressively decelerated. Since the early 90s, total figures for newly built social housing remain well below 1970s figures (Watt 2009: p. 216).

At the same time, the existing stock has been progressively depleted through a number of policies and interventions, most notably the Right to Buy scheme (henceforth RTB) introduced under the Thatcher government in 1980, which allows council tenants to purchase their council home at a greatly discounted price. First introduced in the 1980 Housing Act by the newly elected Thatcher government, the scheme formalised the practice of selling council properties to their tenants at a sizeable discount. While sales of council homes predate the policy (Watt 2021), RTB is generally considered the starting point of a mass privatisation drive that over the next decades transformed council housing from a widespread form of working-class housing into a marginalised and residualised one. As a flagship policy of the Thatcher government, RTB resulted in what Mullins and Murie describe as “the largest privatisation project ever carried out by UK governments” (2006, p. 100). By the late 1990s over 2 million council properties had been bought under the scheme, which contributed significantly to transforming the UK from a nation of renters to one of homeowners. RTB created a mix of tenures on existing housing estates. The percentages of leaseholders to tenants varies greatly from estate to estate, depending on a variety of factors including cost and location; even within the Borough of Southwark one finds a significant variation in the numbers, with each estate presenting different characteristics.

While RTB was a conservative policy rooted in a belief in the creation of a “democracy of homeowners”, subsequent Labour governments did not discontinue it. Although New Labour's emphasis towards housing estates privileged urban regeneration via a different set of tools and policies, RTB was considered too popular to repeal. The shift to private ownership was as much an ideological one as a financial and material one. Homeownership remains the tenure of choice that all citizens are taught to aspire to and to measure their personal success against.

With the Labour win in 1997, urban policy shifted towards “urban regeneration”. Urban regeneration has been defined as “a concept rooted in British urban policy designed to tackle urban decline, decay and social and economic transformation in London” (Imrie, Lees and Raco, 2009, p. 4). As a set of policies it has aimed to stimulate economic growth and investment, with the underlying idea that areas of high social exclusion and poverty would benefit from an influx of more affluent residents. The creation of a more diverse mix of tenures, or “mixed-communities”, is deemed necessary to create a virtuous circuit of economic growth. Most regeneration schemes include interventions on social housing, by either stock transferring housing estates to housing associations, demolishing or privatising them entirely (Lees *at al.* 2012).

The Aylesbury estate has a long-standing involvement with the idea and practice of regeneration. Having become a symbol of “failed estates” in the decades after its construction, in 1997 Tony Blair chose it for his first public speech as prime minister. From an Aylesbury balcony he promised intervention, drawing on a long-standing discourse of un-deservingness that place the blame for poverty onto people’s morals and behaviours, and proposing New Labour as the force that would bring forth a new era of intervention. New Labour’s social exclusion unit launched the New Deal for Communities (NDC) the following year, and in 1999 the Aylesbury became one of the 17 areas nationwide to be included in this scheme that aimed to transform the most deprived areas across the country (Campkin 2013). NDC investment in the Aylesbury estate amounted to over £56 million over a 10-year span, which would fund interventions on both physical and community infrastructures, which “were envisaged as the groundwork in a metamorphic, two-step, £234 m regeneration scheme” (Romyn, 2020, p. 232). While some of this funding was for physical repair, the amount was wholly inadequate to the task of fundamentally improving the long-neglected physical infrastructures. According to historian Michael Romyn the investments in youth programmes instead archived some notable successes and left a legacy in community infrastructures - like the construction of schools, playgrounds and community centres. Romyn also notes that at this time “the estate was awchirl with newsletters, questionnaires, interviews, open days, ballots, public meetings, individual block meetings and surveys” (*idem*: p. 233): it was necessary for the regeneration to be seen as involving the community, and in fact many of the residents I have worked with recall getting involved at this time by attending meetings and running community initiatives funded through the NDC.

Matters came to a halt in 2001 when the residents were balloted on a stock transfer to a housing association that would take over the management and regeneration of the estate. Residents set up the group WATT - Worried About Tenant Transfers. One of their flyers reads: “the Aylesbury tenants campaign to STOP the Faraday privatisation scheme and START a new discussion on a new plan centred on Council Housing”. WATT campaigned across the estate encouraging tenants to vote against the transfer, arguing that under housing association control, their rents would

increase, they would lose control over their housing, their tenancies would be downgraded, and that overall the project was a form of privatisation. On 18 December 2001 73% of Aylesbury residents voted against the stock transfer on a voting turnout of 75.8% (Romyn 2020: p.240). The scheme stalled after the ballot, while tentative plans for refurbishment were made. In 2005 Southwark Council somewhat unexpectedly decreed that the regeneration of the estate was to be delivered through demolition, rather than refurbishment .

In 2010 The Aylesbury Area Action Plan was published, outlining the principles of the demolition/regeneration, although it left many questions unanswered. Demolition on a small area called 'the south-west corner' started, while residents living in what will become known as the First Development Site started moving out. The local authority approved a Master Plan for the area in 2015, which included a doubling of the population density, and a mix of tenures split between private ownership, affordable housing and social housing. The plans have been widely contested by residents, housing groups and activists, who argue that the scheme will result in a marked decrease of social rented units, and in unpromising terms for residents' relocations. It is at this stage that I began researching on the estate, and the salient events of the following 10 years will be covered over the course of the thesis. What is of note at this stage is that the phased demolition/regeneration plan approved in 2005 and set out in the AAAP in 2010 has continued to proceed at snail's pace, slowed down by political and economic events and resident dissent. Exact figures about the number of residents who moved, were rehoused, and how, are difficult to come by, and it is the aim of this thesis to instead provide a qualitative insight into the experience of living through demolition/regeneration.

Moreover, whilst the focus of this research is the Aylesbury estate, its history cannot be separated from that of its neighbouring estates, of the neighbourhood and of London. The Heygate estate, located a few miles north, was demolished in the 2010s and has been replaced by private housing; of the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, another hallmark of 20th century civic modernism (Grindrod, 2013), was demolished in 2024. Both projects were strongly contested by local groups and organisations concerned with the neighbourhood's gentrification. Other, smaller estates, such as the Elmington, located just opposite the Aylesbury, have been undergoing regeneration and demolition now for a number of years. It is also known to locals that several 'opportunity sites' along the Old Kent Road, which borders Walworth on the east side, are currently being marketed to housing developers; Millwall Football stadium is under threat of eviction; a number of other sites along the Walworth Road are earmarked for redevelopment. The history of the Aylesbury Estate cannot but be read in relation to the wider neighbourhood, which is undergoing profound transformation, and in relation to analogous regeneration schemes that are affecting most of London's inner-city areas.



In the first three chapters of this thesis I have introduced my theoretical framework; reviewed the literature and filmography with which I am in conversation; given an overview of the interactive documentary; and placed the Aylesbury Estate in historical, political and geographic context. I now turn to the first of the four empirical chapters of this thesis.

## Timeline

- 1963 The Aylesbury estate development is announced
- 1967-72 The construction of phase 1 of the Aylesbury estate is carried out.
- 1973 -77 The construction of phase 2 of the Aylesbury estate is carried out.
- 1994-96 Southwark Council demolishes three of the bridges and walkways that connect the Aylesbury estate's buildings.
- 1997 Tony Blair inaugurates his tenure as Prime Minister with a speech from one of the Aylesbury balconies.
- 1999 The Aylesbury estate gains New Deal for Communities status
- 2001 In a ballot Aylesbury residents vote against the estate's stock transfer to a housing association.
- 2005 Southwark Council takes the decision to demolish the estate rather than refurbish it.
- 2009 The New Deal for Communities end and the Creation Trust takes over administering aspects of the regeneration/demolition.
- 2010 The Aylesbury Area Action Plan (AAAP) is published, outlining the principles of the demolition/ regeneration. The demolition of the south-west corner starts and residents start moving out of buildings on the First Development Site.
- 2015 Squatters occupy buildings on the First Development Site
- 2015-18 The First Development Site Compulsory Purchase Public Inquiry
- 2020 Southwark Council buys back 258 flats from the development partner Notting Hill Genesis
- 2023 The Fight for Aylesbury exhibition takes place in Aysen's flat.

## Visual interlude #3







## 4. Interrupted Flows

Extracts from a residents' WhatsApp group:

8 December 2023

Beth

No water coming out of the hot tap at all. I reported it 4pm today. They are aware and working on it. The said roughly around 2 hours and it will be restored. Still not back on so will give them a call shortly.

Victoria

Thanks Beth! I have seen the engineer. And he said someone switch off the mains. It will take a few hours to fill the tank.

9 December

Victoria

Good Morning. There's no hot water and tap water in Taplow anyone have the same problem?

Hamda

Morning! Yes no hot/cold running in my flat.

Victoria

I am trying to contact repair! After 10 minutes the answering machine. It's difficult to get in touch.

10 December

Victoria

Good morning.

I don't have tap water. Anyone have the same problem call repair no one reported. The want other people to (phone) they didn't want to give me a job number (laughing/crying emoji).

12 December

Beth

No hot water coming out of tap. Phone to report at 1am. OCO will not come out at night so they said they will fix it today. I have complained several time is going on too much and is not acceptable.

Victoria

No water at all (laughing emoji) what is going on!

Victoria

40 minutes on the phone still not reply! Who is going to help us. I don't have cold water and I can not flush the toilet could please call them. Not help with repairs!

December 2017

Victoria has her extended family over to celebrate Christmas. Her sisters, nieces, nephews, their children and partners are staying for a few days – it's a squeeze to fit everyone in the two-room flat, but there's air mattresses and the kids will have fun at the sleep over. However, on Christmas day the mains water suddenly goes off. There's no way to flush the toilet – the guests leave quickly when they realise, and the Christmas celebration is called off.

Autumn 2018, a meeting of newly formed Thurlow Lodge Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) takes place. Twenty residents assemble in a small meeting room, the overarching theme that compelled most to attend was the dire state of the heating and water provision on the estate, which had reached unprecedented levels of unreliability the previous winter. A litany of complaints to fill two full hours of meeting.

January 2020

A crowd gathers outside the council offices at the foot of Taplow House, to protest against the ongoing heating and hot water outages. I would like to attend, but I gave birth a few weeks prior and I am not up to travelling downstairs 10 floors to the bottom of the building and standing in the cold. The local newspaper puts us on the front page, with a story about being in labour during the outages and my husband filling the bathtub with a kettle. It all feels very close to the bone.

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The Aylesbury estate residents' ongoing efforts to cajole, encourage, push and force the local authority to maintain a clean, safe and pleasant physical environment in and around their homes is the starting point for this chapter, where I analyse the ways in which the relation between infrastructures, materials, residents' bodies, maintenance work, managed decline, discourse on the estate and decisions around demolition have unfolded since the buildings were first conceived. My focus here is specifically on two infrastructures: the network dedicated to the delivery of water and the 13-mile long system of pedestrian walkways that links (or, in sections, used to link) all the estate's buildings to one another. These particular infrastructures are both key sites where debates and practices of demolition and privatisation play out.



The anthropological literature on infrastructures has demonstrated that infrastructures are steeped in political and social dynamics (e.g. Amin, 2014; Harvey and Knox, 2015; Anand, 2017; Anand, Gupta and Appel, 2018). They have also been defined as “semiotic and aesthetic vehicles” (Larkin, 2013), in that their appearance and materiality, apart from their technical function, are a form of address that constitutes particular subjectivities. Moreover, the narratives that surround their planning, construction, maintenance and demolition are constitutive of the things themselves. Large infrastructures are often linked to projects of nation-building and to the construction of shared imagined futures. Infrastructures are either invisible until they break down, and entirely taken for granted in their delivery of goods and services (Star, 1999), or hyper visible in their status as symbols of a particular vision or ideology (Graham and Marvin, 2001).

Moreover, infrastructures are projects situated in time. They do not exist in a perfect timeless form: they are grafted onto existing material networks, and they 'accrete' over time (Anand, 2015). Part of this accretion is a need to be renewed, maintained and repaired on an ongoing basis (Graham and Thrift, 2007). Over the course of the chapter, it will become clear how a lack of consistent and adequate maintenance has been central to the failure of key infrastructural systems on the Aylesbury estate. This neglect is considered a form of managed decline (Watt 2021), through which the institutionally determined subtraction of maintenance resources creates the institutional preconditions for demolition. The long-term but consistent deterioration of buildings and materials anticipates demolition itself, and concomitantly becomes its justification too. The eventual infrastructural failures are then imputed in institutional discourse to original flaws in design, in lifestyles, in materials, rather than to institutional neglect. In this sense, demolition can be seen to start with the slow but ongoing and persistent work of managed decline, many years and even decades before the actual demolition of buildings, in an anticipatory gesture.

I have chosen to focus on the infrastructures that carry water and those that support pedestrian movement because both are key to the life course of the estate. First of all, running hot water, the district heating system and the walkway system were central to the original modernist architectural concept for the estate. The Aylesbury was built to replace insalubrious tenements with modern housing: running hot water and an efficient heating system were fundamental to this mission. The walkways in turn reflected the principle of separation between cars and pedestrians, as developed by Le Corbusier and the International Congress on Architectural Modernism (CIAM) on which the design principles of Aylesbury were based. Therefore, both the hot water circulation system and the pedestrian circulation system were at the heart of the project and its role as a provider of high-quality, low-cost housing for working-class Londoners.

Secondly, these infrastructures are fundamental parts of residents' everyday life. As it is often the case with the infrastructures that undergird contemporary life, it is almost too obvious to state their role: residents rely on the provision of hot water, 24/7 all year round, to use in their bathrooms and kitchens, and to heat their homes in the colder months. The ongoing breakages to the system only help to emphasise just how fundamental this provision is. Therefore, both when it functions correctly (in a near-invisible and taken for granted way) and when it fails (thus becoming an ongoing source of anxiety, worry, anger and discomfort), hot water provision is absolutely fundamental to residents' everyday lives. The pedestrian walkways are in a similar way part of the very structure of everyday experience for anyone living in the Aylesbury buildings: entering, exiting and moving through the site cannot but be done via the pedestrian system.

Thirdly, both networks are an important part of the discourses framing the need to demolish the estate. In particular, their alleged failures to act as a positive system of connection and flow have contributed to a discourse of systemic failure across the site, which in turn underpin policies of demolition and redevelopment. Infrastructural failure or dysfunction in this sense takes on a metonymic quality, and becomes a stand in for wider failures: of the entire estate project itself, of the concept of social housing in general, and of the people who live within it. The conflation between failing space and its inhabitants builds on long-standing ideas that equate working-class racialised urban populations with the squalid material conditions within which they may dwell (Shilliam and Renwick 2022). My proposition therefore is that paying close ethnographic attention to these particular infrastructures affords an insight into the arc of emergence and demise of modernist housing estates – a historic trajectory that links the ideology from which they originated to that which disappears them: the drive of the State to provide housing to working-class Londoners, and the withdrawal of that responsibility through the privatisation of housing provision and public land.

## **4.2 Water, Interrupted**

### 4.2.1 Planning and Building the Flow: The Promise

*The Changing Face of Camberwell* is a short documentary film made in 1963, the year in which the plan for the construction of the Aylesbury estate was first put forward. Whilst the film does not refer directly to the Aylesbury it speaks of the changes in the area just south of where the new estate was going to be erected. In its opening section on housing, it refers to architectural and urban changes that characterised large swathes of London in the post war years, and of which the Aylesbury is just another, if later, incarnation. The film celebrates the modern council buildings that were being erected to house the working class in this era. An intensive programme of slum clearance was under way, and the Victorian terraces that occupied much of the borough's streets were being replaced by modern housing built in concrete and reaching for the sky. In an expository

and propagandist tone, the film contrasts the “slums of old” with the new buildings. A disembodied voiceover sings the praises of the modern architecture. In particular, the ready access to air, sunlight, and running water is exalted. The free flow of these elements is described as the epitome of health and modernity, in contrast of the insalubrious conditions of the terraced housing it was replacing.



Image 8 Stills from the film *The Changing Face of Camberwell*, 1963

“The new industrial revolution of the 1960s” affords pleasant views on the tops of trees, “a bright kitchen separated from the sitting room by glass. A built-in fridge. Modern electric cooker. Electric fires. Central heating. No coals to carry or ashes to clear. All Mr Pearson has to do is turn on a switch and on the lower floor through this grating comes hot air. It heats the bedrooms as well as raising up the stairs to heat the living room.” (*The Changing Face of Camberwell*, 1963). In contrast, the terraces are a “higgeldy-piggledy mess of deplorable little houses”, “mean little streets crammed full of houses”, and families living in “murky drafts” (*ibid.*), enveloped in smoke and bad smells. The architectural features of the modern buildings represented a revolution in lifestyle that projected the urban working class into the future, into a new era of salubriousness and comfort. Triumphant the voice over announces that the “Second Industrial Revolution (our own) is uncovering the ground and discovering the sky” (*ibid.*). *The Changing Face of Camberwell's* narrative evokes a discourse of moral and physical betterment that entwines the built environment with the people that inhabit it.

If the characteristics of a residential architecture rub off on its inhabitants and users, the infrastructures that deliver goods and services also activate symbolic and aesthetic resonances

(Larkin 2013). It has often been noted that infrastructures in this sense carry the potential to evoke an idea of the future and activate desires and imaginings about who and what we could become (Anand et. al. 2018). In the frame presented by *The Changing Face of Camberwell*, positive flows of water, air, light and heat would replace the stagnation of life in the so-called slums. The 'squalor' that the Beveridge Report of 1942 identified as one of the 'five evils' that plagued society and that formed the basis for the formation of the welfare state after the second world war. The positive flows of water, air, light and heat suggest that residents, too, could aim to improve their social position. The circulation of those elements was linked to aspirations of social mobility.

#### 4.2.2 Reform as a Moral Project

The construction of 'modern council homes' contained the promise of a more just future, and hinged in part in its infrastructural provision. However, the Beveridge-inspired drive for air, water and light, has its roots in a discourse on squalor and urban life that emerged over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the rapid increase in industrial urban populations gave rise to concerns and anxieties in the elite about urban working-class life (Shilliam and Renwick, 2022). A discourse developed that linked the conditions of the urban poor, who found themselves living in squalid conditions, to moral characteristics of degeneracy and criminality, as well as to threats of disease and contagion. Notions of an urban residual class, distinct from the deserving poor, started taking shape and would later find its full expression in pseudo-scientific classification projects such as Charles Booths' (*idem*). The urban working class started to undergo a process of racialisation at this stage, with the *urban residuum* becoming situated outside of the confines of a putative 'Anglo-Saxon race'. Reformers of this era, such as housing philanthropist Octavia Hill, worked within this frame where material improvement went hand in hand with moral and character development.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns about disease and contagion underpinned the emergence of a sanitation movement that pushed the State to rationalise and modernise cities by building infrastructural networks for water and sewage. This dual and intertwined function of infrastructures, as both supporting the health and wellbeing of citizens, as well as a means of exerting social control through the identification of certain populations as expendable, can be seen as its biopolitics (Gupta, 2018). The fact that the discourse and practice of slum clearance, sanitation, and social improvement in London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century contains both of these elements, is not an anomaly, but a characteristic shared by other large infrastructural projects. Shilliam and Renwick (2022) argue that the different reform movements that have aimed to tackle urban squalor since the Victorian era, have retained an idea of squalor as connected to the moral character of those living in squalid conditions. Therefore these reform project continue to reproduce those conditions rather than eradicate them. They write:

“We argue that diverse strategies such as slum clearance, new town building, social housing provision, and buying incentives all have rested on a fatal flaw: those who live in squalor have been judged to be part of the dysgenic environment themselves – they are part of the squalor, rather than sufferers of squalid conditions” (Shilliam and Renwick 2022: p. 2).

Building on the work of Bhandar (2018), they also posit that the contemporary form that squalor takes is “organised negligence” (Shilliam and Renwick 2022: p. 111). This terminology centres the active neglect on the part of those responsible for performing the upkeep and maintenance work that is necessary to keep any building functioning well.

What happens when these infrastructures that were built to bring about a ‘modern’ way of living, but hinge on the classification of parts of the urban poor as undeserving and less-than-human, are then neglected to the point of failure, so that they cannot create positive flows and in fulfil their promise? How do those who find themselves living within squalid conditions, with ‘water out of place’, experience their condition?

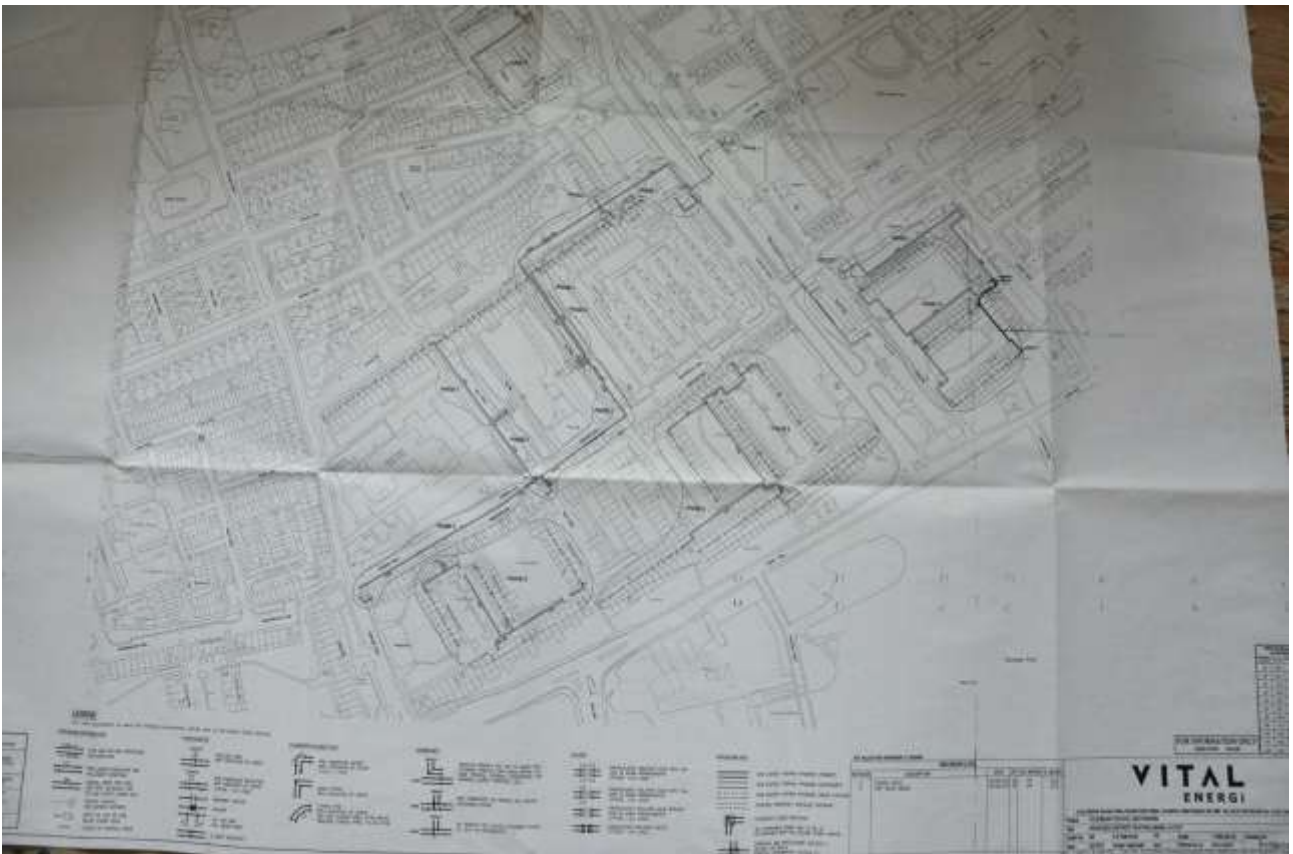
#### 4.2.3 Failed Promises

When recollecting their first impressions of the newly built Aylesbury estate in the late 1970s, residents remember their sense of marvel – and often mention the running water, the ability to run a bath, the joy of a private toilet (Romyn 2020: p. 88-90). At this time, access to running water networks was almost universal. If the construction of the modern sanitised city in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been a notably visible and public phenomenon, once the systems were in place, and “water became controlled, tamed and domesticated, its presence and availability became “normalized” and taken for granted” (Kaika, 2005, p. 141). However, infrastructures are processes situated in time, never fully realised and in need of constant upkeep and maintenance (Gupta 2018). Once water enters into the hydraulic networks, it is transformed from a natural substance into a socio-political material (Kaika 2005). The way it behaves responds to the system and to the other materials and beings with which it interacts, as much as to its intrinsic fluid qualities.

In the years that have passed since I first visited Aysen in her flat, water problems - predicated on either its absence, its temperature – either too low or too high, but mostly too low, its presence in the wrong places in the form of leaks and puddles - have been ever present in the lives of my friends and neighbours living in Aylesbury, as well as my own. Water problems take over, they dominate conversations, but they are also damned with a mundanity that makes them quickly stagnant. They are also, often, hard to believe. Access to water in all its forms is so normalised in the UK that being regularly deprived of access to heat and running water is so outside of most people’s experience as to seem unimaginable. Finding a form to effectively express the continuous

and ongoing condition of living with water out of place is a challenge: stories of water problems quickly start sounding like litanies that fail to convey the deeply material and bodily implications of water out of place. The cold, the damp, the mould, the soggy, the condensation, the drips, have a way of leaving stains and water marks that quickly lose definition when translated into the written word. Gupta (2018) argues however that ethnographic methods are particularly apt to examining the maintenance (or lack thereof) of infrastructures, and their particular temporalities and embodied conditions: the next sections therefore tend ethnographically to the experiences of living with water out of place; in particular I focus on the bodily and affective dimension, as well as the way residents understand its workings and its failings and how they intervene within it.

#### 4.2.4 The District Heating System

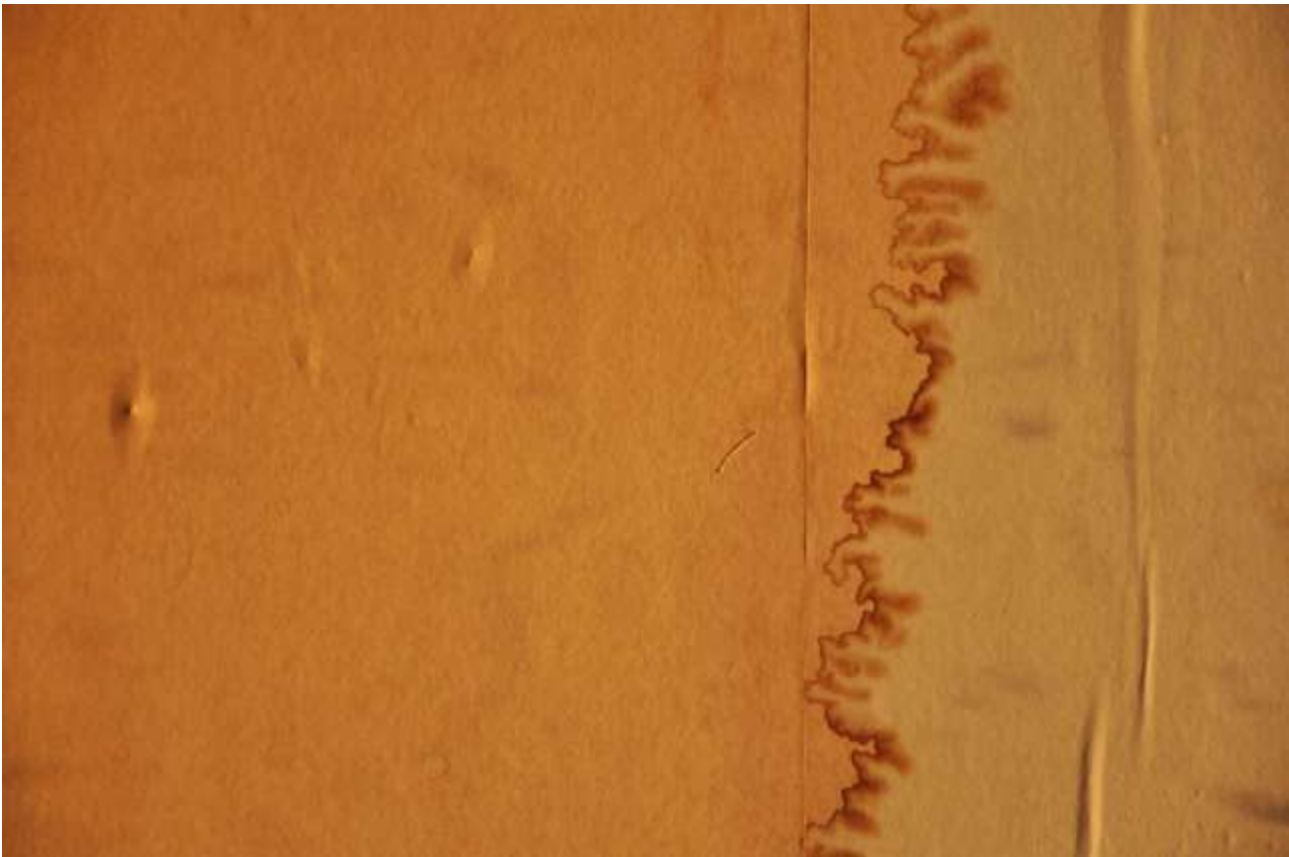


*Image 9 Engineering map of the Aylesbury estate's district heating system*

The district heating is a centralised system built to bring hot water and heating to each dwelling. The hot water is heated in a central location, the main boiler room. It is then distributed through the estate via a system of smaller distribution centres located at the foot of the high-rise buildings, and via a system of pipes that delivers the water to taps and radiators in every dwelling on the estate. This map (image 8) was part of a feasibility report about Planned Preventative Maintenance

penned in 2009 by a chartered building surveyor firm. The surveyors mapped out repair and maintenance work to the existing network: some of it had already been carried out, some was planned for the future. I found the report in Laura's personal archive, and, like other documents stored in cardboard boxes and paper bags in her flat, it contained some of her annotations. This is a very large engineering map, where technical information is overprinted on a base map. The base map is in black and white, without any grading, with uniform line size. The overprint carries information about the type of pipes and fittings that are suggested for the repair of the mains network. From a purely visual point of view, the information the map conveys is that we are looking at a complex system, and one that relies on interconnection over a large area.

However, residents do not experience the district heating system as an integrated whole, but rather in fragmented and splintered elements, out of which stories are stitched together. This amounts to an epistemic practice grounded in everyday experience, relations to materials and bodily sensations, as well a gathering of information from the most disparate sources, and distinct from the way of knowing that the engineering map aims to provide. The contemporary urban condition has been described as being characterised by fragmentation, for example in the concept of "splintering urbanism" (Graham and Marvin 2001), a "politics of fragments" (McFarlane, 2018), amongst others. When McFarlane calls for an attending to the politics of fragments and argues that this "...is an unfolding urban learning process" (McFarlane 2018: p. 1012), this most closely resembles what I am describing here: strategies of sense-making that start from the fragmented detail, and produce out of it a generative process. In the fragmented urban space where residents are barred from certain pieces of information and access to physical spaces, the representational power of the cartographic map and its precise reproduction of reality is of limited use. The work of stitching together disparate elements (such as the water mark in image 9), is more effective in reconstituting an imperfect, iterative image of the system's whole, and its failings. Different types of fragmented pieces of information and informants contribute to the creation of these stitched narratives.



*Image 10 A water damage mark on a living room wall*

For example, clues and scraps of information are gleaned from the contractors who are responsible for fixing the system when it fails – they sometimes provide snippets of information, details as to what went wrong and how long it might take for the system to be up and running again. I have myself approached some of them when I saw them exiting the main boiler room to ask questions. The staff at the borough-wide repairs call centre are known to provide clues too, although the trust in their service is worn thin by the long waits and the inconsistent responses to a repair call. Importantly, residents also gather information about malfunction from the materials and spaces themselves, such as the sound of water in pipes, or the shape of the concrete panels that make up the walls of the buildings, or the layout of flats on top and across from one another, or the pipes in boiler rooms. In the absence of a way of making sense of the totality of the system (and thus of its failings), residents work with whatever information they can gather to create their own understandings of the working of the system.

Luna Glücksberg (2013) notes that Tenant and Resident associations (TRAs) are the main way in which residents on housing estates organise the communal aspects of their life and liaise with their local council regarding anything from rubbish collections to safety on the estate. Involvement in TRAs, as well as Area Action Forums, and other forms of Council-resident liaising committees, sometimes provide additional insight into the type of interventions that the Council carries out to fix and maintain the heating system. If on the one hand understanding of the failure of the heating



system relies on a range of fragmented pieces of information, clues and gossip, residents also understand it through their bodies, in the feeling of cold and damp.

Fennell (2015), in her ethnography of a housing project under demolition in Chicago, writes that the provision of heat is associated with feelings of comfort, homeliness and emotional warmth. The breakdown and disfunction in a system that is meant to seamlessly deliver such warmth without drawing much attention to itself becomes in the bodies of the residents more than a simple lack of material comfort – it becomes a dehumanising experience that increases the sense of insecurity and precariousness as the shadow of demolition darkens. My neighbour Victoria describes this well: normally a cheerful, friendly and optimistic woman, she told me about spending a cold January evening under a blanket on her couch, wearing a hat, scarf and two pairs of trousers, the heating off once again, thinking about “how the council want to take our homes away from us”, and despairing about the next steps in her life. The lack of heat becomes more than a temporary physical sensation, however uncomfortable: it becomes an existential threat that encompasses the very idea of dwelling and living emplaced in a flat or a building, in a neighbourhood and a community. ‘Water out of place’ makes the boundaries of the home as a space of shelter and safety, porous and permeable.

As Victoria points out in the anecdote above, many residents think that the council is withholding repairs as a tactic to grind people down and force them out by exhaustion. There is a long history of communications with local administrators, at all levels, about the water-related breakdowns. Whilst paying sympathetic lip service, the recurring mood of these interactions is one where interlocutors grossly ignore or brush aside the gravity of the situation, leaving residents with the distinct impression that their access to a basic service such as water is not considered important, and reinforcing the idea that there is purposeful neglect at play. As Ahmed (2021) shows, albeit in a different context, those who lodge institutional complaints often become themselves the problem in the eyes of institutions, and residents find this to be true in the relationship between the council, responsible for repairs, and Aylesbury residents.

In this context, residents have become adept at putting in place strategies to document and archive the institutional neglect that they experience on the part of the local authority and the contractors who are responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of their buildings, in anticipation of future confrontations. In response to the anticipatory work of managed decline, residents engage in their own form of future-oriented evidence gathering activities.

#### 4.2.5 Water, Out of Place

Compounding the lack of adequate distribution of hot water across the site is also a widespread problem with leaks and burst pipes – so the threat of lack of hot water is accompanied by the fear of overabundance of water in the wrong place – something that leaves residents feeling helpless and out of control of their physical living environment. Kostas and Maria are a middle-aged couple who lived in a low-rise block on the eastern boundary of the estate. When I visited them for the first time, they showed me around their immaculate flat with pride. It had been in the family since it was built, first as Kostas's mum's council flat, then as Kostas and Mary's very own, after they bought the lease in the 1980s. A handyman by profession, Kostas renovated, adapted and cared for the flat over the decades, personalising it and modifying it as much as physically possible. The narrow balcony doubled as a vegetable garden, with tomatoes and cucumbers growing behind a wall of empty plastic bottles, a DIY greenhouse which is also a barrier against squirrels. The balcony also acted as a washroom, a washing machine rumbling away at the far end.

Kostas took me to the bathroom on the second floor next, and opened the mirror above the sink: a recess that goes beyond the wall appeared – a breeze block had been removed and a little shelf had been fashioned out of the reclaimed space. The reason he showed me is not just pride in his DIY skills: the recess was damp and water damaged, a proof that the leak filtering through to the kitchen came from the rooftop above. Back in the kitchen downstairs we stood in silence contemplating the water-damaged ceiling. Kostas and Mary sighed, deeply unhappy about the state of their walls, but unwilling to get them fixed through the home insurance scheme until they received an assurance from the council that the problem on the roof has been fixed. Kostas was caught in a bureaucratic trap: he could not file an insurance claim to cover the repair costs until he had proof that the problem has been solved at the root, but he was unable to find out what works have been carried out. Since the problem was outside his flat, on his roof, the repair team did not require access to his property to fix it, which means that Kostas could not check when and what works were carried out. This complicated the task of collecting evidence, a key activity necessary in case of any future complaints or any contact with the call-centre or the insurance company. Kostas had lived in council-owned properties for long enough to know that he had to take matters in his own hands. Just as his practice of surreptitiously expanding the boundaries of his flat by burrowing into the very structure of the building, when he realised the leak was coming from outside his flat, he broke the rules and climbed onto the flat roof to check if he could find any clue to its cause. What he discovered became cause for much concern: Kostas found a large bush growing on the roof, its roots clogging the water drainage system, so that a large amount of water had collected on the flat surface of the roof and had then seeped down into his flat. Him and his wife recounted the discovery of a 'lake' and a 'garden' on the roof to me with much worry, and also some exasperated hilarity. Just like the Victoria and her neighbours joked about having their own

Sky Garden on their corridor, Kostas and Maria joked about finally having access to their own roof garden.

Crucially, the bush growing on the roof provided proof that ongoing maintenance had not been carried out: the bush had been allowed to grow for many years. On that first visit to his roof, Kostas knew to take pictures and keep them as evidence in case of a future tribunal appearance. He was especially glad to have done so when, on his next surreptitious visit to the roof, after a repair team attended, the bush had disappeared.



*Image 11 Kostas' archive of managed decline. Photos taken by Kostas*

The photographs' framing foregrounds the large bushes growing in between the piping running along the surface, and a very large puddle of stagnant water. His images capture details that would most probably escape a written description: the colour of the water, and the deposit of algae and chickweed depict an ecosystem which has clearly developed over time. An image of the edge of the puddle shows a water mark on a dry area of the roof, suggesting that at some point in time, the water level was even higher. Weizman writes of "matter as aesthetic sensorium" (2017, p. 94) (2017: 94): materials in physical spaces almost act as photographic paper recording the encounter with specific objects and materials. Buildings record the "environmental and social processes that take place inside and around them" (idem: p. 58). The temporality of long-term neglect becomes inscribed in buildings.

While Kostas's framing foregrounds the ecosystem developing on his roof, the background inevitably leaks into the frame, and in various shots we see in the distance the towering presence of the Shard, an all-glass skyscraper, 95 storeys high, constructed at London Bridge by architect Renzo Piano. It intrudes in the images, suggesting both vicinity and distance: close enough to be a

constant reminder that the land the Aylesbury is on is central enough to be of great value, an inescapable presence.

Kostas's roof-top images speak of a habit of creating evidence in the face of a large, disorganised bureaucracy that has been disinvesting from the building he owns for years. If he ever decided to go to tribunal, he would have the necessary evidence base to make his case. This type of anticipatory work is the closest that leaseholders and tenants can come to performing maintenance work on their properties. Barred from performing structural interventions on the buildings they live and own, Kostas works nonetheless to create an archive that demonstrates how maintenance is not performed (image 10), and that any damage is not to be imputed to him. In creating these images, he is biding his time, knowledgeable of the fact that the situation he is in might draw on for months and years. What also plays on his mind is that the local administration is keen to buy his flat back from him, in preparation for demolition, and that the valuation of his property is a key contested ground.

The water infrastructure concerns the interiors of people's homes, their private comfort, and ability to clean, cook and stay warm: water out of place, either not flowing or flowing or pooling in excessive quantities, along pathways that were not intended for it, and at the wrong temperature, is understood by residents as an active act of neglect on the part of the local authority. This neglect speaks to residents about their marginalised status as expendable individuals in the eyes of the administration. The devaluation of residents and buildings is both immaterial, as well as financial, as I will show in more detail in chapter 7. I will now step outside the threshold of individual dwellings, into the pedestrian walkways that connect the estate.

### **4.3 Pedestrian Flows**

John Boughton, in his *A History of Council Housing in 100 Estates* (2022), provides a classification of municipal building in the UK that combines chronology with layout and building typologies – and the Aylesbury estate, while not listed amongst the 100 of the title, appears referenced in the short introductory paragraph of the 'deck access' section, together, notably, with Sheffield's Park Hill estate. The 13 miles of pedestrian walkways and raised decks that connect the estate are both a central distinguishing feature of Aylesbury, and a common and widespread 'type' of council building of the era of industrialised high-rise building, which saw its maximum expression in the ten years between the end of the 1950s and the late 1960s. The pedestrian walkways encompass a range of different types of elements – from wide access corridors (both internal and external), to bridges that connect blocks across streets, to ground level pedestrian routes through green spaces, as well as ramps, stairwells and passages. The external deck access can be traced to the tradition of the balcony-access typical of brick tenements of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reinterpreted through

the lens of architectural modernism (Broughton 2022). It is to this tradition that we will turn our attention now.

#### 4.3.1 Genealogy of a Vision

Narkofin Communal House in Moscow was built in 1928-30 as a prototype for a new type of housing for the USSR. The Constructivist avant-garde architects designed it to express and shape the ideals of collective communist life (Buchli, 2017). Narkofim was conceived as a “transitional type of experimental house” (Ginzburg, 2017 [1933], p. 84) that would include different typologies of accommodation, to accompany and encourage the socialisation of life and the dissolution of the nuclear family under communism. The building complex therefore sported dormitories for single people as well as apartments for families, and communal facilities such as a kitchen, creche and gymnasium. The replacement of

vertical links between separate residential elements (the stairwells) with horizontal arteries – corridors linking the individual residential units with one another, and, even more importantly, with the socialised centre (Ginzburg 2017 [1933], p. 84)

represented a crucial infrastructural feature that reflected the social ideology behind the plan – the architecture would contribute to shaping the consciousness of the newly born post-revolutionary nation. At 4 meters of width, Narkofim House’s corridors were designed as a vital space for socialisation on the threshold of individual dwellings. They also provided a physical and imaginative connection through the site. They are one of the first examples of elevated walkways conceived as places of sociality and connection, and integral to the architectural, social and urban planning concept.

In 1928 the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne / The International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) was founded in Switzerland. Its regular conferences were foundational in the development of an international modernist approach to architecture and urbanism. Le Corbusier was a leading figure within the congress, which brought together the main architects of the era, including the Russian Constructivists behind Narkofim House. CIAM’s key contribution during the first ten years of its existence was the idea of the Functional City, an urbanistic blueprint that responded to the changing needs of urban environments. The tenets of the functional city were laid out in Le Corbusier’s *The Radiant City* (1964 [1933]) and in the congress’ *Athens Charter*, which was developed during the 1933 Athens congress and finally committed to writing and publication in 1943 (Mumford, 2000). The Functional City rested on the idea of separation of functions, so that the city would be divided in zones devoted to four main human activities: dwelling, work, leisure and circulation. The principle of separation between cars, pedestrians and cyclists was central to the Functional City. In his writing Le Corbusier expresses a strong concern

towards the rise of motorised traffic in cities, and posits a strict separation between areas devoted to the car and those devoted to pedestrians, planning for raised motorways to channel the traffic away from the ground level, which would be thus a quiet space for pedestrians:

The city dweller, as a pedestrian, must have the entire ground surface of the city at his disposal. The ground surface of the city if made up of parks (...) Most of the city's streets will now be inside the buildings. (Le Corbusier 1964 [1933], p. 113).

This would lead to nothing less than the death of the street, a concept to which he devotes an entire chapter in *The Radiant City*. Pedestrians would have access to “a direct yet sinuous network of pedestrian walks (...) Where does this fluid network of paths lead to? Everywhere in the city. (...)” (1964 [1933], p. 125).

When planning and building his influential L'Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, Le Corbusier included wide (glazed) internal corridors that linked individual dwellings as well as hosting shops and facilities. The ninth CIAM congress, held in Aix-en-Provence in 1953, concluded with a party on the roof top of the newly build Unité. It is hard to underestimate the influence that this building has had on architects worldwide; in the UK, architect John Partridge remarked that at one point “a trip to the LUH was almost mandatory” (Grindrod, 2013, p. 170) for architects working in the London County Council, heavily engaged with the construction of council housing in the British capital. However, by the time of the Aix congress, CIAM's idea of functional city was being criticised by a younger generation of practitioners, amongst whom the British Alison and John Smithson played a leading role (Banham, 1966; Mumford, 2000). This marked the start of a departure from the congress' more formalist tendencies and its emphasis on urban zones and functions (Highmore, 2017). The Smithsons had an interest in vernacular forms of urban inhabitation, and in integrating patterns of social relations in their planning. Their architectural approach has been analysed as one that responds to existing crises or conundrums (Highmore 2017), “the world as it is encountered, with all its rough edges, awkward, complex and unfinished” (Thoburn 2022: p. 44). They took an interest in street life in the East End of London, and in the changes that the introduction of the car was bringing. This led them to develop the concept of ‘streets in the sky’ as a space that could reproduce the sociality, conviviality and relation that had been the marker of the paved streets of the Victorian terraces and that was quickly disappearing. The work of their associates and friends Judith and Nigel Henderson – she an anthropologist working and teaching in Bethnal Green, and he a keen street photographer, was influential in shaping the Smithson's “doorstep philosophy” (Highmore 2017).

In 1951 the couple participated in a competition for the construction of the Golden Lane housing development on a bombed area in London. Their proposal did not win and was thus never realised, but “the work that the Smithson's undertook for it should be seen as an important moment

in the evolution of a brutalist lexicon and imaginary” (Highmore 2017: p. 61). One key feature of the proposal was the inclusion of streets in the sky. In their contribution to the 9<sup>th</sup> CIAM congress, the Golden Lane design proposal was paired with Henderson’s photographs of children playing in the streets in East London. The proposal “develops an urban sensibility (rather than simply an architectural one), which is increasingly concerned with the orchestration of a population within a built environment” (Highmore 2017: p. 63). Within this, solving the issue of the street as a space of sociality and expression of working-class life was central. The Smithsons on the issue: “Streets will be places and not corridors or balconies” (quoted in Highmore 2017: p. 63), places of identification and belonging. The caption of a cross-section drawing of the Golden Lane proposal reads: “EMPHASIS ON SITE, CIRCULATION, HABITATION AND HUMAN PRESENCE.” (Highmore 2017: p. 67). This represented a more grounded and pragmatic approach if compared to the formalism of CIAM’s Functional City.

If the image of children playing on the asphalt is used to symbolise the vitality of street life (albeit a vanishing one), metaphors of fluid circulation can be found both in the Smithsons’ and Le Corbusier’s writings on pedestrian movement. For example, “Ways-in-the-air could be a framework, like drains, to which everyone connects to”, write the Smithsons (quoted in Highmore 2017: p. 64); in the Radiant City, Le Corbusier includes a paragraph about the positioning of the sewage systems right after his evocative description of fluid pedestrian passageways. The science of transport networks is based on fluid mechanic formulae and understands vehicular traffic as akin to fluid movement (Claudio Borsari, personal communication). However, as Highmore (2017) notes, creating parallels between waste systems (drains, sewers, rubbish chutes) and pedestrian traffic, is a notable choice when writing about working-class life, as they reinforce historical associations between poverty with dirt. (Shilliam and Renwick 2022). The use of these metaphors and associations by the proponents of the ‘streets in the sky’ anticipates the later association between this architectural form and criminality

The influence of the Smithsons’ new brutalist sensibilities, ethics and aesthetics (Banham 1966, Highmore 2017), and well as CIAM’s work on public architecture in the UK cannot be underestimated. The construction of Alton West estate (Roehampton, London) in 1953 marks the beginning of an intense period of council housing construction following modernist formulae. Grindrod identifies the construction of Park Hill in Sheffield (1957-1961) as the moment when CIAM’s influence influenced waned in favour of Smithsons. Park Hill was designed by architects Ivor Smith - who had trained with the Smithsons - and Jack Lynn. Like many others, Smith and Lynn were inspired by L’Unite d’Habitation, but they took the idea of the streets in the sky to a new level. Rather than just internal corridors, their streets in the sky connected buildings to one another, and could lead one from the bottom of the hill, upwards towards the higher end of the development without ever leaving the ground (Grindrod 2013). The planning department at Southwark Council,

headed up by Hans Peter Trenton and Frank Hayes, included newly trained architects, such as John Nichol. In their planning of Aylesbury, and later of its sister estate Heygate, they were influenced by the lineage and influence of CIAM, Le Corbusier, and the work of the new brutalists.

Southwark Council announced the plan to build the Aylesbury Estate in 1963. Whilst the neighbouring boroughs of Camberwell and Bermondsey<sup>8</sup> had been active in the post war house building efforts, Southwark had been lagging behind, and Aylesbury was its first major construction project. The 1956 Housing Act mandated that municipalities could only clear and redevelop slums, and that any other housing building schemes should be driven by the private market. Southwark Council identified an area of Victorian terraced housing, tenements, small industry and bomb damaged plots to build the Aylesbury (Romyn 2020). Construction of the first phase began in 1967 and completed in 1972, and phase two spanned 1972-1977.

During the construction of the estate however the architectural plans encountered, or collided, with a push from central government to build at pace and high, often at the expense of quality (Romyn 2020). The 1956 Housing Bill included a multistorey subsidy – although this was abolished in 1965, it gives an idea of the mood of the time: building high rises was encouraged during this phase. The year that construction of the Aylesbury began (1967) also saw the introduction a housing cost yardstick, which forced the lead architect to save £2 million on the construction costs. The materials themselves, the Jespersen large panels, also dictated elements of the construction as their delivery required a long straight access. The Aylesbury estate was therefore the outcome of architectural design principles' encounter with the constraints of the construction industry, politicians and construction materials. Bullock (2010) distinguishes the pragmatic approach to building work taken by local authorities under the constraints of economic and political forces, from a design-led approach, which architects in the London County Council (LCC) had the chance to take and which allowed for more regard to quality and design. If Robin Hood Gardens, developed by the Smithsons under the aegis of the LCC is an example of this latter approach, Aylesbury falls squarely in the former camp. There is a way in which a double tier system is still detectable today, in the current revival of interest in brutalist architecture. This revival, which for the most part disavows brutalism as a 'class architecture' (Thoburn 2022) and concerns itself only with its aesthetic qualities, more often than not privileges the signature buildings created by now famous architects (the Smithsons, Erno Goldfinger, Lubetkin, amongst others) and side-lines the buildings created by municipal planning departments. From an architectural point of view, the Aylesbury estate suffers from this selectiveness. Where it is included in listings of brutalist buildings, it is the streets in the sky that are a highlight (e.g. in a book like *The Council House of 2022*, "a visual

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<sup>8</sup> The boroughs of Camberwell and Bermondsey were incorporated into Southwark in 1965.



celebration of 68 of London's most iconic council estates", as well as the aforementioned Broughton's *A History of Council Housing in 100 Estates*).

#### 4.3.2 The Aylesbury Walkways

Of the modernist architectural principles that Southwark Council's architects followed when designing the Aylesbury Estate, the separation between areas for pedestrians and areas for motorised traffic was a central one. Distinct infrastructures for the flows of people and of vehicles were implemented: the street level was designed as a space reserved for cars, while a large network of walkways, ramps, bridges, corridors and external stairs was created with the movement of people in mind. The elevated pedestrian network was so highly developed that it was possible to walk from one end of the estate to the other without ever touching the ground, along internal corridors, external walkways, pedestrian bridges over roads, ramps and stairs. In addition, the Aylesbury was linked via aerial routes to its neighbouring Heygate Estate, which was built in a similar style. One resident remembers taking her children to a swimming pool in Elephant and Castle, over one mile away, without ever having to be on the street. In the original architect's plan, avenues of shops would also be available on some of the open walkways; the large corridors running outside the entrance of the dwellings would be used as social spaces as well as transit areas; and the system of walkways would terminate in the neighbouring Burgess Park, a vast green space separated from one edge of the Aylesbury estate by the busy Albany Road. It was the architect's vision that the residential spaces would bleed out onto the communal spaces of corridors and walkways, and that a community life and spirit could be fostered this way.

It was a policy requirement at the time of building that there should be one parking space per dwelling, plus 30% for visitors. In order to fulfil this requirement, the ground level of the buildings was designed for the storage of cars, in the form of open plan and individual garages. The street level was therefore almost entirely devoted to the car, either as street or as parking space.

On Aylesbury, the architectural vision was never fully realised: the planned aerial link with the nearby Burgess Park was never realised, therefore curtailing the plan of one of its key aspects, a link both physical and imaginative into the vast green space of the newly built park. The shops lining the aerial avenues did not work commercially and they were converted into artists' studios, with little interaction with the resident community. The housing cost yardstick imposed by central government translated in less insulation being used on some parts of the walkway system, resulting in loud overhead noises for some residents, followed by remedial work. Moreover, car ownership never reached 100%, probably because public transport in the area is very good, and many residents could not afford to own a car, so all the open-plan garages fell into disuse over the years, leaving large empty spaces at street level. While the delivery of the pedestrian and car circulation system might have had some failings, the critical scrutiny under which both the

walkways and the garages have been put, both in the media and in the academic literature, bears analysing in detail.

#### 4.3.3 Defensible Space Theory

The use, image, and everyday experience of walkways became over the years shaped by a public critical discourse rooted in Defensible Space theories. Campkin (2013) links the “sink estate spectacle”, a public discourse rooted in a language and metaphor of dirt and marginalisation, to the drive towards an urban regeneration movement that displaces working-class, racialised and marginalised residents. Campkin developed his arguments using the Aylesbury as a prime example of this phenomenon, as he argues that the Aylesbury “has been symbolically central to the discourses of late-twentieth century urban blight in London” (2013: 16). Campkin’s work is in itself a response and critique to theorisations of Defensible Space as developed by Oscar Newman and Alice Coleman. Both theorists made reference to Aylesbury in their work –Newman in the BBC documentary *The Writing on the Wall* (1974) and Coleman in her book *Utopia on Trial* (1985). Coleman takes up and develops Newman’s theories to criticise (and to literally put on trial) British instantiations of modernist design on housing estate, in particular focusing on a critique of the architecture inspired by CIAM and the New Brutalism. In Newman and Coleman’s deterministic schema, the design and layout of a space have a direct impact on the way it is used and how people behave around it. This includes the most intimate areas of people’s lives, with Coleman going as far as stating that “There are also many other kinds of stress and trauma, including crime, fear, anxiety, marital breakdown, and physical and mental disorders that would be largely avoidable in more *socially stabilising environments*” (Coleman, 1985, p. 3 emphasis mine). Amongst the design and layout features that Newman and Coleman put on trial in their work, both give central importance to overhead walkways and pedestrian networks. In *Writing on the Wall* Newman is filmed walking on the Aylesbury estate’s walkways illustrating his theory that links design with a higher incidence of criminality. Coleman similarly writes about the walkways as providing escape routes for criminals and fostering anonymity, citing the Aylesbury estate as an example.

As Campkin demonstrates, defensible space has had a pervasive influence in the way the media have over the years addressed estates in the UK in general, and the Aylesbury in particular (2013). A brief review of local and national print press from the 70s through to the 90s reveals a steady flow of articles about the Aylesbury estate that in language and tone repeat a uniform message: *Slums of the Seventies* (Time out 1974) speaks of “Featureless walkways and barren open spaces”; in *Did Groucho Marx Invent the Yardstick?* (The Architect, 1975) we read that “Aylesbury pedestrian walkways not only encourage vandalism, pedestrian footsteps keep sleepers awake in bedrooms below”; *Looking Down on Life* (South London Press 1977): “...before it was discovered

that living in the sky was nearer the Devil, in psychiatric terms, than Heaven”; a Radio4 programme from 1983 sets the scene by depicting a “11 mile labyrinth of dimly-lit walkways and bridges.”

These media depictions of Aylesbury stated that the extensive network of walkways provided easy and fast escape routes for thieves and drug dealers: they provided too much flow and connection, but they were the wrong sorts of flow for the wrong sorts of people. The press also repeatedly wrote that muggings became widespread on the walkways. Although narratives of criminality, drug-dealing and antisocial behaviour flourished in the press and in public discourse around Aylesbury, there is little empirical evidence that crime rates were higher than in other parts of London (in fact, one comparative survey shows lower rates of crime compared to the rest of the borough of Southwark). Despite the facts and figures, some residents naturally internalised these mediatic and political fear narratives, whilst also suggesting possible solutions: historian Michael Romyn (2022) writes about a report on the safety of women on Southwark housing estate from the early 1980s, in which respondents reported widespread concerns about their wellbeing, compounded by factors such as poor lighting conditions in public areas, a lack of caretakers and external doors. Minutes from Aylesbury Tenants and Residents association meetings in much more recent times similarly reveal that residents have continued to lobby the council for the installation of entry phones, better lighting and increased security, to no large avail.

Instead, the relentless negative publicity and messaging lead in the 1990s to a push from local politicians to interrupt the potential for uninterrupted pedestrian flow within the estate and beyond, by removing one part of the system: the bridges that run over roads used by cars.

The South London Press ran three articles between May 1994 and December 1996 chronicling the demolition of the bridges, indicating that the demolition was an effort to “design out crime”, titled *Up, up and Away, Bridges of Fear* and *The End of a Hazard*. *The End of a Hazard* is accompanied by a striking image taken by the then lead photographer at South London Press, Tim Dickinson. Dickinson does not recall how the photograph came about but he thinks the scene was likely to have been set up by the local authority’s press office. The image frames local policeman PC Holland, a white middle-aged man, standing in front of a barricaded walkway, facing two young black men who lean over a parapet and peer down onto the rubble of a demolished bridge. The image resonates with references – habitual readers of the newspaper and anyone attuned to the public discourse around crime would be able to decode it easily, as a depiction of a symbolic stand-off between the face of the law (PC Holland in uniform) and the face of lawlessness. The generic, non-identifiable image of two black teenage men stands in for housing estate criminality and anti-social behaviour in this highly staged photograph.

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■ Above: PC Kevin Holland joins local youngsters as the Aylesbury Estate's walkways are demolished

# END OF A

**CONCRETE walkways on a huge housing estate used as escape routes by muggers have started to come tumbling down.**

The notorious footbridges which link up sections of the sprawling Aylesbury Estate in Walworth, are now being demolished.

Six have already been ripped down and work on the remaining two will start in the new year.

As well as helping to beat crime on the estate, the work also signals the start of a major bid to renovate all 2,600 flats.

Southwark Council said it hoped to submit an application for a major Single Regeneration Budget grant for the work.

Hatchel Sharpe, the housing

by SHUJAU AZAM

## 'Muggers Paradise' goes as estate takes on a safer look



■ Walkways demolition gets underway Photo: TM DICKSON

# HAZARD

strategic services manager for the council, said, "Today we are holding a brainstorming session with representatives from the local community and tenants' association."

"The housing department has commissioned a feasibility study of crime and community safety on the estate and we'll act on the results."

"The Government guidelines for the Single Regeneration Budget are due out this week. If we can meet their criteria then we will be preparing to submit a bid for next June."

"Wendover House on the estate is the largest housing block in Europe so it is a major task. In all there are 19 different blocks and the links are being taken down presently under our neighbourhood programme."

PC Kevin Holland based at Walworth Police Station, who patrols the estate, said, "The walkways were used as rat-runs by criminals who often used motorbikes and mopeds as their escape vehicles."

"There has been a reduction in crime on the estate and we want it to continue."

PC Holland added, "Tons of concrete is being removed as the pillars are gradually taken down."

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Image 12 South London Press, 13 December 1996

Stuart Hall and his colleagues' seminal analysis (Hall *et al.*, 1978) of the way that street crime emerged as a category of interest to coercive State powers through the 70s described as a "moral panic" the public discourse and attendant legislative and policing interventions that accompanied it. They trace the way in which a certain type of street crime – mugging – became associated with black youth, and emphasise how this link contained a geographic dimension. Deprived inner-city areas become the terrain where the contradictions of crisis played out in the criminalisation and policing of young black men in particular. The walkways and bridges became a central locus for these narratives, which in turn became one of the justifications behind the alleged need to demolish the entirety of the estate. The demolition of some of the key bridges and walkways can be seen as an attempt to limit the presence and flow of people, in particular of young black men.

As Yemi, a young woman of Nigerian descent in her twenties, pithily told me in relation to the demolition of the estate: "They want to get rid of poor people in Southwark, and they want to get rid of black people in Southwark. Simple as that." Yemi voiced a sentiment that many other residents expressed, in more or less explicit ways. The demolition project is, in the eyes of many of the residents I worked with, a project of social and racialised cleansing. The demolition of the bridges can be read as another anticipation of it, one heavily inflected by the criminalisation of racialised residents (especially those young, male and black). If fear narratives have had an important role in in the demolition assemblage, policing itself is and has been directly entwined with the regeneration of estates (Perera 2019). Perera argues that the regulation of the lives of working-class racialised residents via specific policing policies, strategies and approaches, through the

creation of “localised hostile environments” (Perera 2019: 22) accompanies and under girdles the creation of sanitised spaces for middle class gentrifiers. If the 1980s and 1990s were marked by the figure of the ‘mugger’, after the 2011 London riots, the figure of the ‘gang’ enters public and policy discourse about estate regeneration (Perera 2019).

If we can deconstruct the fear of ‘muggers’ and ‘gangs’ as produced by media and political discourses and link it to projects of spatial marginalisation, we also have to take seriously the fears that residents speak of, such as the fear of gender-based violence and of racial attack (Romyn 2022), and the fear of policing that disproportionately targets and profiles those young, black and male (Perera 2019).

In *The Racial Contract*, philosopher Charles Mills theorises white supremacy as the “unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today” (1997, p. 1), and posits the “norming of space” as one of the key ways in which the racial contract is enacted and reproduced. The relation between the “norming of space and the person” as a racialised subject (idem, p.41) are bound up together in what he calls a “circular indictment” (idem, p. 42). He writes: “The norming of space is partially done in terms of the *ricing* of space, the depiction of space as dominated by individuals (...) of a certain race. At the same time, the norming of the individual is partially achieved by *spacing* it, that is, representing it as imprinted with the characteristics of a certain type of space” (idem, p. 41-42). While defensible space theorists would have us believe in a simplistic relationship between space and personhood (where design and layout shape populations and their behaviours), Mills posits a complex relation between the creation of space and race as central to the racial contract. The circular relation between space and race that Mills describes maps onto the way the Aylesbury became over the years synonymous with criminality, antisocial behaviour (the term that replaced mugging in the 90s), blackness and poverty, and how its residents in turn became marked by these characteristics. One key expression of this relation is expressed in the way the walkways were conceptualised, written about, policed, interrupted, and finally demolished together with the rest of the buildings they were designed to connect.

#### 4.3.4 A Visual Ethnography of the Walkways

The composite images that accompany this text strive to create an imaginative space where the walkways can be rethought using residents’ narratives and memories as a starting point. They foreground ease of connection with places and people foremost. The images juxtapose a trace of the way the pedways were and are used in everyday life, with a visualisation of what has been excised from the landscape – in particular here the focus is on the bridges that were demolished in the 1990s. The quotes from residents, written by hand over the images, stand as a corrective to the vast amount of literature produced by the media that depicted the walkways univocally and

solely as a space of danger, criminality and excess. Residents speak instead also of the everyday mundane simplicity that walking in a pedestrian zone afforded them, especially when walking with children. The images aim to evoke the absence of parts of the infrastructure, and they point to their spectral presence, both in the urban landscape and in the embodied memory of residents. The images are inserted in the i-doc in the form of a visual essay, and accompanied by short text panels that summarise the salient pieces of information presented in this chapter.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter considers two infrastructural systems at the basis of which is an idea and a practice of flow: the flow of people across space and the flow of hot water through pipes and radiators. When they were conceived both were envisaged as smooth and flawless, contributing to the creation of a harmonious, connected community. Both contained, in their own specific ways, a promise and desire for a 'modern' future. They implied and envisaged the possibility of social and moral betterment of working-class residents.

However, far from delivering their promise of unobtrusively fostering interconnection and social mobility, both systems have been punctuated by neglect, interruptions and breakdowns. The anthropology of infrastructures teaches us that infrastructures are laced with the political, social, economic and symbolic conditions of the context they emerge from – and here I have contended that their maintenance and upkeep remains similarly linked to these conditions and their changing characteristics over time. This accretive nature of infrastructures includes the way they are managed over time, and also undone or decommissioned.

The Aylesbury estate was much criticised in the general and architectural press at the time of its construction. Over the years, however, its reputation continued to worsen. Concomitantly, the national project of privatisation and residualisation of social housing continued to inform the way Aylesbury and estates like it were imagined, managed and policed by local authorities, the press, and at times the residents themselves. What has remained in the background in these analyses is the racialised dimension of such increasing demonisation. In this chapter I have included a discussion of how a discourse on race and dysfunction have been part of these processes.

What is important here is that residents continue to live within the homes, buildings and neighbourhoods within this time span. They continue to make their lives within the material and symbolic demolition landscape. Residents continue to inhabit their flats and buildings every day and create lives within them that exceed the narrow narratives of poverty, decline and failure. Residents organise to demand better services, ongoing supply of water and heating, rubbish collections, lighting and maintenance of communal areas, via Tenants and Residents

Organisations, via informal and self-organised groups like the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group, or as individuals, like Kostas, who collects evidence of infrastructural neglect in preparation for future confrontations. In this chapter has centred two systems that are integral to the residents' everyday life and their domestic living arrangements. In the next chapter I instead address a domain that is firmly public, and connected to legal requirements behind regeneration/demolition: that of the expropriation of privately owned flats on the estate.

## Visual interlude #4









## 5. Into the Lions' Den<sup>9</sup>



*Image 13 Southwark Council's legal team speak to the assembled Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group objectors*

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on two public inquiries into the compulsory purchase order for flats owned by residents of the Aylesbury estate. These inquiries saw the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group (ALAG) and the London Borough of Southwark face one another. They were high profile events not only for Aylesbury homeowners, but also for housing activist networks nationwide, and for segments of the property development sector and the legal profession, who followed the proceedings and their outcomes closely.

Southwark Council, as part of their agreement with land developed Notting Hill Housing (later Notting Hill Genesis), had the task to reacquire all those council homes they had sold and that were now privately owned by leaseholders. Compulsory purchase, or expropriation, was the measure of last resort they had at their disposal to buy the leases back to allow for the regeneration/demolition to take place. The legal process that surrounds expropriation is the focus

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<sup>9</sup> The reporting, analysis, and feedback of 35% Campaign and Southwark Notes, who are part of the leaseholders' network of solidarity, have been invaluable in the writing of this chapter, and so have been the scholarly articles published by those academics in attendance at the inquiry as witnesses for ALAG. The title - Into the Lion's Den – is taken from a 35% Campaign blog post title (<https://www.35percent.org/posts/2015-05-02-aylesbury-estate-compulsory-purchase-order-public-inquiry/>).

of this chapter. It is a central aspect of the demolition assemblage, not only because it spanned over a number of years and delayed the regeneration timeline considerably, but also because it provoked debates that exceed the concerns of individual leaseholders. The legal question underpinning compulsory purchase inquiries in the UK is whether the expropriation of private property, and the infringement of the owners' human rights, is justified by a public interest motive. Debates about public versus private interest were therefore central to the legal case itself, and to the way that public attention and support was harnessed by the Aylesbury homeowners towards the case. Over the course of the chapter, I will review the arguments brought to the inquiry by the homeowners and their supporters, to criticise the local authority's urban regeneration framework and to argue that it would not be in the public interest to pursue it in its current formulation.

In this chapter I also grapple with a fundamental contradiction that underpinned the organised Aylesbury homeowners' position, which saw them balancing a public interest case on the one hand, with their private interests as individual homeowners on the other. Leaseholders, many of whom had become homeowners through the Right to Buy policy, argued that a publicly owned and managed housing estate, home for the great majority to council tenants, was in the public interest. They also argued that the regeneration plans of the public administration would disproportionately benefit private interest. However, the legal case hinged on individual property ownership rights. The group managed to walk this tightrope with skill, until the underlying tension eventually came to the fore and marked the case's ultimate unravelling.

Public inquiries are independent investigations of a quasi-judicial nature, and over the course of the four years that these inquiries spanned, I undertook a courtroom ethnography (Walenta, 2020) during which I followed the proceedings closely and collaborated on the case with the objectors (as the Aylesbury residents and their supporters were called in the space of the inquiry). On the objectors' request, I filmed the inquiry hearings, and I created an indexed archive of the video material, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The inquiry courtroom is marked by institutional exclusionary dynamics that are etched into its structures, procedures and *modus operandi*. Critical legal scholars have long analysed and shown how the law is a classed, gendered and racialised arena (e.g. Van Cleve, 2016 on racism in a criminal court in the USA) that favours those in possession of social, economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu's framework is useful here: the legal field is predicated upon a fundamental differentiation between lay people and a professional legal class that has acquired a specific language, mental space and habitus that grants it participation rights (Bourdieu, 1987). My argument is that ALAG members, from their marginal position as mostly working-class and racialised homeowners, negotiated their right to participate in the legal process of the inquiry by activating networks of solidarity around their cause: self-education and collaboration with activist groups, lay experts and

academics became central to their practice and allowed them to dispute their case within the juridical field, with some degree of success. Such forms of “knowledge politics” are increasingly central to citizen mobilisation movements (Leach and Scoones, 2007). In this inquiry a strategic alliance between sometimes unlikely groups created a temporary network of support that gave great visibility to the Aylesbury movement. Ultimately however the strategic alliance buckled under the underlying contradictions that underpinned it.

There has been a tendency for the social study of the law to focus on its linguistic and discursive dimensions (e.g. Conley and O’Barr, 1990). Here I intend instead to forgo this “analytic logocentrism” (Bens, 2019): I understand law as a “socially and materially embedded performance” (Jeffrey and Jakala, 2014, p. 8) and aim to analyse the inquiry as such, beyond a textual and legalistic approach. Ethnography as a method of studying the working of the courts enables a careful consideration of all those details that are left out of the ‘case files’: the embodied, emotional, and material dynamics that shape the working of the law in the physical space of the court (Faria *et al.*, 2020). I pay close attention to the court atmospheres, including the bodily arrangements and the role of emotion within the inquiry space (Bens 2018). In addition, I analyse the spatial dynamics of the first inquiry, inspired by critical legal geographers and their work on space and the law.

The strategies that I use to tend to this aspect of the inquiry include the extensive use of still images that illustrate the chapter<sup>10</sup>; the selection of the stills foregrounds the positioning of bodies in space and in relation to one another, as well as facial expressions, bodily dispositions, clothing and accessories. The inclusion of extensive direct quotations from participants, as they were spoken during the hearings, complement my own written descriptions.

In summary, the aim of this chapter is threefold: the spine of the chapter follows the chronological unfolding of the inquiry, as I recount its history from the point of view of the objectors. In the second instance, through a close ethnographic approach, I aim to show how the residents were able to work within the exclusionary boundaries of the inquiry by activating networks of solidarity and creating an alliance bringing together diverse interests and positions. And finally, through the arguments presented during the inquiry I provide an overview of the critiques of the urban regeneration of housing estates, as presented by residents, academics and housing activists.

### **Public inquiry timeline**

28 April - 1 May 2015      First inquiry sitting

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<sup>10</sup> The still images are screenshots taken from video footage that I and filmmaker Line Nikita Wolfe filmed during the inquiry. Niki and I worked as a team during the inquiries, making sure that at least one of us was present at the hearings every day. We shared the footage and worked together on making an audio version of it available online.

12 May 2015	Second inquiry sitting
12 – 14 October 2015	Third inquiry sitting
16 September 2016	Secretary of State's decision letter
17 January 2017	Southwark Council wins the right to a judicial review
21 April 2017	Secretary of State quashes his decision to not confirm the CPO
9-31 January 2018	First revised inquiry sitting
6 April 2018	ALAG withdraws its objections
17 – 18 April 2018	Second revised inquiry sitting

## 5.2 Setting the Scene



*Image 14 Giving evidence to the inquiry*

I am neither an academic, a solicitor or a barrister, I am a lady who is losing her home and that is why I am here today. My witness statement consists of: breach of my human rights, as well as my personal circumstances. I have been a leaseholder since 2005 (...)

Can everybody hear me?

I believe that it is not in the public interest to acquire my property by compulsory purchase order, there are alternative solutions that could be offered to enable individuals not to lose their homes, their space, their families, their communities, and their sense of belonging somewhere, and not to have to start family life again out of the area.

(...) The London Borough of Southwark states that the estate is ugly, rundown, beyond economical repair, and I have read this negativity from outsiders. I would like to know - these people who are writing these things, have they actually been on the estate and walked around the estate, prior to decanting, and seen the beauty of the estate. Every rock is somebody's diamond.

Extract from Anne's inquiry witness statement, 1 May 2015



Anne delivered her statement, of which this is but a short extract, from the public inquiry witness desk. She was addressing a government appointed inspector, Lesley Coffey, a chartered town planner appointed to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State for Communities on the case on hand. As Coffey summarised:

The purpose of the inquiry is for the Council to justify its position in making the compulsory purchase order and for the objectors to explain to me why it should not be confirmed, and this will allow me to make a fair and balanced report to the Secretary of State who will make a decision on this case.

Lesley Coffey, addressing the parties during the public inquiry, 12 October 2015

While Coffey's statement is factually correct, it underplays the inquiry's adversarial set-up, and the judicial organising principles that underpinned it. Southwark Council was represented by barrister Melissa Murphy, who specialises in planning and compulsory purchase, with its own legal department providing assistance, while the Aylesbury homeowners did not initially have a legal representative (we will see how this changed over the course of the inquiry). After Anne delivered her witness statement, she was – like all other witnesses – cross-examined by Melissa Murphy, who sought to challenge the evidence presented. Like in a court of law, during cross-examinations witnesses are alone at a desk and cannot communicate with others, and during breaks they remain isolated in what is in jargon referred to as 'purdah'. If simply testifying can be stressful for a lay person, being cross-examined is a decidedly anxiety-inducing prospect for most. What led Aylesbury homeowners to this inquiry?

### **5.3 Compulsory Purchase Orders: a Background**

This public inquiry was set up to test whether the compulsory purchase order served to the residents still living in an area of the Aylesbury estate referred to in official documents as the 'First Development Site 1a/1b' or 'the order land', was justified on public interest grounds and could legally proceed. The First Development Site 1a/1b was a large area which included two high rise blocks, Bradenham House and Chiltern House, between which stood six blocks of two-and four-stories (for a total of 566 flats), as well as green space, several mature trees and a children's playground. All bar 2 tenants had already left or had been rehoused by the time the inquiry started on the 28 April 2015, and just under 20 of the original 74 homeowners were still on site. The local authority had been pushing the homeowners to sell back their properties for several years, so that demolition of the buildings and subsequently reconstruction could begin.



*Image 15 A resident points at the First Development Site from her flat in Chiltern House, July 2015*

Many homeowners had however refused to accept the terms of the sell-backs (in chapter 7 I discuss valuations, buy backs and compensation offers in detail), as well as the overall rationale of the regeneration/demolition. In legal language, homeowners and the local authority therefore “failed to agree” on an adequate financial offers and compensation packages. In response to this failure to agree, the local authority (the London borough of Southwark) served a compulsory purchase order (an expropriation order) to the homeowners.

According to Compulsory Purchase Law, acquiring authorities must serve a compulsory purchase order (CPO) to all qualifying persons and submit the CPO for confirmation to the relevant 'confirming authority', i.e. a minister, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Government and Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, 2015, p. 20). Central government therefore is asked to consider the order served by a local authority, and either approve or reject it. Once a CPO is served on “those with an interest in the land”, there is a set period during which objections to the order can be raised. If this happens, the Secretary of State orders for a public inquiry to be held, in which the case is heard by an appointed government inspector, who then reports back to the Secretary of State for a final decision. When residents on the First Development Site were served their Compulsory Purchase Order, they made use of this objection system: a public inquiry was set up and both parties, “the objectors” (as they were now collectively referred to) and council, were asked to provide evidence of their respective cases.

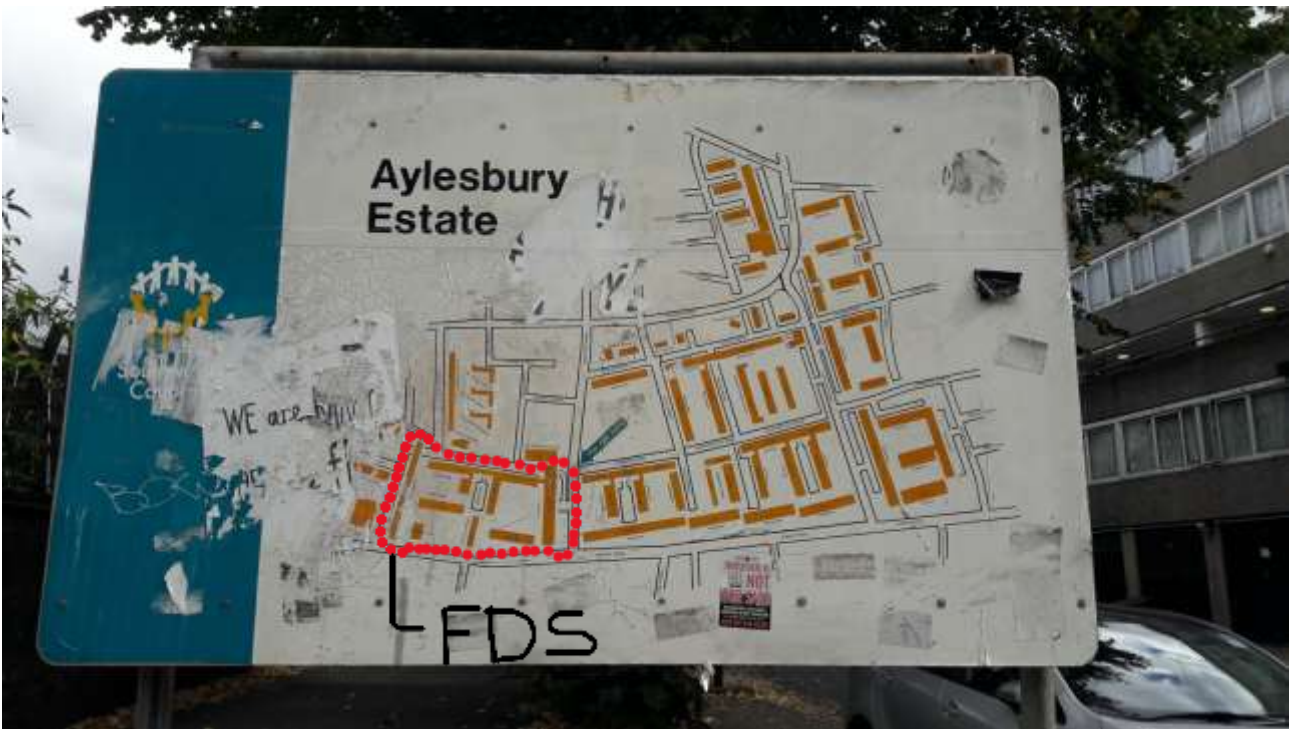


Image 16 The First Development Site - circled in red - in relation to the rest of the Estate

None of this had been straightforward for the group of homeowners who had been refusing the sell-back conditions for years, whilst living in deteriorating infrastructural conditions. Their neighbours - council tenants and other homeowners - had been moving out around them, and a barrage of contradictory information made navigating the choppy currents of the local Council's relocation politics very difficult. I had first met Anne, ALAG's spokesperson, six months before the start of the inquiry, and she had been considering and pursuing all possible avenues to solve her situation. She was pushing for the regeneration/demolition plans to be called off, so she could continue to own and to live in her flat, and to enjoy the surrounding estate where she had been living for many years and felt at home. Concomitantly she also researched rehousing solutions that would satisfy her: she wanted to stay in the neighbourhood, in a large and light-filled flat like the one she owned, without needing to take on extra debt or any additional financial outgoings. Whilst the Council continued to pursue the expropriation process, the option to accept one of the (unsatisfactory) rehousing offers remained open to her and her remaining neighbours.

The decision to precipitate a public inquiry was not an easy one: it was clear to Anne that the process would be incredibly taxing, physically, mentally and financially. While leaseholders were entitled to receive a reimbursement as part of their repurchasing process for 'reasonable professional fees', such as the cost of hiring a surveyor, the legal onus of professional representation during the inquiry was not covered. At the same time, entering into the inquiry as an objector remained the only possible institutional avenue left to continue trying to either stop the expropriation, and potentially regeneration/demolition *tout court*, or to negotiate an improved offer on their move. *Not* going into the inquiry instead would mean either waiting for the expropriation to

take its course, or agreeing to one of the rehousing offers on the table. For Anne, and her fellow ALAG members, entering the inquiry was thus both a way of continuing to critique and refuse the underlying logic of the regeneration/demolition in an institutional setting, as well as a leverage mechanism that could tip the negotiations towards better rehousing options in their favour. However, to do so meant engaging with a process predicated upon the systemic exclusion of working-class and racialised objectors, which was exacerbated by the absence of an ALAG legal representative who could take on some of the mental burden of the inquiry.

#### 5.4 Transforming 'Arry's Bar into a Legal Playing Field



*Image 17 Millwall football stadium, the location of the public inquiry*

Four days before Anne delivered the witness statement that opens this chapter, I had hesitantly entered the grounds of Millwall football stadium in South London for the first time. Carrying my camera bag and heavy tripod on my shoulders, I walked across the enormous, empty, and eerily silent parking lot, and squeezed past a muscular security guard to reach 'Arry's Bar, the unlikely location for the public inquiry. I climbed a steep set of stairs, gave my name to a council official guarding the entrance, and I entered the room, repurposed for the occasion into a tribunal-like formation. I sat myself and my camera down in the public galley, joining other supporters, journalists, bloggers, activists and tenants. The bar serving area was closed by a shutter decorated with the signature Millwall lion, and large black and white photographic prints of historic football matches hang on the wall all around us. The air was crackling with tension.



*Image 18 The entrance to 'Arry's Bar*



*Image 19 The Lion's logo on the window of 'Arry's Bar*

On that first day of the inquiry many of the estate residents and their supporters remarked on the peculiar choice of venue. The stadium is nicknamed The Den, and it is home to a football club that, due to the behaviour of some fans, has acquired an intimidating reputation – one of the famous fan chants is chant 'Nobody likes us, and we don't care'. The stadium is also located in an area infamous for its historic links to right-wing organisations and racism. The residents of the Aylesbury estate that took part in the inquiry were representative of the estate overall: a diverse group that included Black Brits and people with backgrounds in Latin America, West Africa, mainland Europe and beyond. They only had to drive or walk for a very short distance from their homes to reach the

stadium, however this involved the crossing of one major road, the Old Kent Road, a symbolic crossing into an area they did not feel safe in, and that was beyond their usual urban trajectories. An idea started to build on that first day among the residents and their supporters, that the intimidating and off-putting location had been chosen purposefully by the Council to discourage residents and their supporters from participating in numbers.

Loretta Lees, an urban geographer and gentrification scholar who attended the inquiry as an expert witness, has written that the location was chosen to deter protests (Lees and Hubbard 2020). Whatever the institutional reasons might have been to choose such a symbolically charged location for the inquiry, some of the objectors understood this choice as a form of spatial exclusion – a coded message that reinforced the inquiry’s adversarial set up. Not only is the football stadium out of the residents’ way, in an area of light industry not served by buses, and with a history of racism and aggression; the space of ‘Arry’s bar had to be transformed from a venue dedicated to sociality and beer drinking during football matches, into a legal space that could reflect the logics of an adversarial trial.

The architectural space of the courtroom is predicated upon creating divisions between internal and external areas, and between insiders and outsiders (Mulcahy, 2011). The transformation of Arry’s bar into a courtroom took place through the creation of separate areas via the placement of furniture (chairs and tables), and via the positioning of these in relation to the exits. A small welcome table at the entrance was the place to sign oneself in: a security guard took everyone’s name and contact details, and ushered people in. Immediately after the entrance, was the area dedicated to the objectors. Further along sat the inspector, and the area for the local administration was at the far end of the room, the furthest away from the entrance doors. The council administrators also had access to a private area behind their desks, where a photocopier was located, and perhaps other amenities. Facing both sides was the public gallery, comprising about 10 rows of chairs.

As any other court and para-judicial setting, the spatial arrangements established, demarcated and separated the two parties who confronted each other during the inquiry. Locating the council’s desks at the far end of the room, effectively created no-go areas for the residents and the spectators. On the other side of ‘Arry’s bar, the objectors’ area was placed right after the entrance, so that anyone entering the room had to shuffle past the objectors from behind, and could peek at the people, the documents on the tables, at their notes and personal belongings. In one way this spatial arrangement reflected the objectors’ marginalised status within the inquiry, but it also spatially visualised the objectors’ failure to comply with the juridical field’s foundational requirement of access – the possession of professional expertise and a clear division of roles within the team. The makeshift nature of the space meant that the boundaries between areas were sometimes

violated and became more fluid than they would have been in a dedicated space with built-in furniture and fixed dividing features such as ramps, walls and screens. Roles of objectors and their quasi-legal representatives, witnesses, expert witnesses, and supporters in the public gallery were not as clear cut and defined as the process would have demanded, and this was reflected spatially. The separation within the judicial field between those competent to speak and those who are not hinges upon the membership to a professional class that is trained in the language and demeanour of the court (Bourdieu 1987). The distinction between specialists and non-specialists, dominated the first phase of the inquiry at 'Arry's bar.



*Image 20 ALAG objectors at the inquiry*

## **5.5 Imbalance of Power**

Once everyone had settled in, the inspector opened the proceedings and asked the parties to introduce themselves.



*Image 21 Southwark Council's legal team opens proceedings*

Melissa Murphy: As you can see from the sheet, I am Melissa Murphy QC from Francis Taylor Building, I am instructed by the director of legal services of the London Borough of Southwark. My intention is to call the following witnesses, and in the order I have listed them, Madam, as has already been notified to your case officer.

[ MM lists the Council's witnesses, their role, she summarises the points they will cover and what documents they submitted to the inquiry.]

MM: Madam, in accordance with the ordinary procedure, and indeed as suggested procedurally by your case officer, it is our intention to use the summaries as, largely, the evidence in chief, and to take, subject to you being happy with it, the evidence as read.

Inspector: Thank you.

MM: I am grateful.

Inspector: Who appears for the qualifying objectors?





*Image 22 The objectors introduce themselves*

Anne: I am Anne Smith, I am the spokesperson of the Leaseholders Action Group

Inspector: Ms Smith, I can hear you, because I am quite close, but I don't know how easy...

AS: Can everybody else hear me?

MM: I actually can't hear very well. The acoustics in here are not brilliant, we will have to do our best to...

Inspector: Can we take a break at some point to get a microphone? There are some people who are not used to speaking in a large room, and it might be useful to have a microphone.

Sorry, Anne Smith, and you are...?

AS: A leaseholder on the order land.

Inspector: And are you a spokesperson for those putting their case jointly?

AS: I was initially spokesperson for the group, but today we have such a volume of information, that loads of the local people got together in our group and are going to support me today to support my case.

Inspector: Right.

AS: I am not a trained lawyer, I am not a councillor, not an architect, I am just a leaseholder.



*Image 23 The inspector addresses the objectors*

Inspector: No, absolutely. So what I want to know, and I don't know if you fully appreciate why I needed to know it, is what witnesses you got, who is going to speak and what they are going to cover. (...)

AS: Can I pass that over to 35% Campaign to...?

Those first minutes of the inquiry revealed the glaring unequal standing between the parties. The difference was one of legal expertise, as well as of a knowledge of the unspoken norms, bodily attitudes and comportments of the inquiry setting. Whilst the council displayed a clear demarcation of professional boundaries and roles, a deep knowledge of the inquiry systems and procedures, and an ease with the language and demeanour of the setting, ALAG members and their supporters did not. A member of the 35% Campaign, an experienced trade union rep in his workplace, took on the role of representative, but despite his skill and confidence in handling the dealings with the inspector and Southwark council's barrister, he was not a legal professional and did not possess the "technical mastery" of the profession (Bourdieu 1987, p. 828).

## **5.6 Lay Experts**

The Aylesbury objectors presented a collective case under the umbrella of the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group (ALAG), spearheaded by its founding member and chairperson Anne. ALAG had first emerged as HALAG, the Heygate and Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group: the Heygate estate, located just north of Aylesbury, had gone through its own regeneration/demolition and had been the centre of a large housing and anti-gentrification campaign (Lees and Ferreri,

2016; Ferreri, 2020). Heygate leaseholders had precipitated a public inquiry for their case too, and the experiences and expertise they had developed informed what they became ALAG.

Anne, like the Heygate leaseholders, had over the years acquired specialised knowledge about the regeneration, becoming a “lay expert” (Epstein, 1996). When I visited Anne in her flat in Chiltern House, it was common to find her surrounded by files and piles of paper documents, marked with post-it notes, highlighted, underlined, and scribbled on. She, like other Aylesbury residents who refused the demolition/regeneration, felt like she had no choice but to spend time researching and investigating the process that she was unwittingly part of.

In order to officially contest any decision taken by the local authority about the regeneration, residents have to use an objection system which hinges on being able to access, process, understand and criticise documents couched in jargon that refer to specialised policies and practices. The homeowners, many of whom come from working-class backgrounds and some of whom (but by no means all) have limited formal education, find themselves operating within an unequal playing field, in a regime that hinges on expert knowledge, access to documentation and reliance on valuers, planning and policy experts, and legal representation. Homeowners on housing estate are in the main excluded from such circuits of knowledge circulation, and feel routinely dismissed, unheard, out of their depth and patronised by council officials, politicians and housing developers. They often also lack the financial resources to be represented by lawyers or valuers on an ongoing basis. To complicate matters, residents had to contend with what Jerry Flynn of the 35% Campaign has defined as the “Council’s boosterism: the drumbeat of positivity that accompanies regeneration. This is created by council/ developer publicity, and the general consensus amongst decision makers that regeneration, ultimately, is a ‘good’ thing” (Jerry Flynn in a comment to this chapter, 5/2/2024).

The work that Anne and other lay expert residents undertake, to both self-educate and to refuse the logics of regeneration/demolition, is intensive and all consuming. It is a work that takes its toll mentally and physically, with lay experts often speaking of how tired, overwhelmed and anxious they were. It impacted their health, physical and mental – some spoke about having difficulties sleeping, others about weight gain and back aches. Anne, like many others, often had periods during which she was unable to leave the house, exhausted, worried and stressed. The constant sense of being in a battle with the local authority and the developers, of not receiving answers, of being denied access to key pieces of information, of having arguments ignored, and of being lied to, had ongoing repercussions. In addition, often these embattled residents were among the last still living in increasingly empty and neglected buildings, with ongoing infrastructural breakages threatening their safety and wellbeing.

Anne and ALAG as a group had long been aware that they were not able to contest the buy-back and the expropriation of their flats alone. Despite her highly competent and confident demeanour, Anne was a non-professional taking on a barrage of experts capable of mobilising knowledge, experience, access to resources and contacts that her and the other homeowners just did not possess.

Despite the systematic exclusion from expert circuits of knowledge, ALAG members were however able to use tactics and strategies that allowed them to engage with the system on its own terms. At the public inquiry, Anne and ALAG were successful at creating and mobilising a wide network of supporters that could help them argue and defend their case: four leading housing academics were enlisted as expert witnesses, a retired local politician helped with procedural and legal matters, and the Southwark based housing campaign group 35% Campaign acted as their representative, in lieu of a legal professional. ALAG, through Anne's skilled networking and outreach efforts, had surrounded itself with a range of experts from different fields and experiences, to increase their chances of levelling the field in the frame of the public inquiry. While these supporters participated with their own motives, most of them were interested in arguing against the public interest case of the Aylesbury regeneration/demolition, and in wider terms, against the drive to demolish or privatise housing estates more generally.

In effect, the objectors' case, as we will see, was based on both the individual homeowners' predicament, as well as a general critique of a specific political and economic trend towards a divestment from public housing nationally. ALAG was able to leverage the interest of activist and community groups towards their case, because engaging in the public inquiry represented an occasion to challenge the regeneration/demolition logic in a legal and institutional setting, which had the potential to create a precedent for other similar cases nationally. However, ALAG members were also, and maybe principally, engaged in the inquiry as individuals who desperately wanted to protect their properties from expropriation. At the outset of the inquiry these two different motives aligned, and a strategic, potent, if somewhat unstable, alliance came into being.





### 5.7 An Unlikely Web of Support

35% Campaign is a small grassroots group formed of homeowners, residents and council tenants from Southwark that aims to scrutinise Southwark Council in its delivery of social housing. Their very name, 35% Campaign, refers to the minimum legal requirement of social housing that should, according to local planning policy, be delivered as part of any new housing development. 35% Campaign campaigned actively during the regeneration and demolition of Heygate estate and together with Heygate residents and other anti-gentrification campaigners such as Southwark Notes mounted a fierce battle against the demolition and compulsory purchase of the last Heygate flats in 2012. They succeeded in creating a powerful counter-narrative to refute the council's logic of regeneration/demolition, working against stigmatising images of structurally unsound 'sink estates', making the Heygate case well known to a wider public, transforming the empty site into community gardens, holding events and becoming a thriving community and activist power spot. One of the ways in which they campaigned was as objectors in the public inquiry for the compulsory purchase of the last flat on the Heygate estate. They were ultimately not successful in contesting the compulsory purchase order, and the Heygate was demolished and replaced largely by private housing, however in the process they developed expertise and knowledge about CPO public inquiries (Lees and Hubbard, 2020). Despite the ultimate failure to save the estate from demolition, the Heygate campaign and the work of 35% Campaign was greatly influential in developing a critique of regeneration/demolition of housing estates. This accumulated knowledge then fed into other campaigns, including the Aylesbury's. 35% Campaign members offered their support to help ALAG, sharing their extensive knowledge of the process and their insight into the regeneration regime. One of the practices they are most known for is the publication of regular blog posts <sup>11</sup> through which they disseminate their precise and painstaking investigative research into council documents and figures, making the largely inscrutable documents legible for a lay public. Their writing is widely referred to and quoted in the field of critical regeneration and

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.35percent.org/>

gentrification studies. Operating chiefly through a thoroughly researched blog and newsletter, 35% Campaign also uses the institutional system to present objections, as well as organising public meetings and demonstrations around regeneration and urban development issues locally.

Alongside 35% Campaign, ALAG was supported and informally represented by Toby Eckersley, a retired local conservative politician. A firm believer in Thatcher's Right-to-Buy and in the leaseholders' rights not to be deprived of their right to private ownership, he had been supporting ALAG and Anne specifically for some time. When I interviewed him in the front room of his Victorian terraced house in east Walworth, a few kilometres north of the Aylesbury, he told me he felt an affinity with the Aylesbury leaseholders because he succeeded in overturning a compulsory purchase order on that very house in the 1970s. He defended his own case, and still conserved the paperwork, reams and reams of papers held in dusty folders on a bookcase. Crucially, Toby had also followed the turns and developments of the Aylesbury regeneration in various official roles and guises while he was in office. He had therefore invaluable institutional historical memory related to this specific regeneration project; a first-hand experience of compulsory purchase; and knowledge of the procedures and laws relating to it. He took a keen interest in the leaseholders' case and spent many years deeply immersed in their cause, up until his untimely death in 2018. In 'Arry's bar, he also brought the cultural capital of someone adept at navigating institutional setting, and its attendant speech manners and confidence, together with his knowledge of the details of the case.



*Image 24 "His experiences and class background meant that he was not in the least bit intimidated by the procedures or the personalities, which, aside from being valuable in itself, gave everyone else confidence." Jerry Flynn of 35% Campaign on Toby Eckersley.*

In addition, representatives from the rich network of groups operating in Southwark who are critical of the urban regeneration projects across the borough, attended the inquiry and lent support. The Peoples Republic of Southwark, Southwark Notes, Defend Council Housing at times sat in the public gallery and observed, asked pointed questions and blogged about the inquiry. ALAG became embedded in this existing and ever evolving landscape of locally grounded groups who organise, research and produce media with a focus on "the right to the city".

Jane Rendell, an architectural historian and local Southwark resident who supported ALAG as an expert witness, wrote that on the occasion of the inquiry, 'Arry's bar became a "social condenser":

"(...) a new form of life did emerge through those sessions, fragile and transitory; who knows whether it can be maintained. 'Arry's Bar became a spatial repository for a critical opposition to the 'slow violence' enacted through Southwark's state bureaucracy. An unlikely group of people came together to resist Southwark's institutional brutality" (Rendell 2017, p. 17).

Rendell detected the strength that this unlikely alliance produced, whilst also presciently recognising its temporary nature. The network of solidarity was formed during the inquiry, and shaped by the need to develop a strong case against the compulsory purchase.

## 5.8 The Case

Compulsory purchase regulation in the UK recognises that the power of the State to expropriate individual property breaches article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which states that "Everyone has the right to respect for his (*sic*) private and family life, his home and his correspondence" (2021, p. 11). Whether this breach is justified on the grounds of a wider public interest is open to legal contestation. The convention itself caveats the article itself with the following point:

There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. (*idem*)

British compulsory purchase guidance, as encapsulated in the Crichel Down Rules (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities 2015) operates along similar lines, succinctly stating that compulsory purchase must be underpinned by a "compelling case in the *public interest*" (page na, emphasis mine), to "help deliver social, environmental and economic change". At the centre of the inquiry was therefore a

fundamental debate about how public interest is understood in the context of urban development, and how social, environmental and economic change is conceptualised. Evidently, the acquiring authority and the objectors defined those in differing ways.

After introductions and discussions about procedure, the inquiry proper started with Melissa Murphys' opening submissions. She summarised the Council's case, which was shaped in response to the objectors' critiques as presented in the preliminary evidence delivered before the start of the hearing. The Council's arguments responded to five main areas of contention: efforts to acquire the land by agreement; compliance of the plans with the planning framework for the area; the wellbeing impacts of the redevelopment; the financial viability of the project; and the absence of alternatives to the redevelopment plan. The witnesses that were called to present evidence relating to each of these points were Southwark Council employees responsible for the project, and included the Head of Regeneration, the Social Home Buy Manager, the Design Lead, as well as the Director of Regeneration at Notting Hill Housing, the housing association tendered with the redevelopment. After being led through their evidence by Murphy, the objectors cross-examined them. 35% Campaign's cross-examination focused on the loss of social housing (through demolition) and the lack of re-provision of social housing in the redevelopment. In particular, they contested the terminology used to define rent affordability, arguing that the loss of social rented housing was being obscured by using the terms like affordable and target rent.

The second important pillar of 35% Campaign's argument pertained to the adherence to Section 106 agreements between the Council and, in this case, the developer Notting Hill Housing. Section 106 agreements legally bind developers to planning obligations, such as the delivery of community amenities or subsidised housing delivery, and they are written alongside planning applications for land development. 35% Campaign argued that Southwark Council's record of tracking and implementing these agreements was poor and provided evidence to that effect.

35% Campaign's argument, underpinning this line of questioning, was that the loss of social housing through demolition and redevelopment would not improve the area's social and economic wellbeing. The objectors' case was wide in scope, and it looked beyond the technicalities of the Aylesbury FDS CPO and beyond the specificities of the homeowners' cases, to include critiques of the very rationale underlying the processes of urban renewal through 'redevelopment' (to mean demolition and rebuilding of existing social housing) – in this case with a critique of the mechanisms through which social housing is replaced by less affordable tenures in urban regeneration projects.





*Image 25 Giving evidence for Southwark Council*

Testifying for the objectors', academics Ben Campkin, Jane Rendell and Loretta Lees delivered an overarching dissection of urban regeneration from different disciplinary perspectives. As Epstein wrote in *Impure Science*, "the sociology of knowledge (...) identifies credibility and trust as the very underpinnings of scientific knowledge-production" (1996, p.14). One of ALAG's main challenges rested on the ability to present itself as a reputable party with credible advocates and expert witnesses who could authoritatively present a case that would stand the test of the inquiry frame. Within the adversarial litigation structure, expert witnesses appointed by the parties give evidence and are then cross-examined by the opposing party – as Sheila Jasanoff writes, in this system, the adjudicator is presented with "two carefully constructed representations of reality, each resting on a foundation of expert knowledge but each profoundly conditioned by the culture of expert witnessing as it intersects with the interests, ingenuity, and resources of the proffering party" (1997, p. 45). The academic expert witnesses presented material critical of regeneration projects which emerged from qualitative social science research in the fields of geography and architectural history, some of which was based on data collected from the same homeowners and estate residents sitting in the objectors' chairs and in the public gallery. The academic experts' role therefore was on one level to provide an analytical frame to interpret the data. In addition, their role was also to legitimise residents' experiences and to lend credibility to it through their established professional positions.

Ben Campkin, Jane Rendell and Loretta Lees' scholarship was not only central to the inquiry, it is also key for this thesis and it contributes to shaping my approach and theoretical framework. Therefore, when I outline the content of their witness statements, I am describing the objectors' legal case, whilst concomitantly also providing an overview of the academic critiques of New

Labour's urban regeneration programme and its ideological underpinnings. While this might be an unusual literature review, it is one steeped in the very processes that it aims to describe. This foundational scholarly research is not accessed only through academic articles and books here (although I do provide the relevant references in the text). Rather, I set it within the adversarial site of the inquiry, under the scrutiny of the local authority, central government (as represented by the Inspector), the residents (many of which were respondents in the very research described), and the many onlookers in the public gallery, who included other researchers, filmmakers, journalists, and housing activists. I use a mix of direct quotations, paraphrasing and referencing to convey the main arguments, without forgetting to evoke the atmosphere in 'Arry's Bar at key moments.

Ben Campkin was the first expert witness who gave evidence for the objectors. Campkin, as requested, opened his statement by providing his credentials – an architectural historian affiliated with University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture, he authored *Remaking London*, a study on urban regeneration in London (Campkin 2013). His submission to the inquiry was an abridged version of the book's chapter 4, which focuses specifically on representations of the Aylesbury Estate.

"This research project looked at the way that representations of decline and urban blight work within regeneration processes, so the effects that they have. I looked at different scales of regeneration, from the informal to the formal, from 1920s slum clearances right up to the Olympics. (...)

The main argument that I put forward in this book is that the practice of regeneration has shifted from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> from a focus on public health and housing need, to a term that sort of covers different forms of urban development, and often we see regeneration displacing communities, and the way this works is often through these processes of demonising certain places through negative stereotyping imagery and rhetoric."

(Ben Campkin's inquiry evidence, 30 April 2015)

Campkin then outlined the most prominent architectural, mediatic and political representations of the Aylesbury estate that have shaped a discourse of failure, which has in turn been mobilised to justify the need to regenerate and demolish it. This included a discussion of Defensible Space theories (which I look at in detail in chapter 4, Interrupted Flows), as well as an analysis of Tony Blair's visit to the Aylesbury in 1997. This, according to Campkin, gave rise to a renewed wave of negative media articles on the estate, and it also tethered the Aylesbury regeneration to the New Labour project, so much so that "Aylesbury became the barometer for New Labour's efficacy".



*Image 26 Ben Campkin explains the significance of the demolition of Pruitt Igoe to the inquiry: “This picture in architectural theory represents, according to certain architectural theorists, the end of modernism, of the fall of architectural modernism.”*

Campkin grounded his analysis of the Aylesbury in wider historical trajectories. In particular he focused on the demise of architectural modernism and how it has been represented in visual form:

“Perhaps one of the most famous images in architectural history, shown to every single architecture student who ever trained; it’s a press image of the Pruitt Igoe estate in St Luis, Missouri, being demolished. Or arguably, that’s what we are seeing (...) This picture in architectural theory represents, according to certain architectural theorists, the end of modernism, of the fall of architectural modernism. This image of demolition stands in for all these other perceived problems of architectural modernism. This picture makes us forget all the difficult complex processes around estates.”

(Ben Campkin’s inquiry evidence, 30 April 2015)

At the end of the 20-minute presentation, a spontaneous applause rose from the public gallery and from the objectors’ side of the room. Inspector Coffey was quick to gently but firmly issue a reprimand:

“I appreciate your feelings but it’s not really appropriate to clap during the public inquiry, so if for future witnesses you could avoid it, that would be good.” (Inspector Coffey, 30 April 2015)

During Campkin’s cross-examination, Melissa Murphy pursued a line of questioning that aimed at establishing what she called “inherent flaws” in the design of the estate. It included questions about

the scale of the high-rise blocks; the estate's alleged lack of integration with the surrounding environment; the separation between pedestrian and vehicular traffic; of access to dwellings; and crimes statistics. Ms Murphy concluded her cross-examination with a pointed question: "You are acknowledging, aren't you, that there are shortcomings in the way the estate was built?" An increasingly irritated Campkin continued to redirect the barrister to his evidence, as he refused to pass a simplistic judgement on design issues that were at the basis of the Councils' case for demolition.

Melissa Murphy: Many elements of its layout, such as its walkways, contribute to crime and safety. Do you agree or disagree with that?

Ben Campkin: I have seen no evidence of it (...). That was the point of my statement, if you read my statement, that these are under-evidenced arguments that come from a history of under-evidenced arguments being applied crudely to particular estates.

(Ben Campkin's cross-examination, 30 April 2015)



*Image 27 Southwark Council's legal team confer.*

Loretta Lees introduced herself as professor of Human Geography at the University of Leicester and as "what some people might call an international expert on urban regeneration". She presented a critique of some of the principles underpinning the Aylesbury regeneration. Her main arguments regarded the "mixed community policy" and the issue of resident displacement and gentrification, which are drawn from her research, some of it based on interviews with Aylesbury residents (Lees 2011).

What this statement does today is to question the decision taken by Southwark Council to redevelop this particular estate as a newly built "mixed community". Key to my argument is that

mixed community policy leads to processes of gentrification and also displacement and that this is not in the public interest of either the Aylesbury estate tenants, nor indeed of London more generally. (Loretta Lees' inquiry evidence, 1 May 2015)

She traced a history of the mixed community policy from its inceptions in the USA in the 1990s, through to New Labour's embracing of it.

In the late 1990s in the development of New Labour's Urban Renaissance agenda, council estates here played symbolic and ideological roles as a signifier of a spatially concentrated and supposedly dysfunctional underclass. (Loretta Lees' inquiry evidence, 1 May 2015).

The New Deal for Communities (NDC) became the keystone regeneration programme that aimed to fix this supposed dysfunctional concentration of poverty through the concept of mixed communities, and the Aylesbury Estate was included in the first round of NDC funding in 1999. Lees explained the ideological underpinnings of mixed communities thinking, which posits that middle-class presence is positive – socially, economically and even culturally, and the benefits that middle class residents bring eventually trickle down to poorer strata of the population. Lees argued instead that mixed community policies as they have been implemented, produce gentrification. She referenced Marcuse's seminal work on displacement to ground her critique (Marcuse, 1985).



Image 28 Loretta Lees presents 'Aylesbury displacement maps' to the inquiry.

During the cross-examination, Murphy asked whether Lees' critique amounts to nothing less than a fundamental disagreement with national and local urban planning policy (as mixed community policy is inscribed in policy documents such as the London Plan and the Aylesbury Area Action Plan): *"Aren't you fundamentally just disagreeing with all levels of development plan: regional, national planning policy?"*

Lees retorted that the wordings used in mixed community policies are too generic to determine any specific outcomes, and it is in their specific implementations that their detrimental effects are shaped.

Jane Rendell, professor of Critical Spatial Practice at the Bartlett School of Architecture and widely published author, presented yet another angle. She prefaced her main arguments with a point about representation and public funds:

While much legal aid is being withdrawn, Southwark Council have access to fully trained lawyers who I assume are paid for with public funds so one of the questions I would ask is, is it in the public interest to use public funding to pay for a legal team whose work is focused on dispossessing people of their homes, both tenants and leaseholders, who bought their properties in good faith, from the very vendor who is now seeking to demolish the homes it sold.

(Jane Rendell, 1 May 2015).



*Image 29 Jane Rendell gives evidence*

Following on from this point, Rendell delivered one of her key arguments, which hinged on the demolition and reconstruction of the estate being underpinned by a private interest motive, with land developers profiting from the operation.

As London property prices have been leveraged to unsustainable levels, the motive for unearthing the potential of public land, which depends on the demolition of public housing estates, is to open them up for private investment rather than the greater public benefit, and this is the context for the use of CPOs to acquire the leaseholders' properties.

(Jane Rendell, 1 May 2015).

Moving from this overarching critique of the underlying logic of housing estate regeneration/demolition, she then zoned in on the particulars of the case, by questioning the decision taken in September 2005 by the Council cabinet to demolish the estate, rather than to refurbish it. Her research into publicly available documents revealed the absence of a cost-benefit analysis that compared the economic, social and environmental cost of both options.



*Image 30 Judi Bos looks through the case folders at the inquiry*

In contrast to the expert witnesses who base their claim to knowledge on their professional expertise, residents living in the area affected by the compulsory purchase were classed simply as ‘witnesses’. Their own lived experiences formed the basis of their evidence. However, many resident witnesses combine personal narratives with research findings, based on desk research into publicly available documents, correspondence with the local authority and so forth. The role of legal professionals is to guide witnesses through the presentation of their testimony. Through this process personal experiences undergo a process of translation that makes them legible within the adversarial legal process. In the absence of legal representation, witnesses read out their statements, unguided.

Judi stepped up first. She summarised her history – she bought her flat on the open market, and in the early days of the regeneration she supported it by running an NDC funded young people’s scheme. After moving abroad for 9 years and renting out the flat, she returned to find a letter on her floor announcing the compulsory purchase. She argued that the council did not engage in negotiations regarding the purchase:

The council never negotiated with me. They offered me £10K less than what my property was actually worth in 2005 when I had it valued. I tried to negotiate with them, and I failed.

(Judi’s inquiry statement, 30 April 2019).

She spoke in detail about her efforts throughout the years to have the offer increased. During this time she also continued to monitor property prices and the land tribunal cases that the council was engaged in to resolve value claims.

For two years a website (Southwark Council's website) was telling everybody around the world that on the Aylesbury estate, a three-bedroom place was only worth £140-150.000 (...) Now we have an estate that has been in blight for a decade. We are sitting here a decade later, when the work could have finished, and refurbished.

(Judi's inquiry statement, 30 April 2015).

I return here to Anne's statement (almost) in full, to convey her multifaceted arguments as well as the strong emotion that accompanies her deposition. This self-directed statement will also provide a point of contrast with her experience on the witness stand at a later time, when her barrister helped her deliver her evidence again.

In 2001 the London Borough of Southwark proposed that the Aylesbury estate was to be refurbished. This proposal was strongly supported by residents: refurbishment would have been in the public interest, and for the wellbeing of the current community and the residents of the Aylesbury. (...) I signed on the dotted line to sign on the transaction of my property, then I became aware that my property was to be demolished. My property became immediately blighted. You could imagine my shock and anxiety. I felt like I had been deceived. I know I was given a discount for the property, and I was informed that if I sold it back to the London Borough of Southwark, I would have to give back the discount. This I could not afford, so I was now between a rock and a hard place. I am faced with the immediate threat of losing my home due to compulsory purchase order. I love where I live and I find it to be a complete injustice and inequitable. The Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group stresses that no proper consultation was undertaken before the decision to demolish.

(...) Prior to living on the estate I spent many summers on the estate with my cousins, on Latimer, that was my first introduction to the Aylesbury, and those were fun years of my teenage life, running around the estate, networking in the bag wash laundry mat. My cousins continue to live in the area and I enjoy socialising with them. (...)

I made the decision to buy my home in 2003, and it was because I loved the area and being close to the largest park in South-East London, Burgess Park, was another attraction. Beautiful outside space and various elements, which is a wonderful place for family life as well as scenery. My future benefits and expectations would be met by having a home for life. The view from my kitchen, bedroom and front landing are breath-taking. I see all the major London tourist attractions, e.g. the London Eye, Big Ben, the Shard, Gherkin, Razon, St Paul's Cathedral, Canary Wharf, Stata Tower at the Elephant and Castle. That I will no longer... Anne breaks down.



Inspector: Take a moment if you wish. Do you want someone else to read the remainder of it?

Anne: No. [A fellow ALAG member sits next to her, and Anne continues reading through tears.] I will no longer be able to see these sights from my window if the compulsory purchase is granted. My family and friends come from all over the world to see the attractions and go back to their friends and talk about what spectacular views... Hold on a sec.

[She takes off her glasses and dries her eyes]

...what spectacular views their friend and cousin has in London. People saying this was such an ugly and deprived estate, then why do people come to see it from all over the world, basically. Because of all the unnecessary stress of the decanting and the hostility that comes with it, I have already suffered from severe health episodes, which fatally could result in a stroke or a heart attack. This is due to stress. My house if being taken away from me for a fraction of the cost I believe it is actually worth. This is a bitter pill to swallow. I am not in a position to get a mortgage, because of my age and being unemployed, not for any fault of my own but through redundancy, so the future is very bleak and the uncertainty of moving away from my life-long friends and family is killing me on a daily basis. My health continues to deteriorate, waiting for my home to be taken, basically. The properties I have seen go no way to meet the spacious element of my flat, the council taxes on these properties are more than the current property that I live in, moreover I will have to pay more money in transport to move to these properties or if I move out of the area I will have to find money to come to the area to attend my hospital appointments and other services. The negotiation with the London Borough of Southwark has been extremely difficult and the conduct of certain parties can be called into question. They do not treat people fairly and equitable. The money on offer cannot buy another property of the same size in my area. I am unemployed as I said and have restricted funds. The CPO is harming my prospects in the future. The threat of the compulsory purchase order has prevented me from performing my goals of future studies and impinged on my rights to family life and have a negative effect on my health. I know I am going on about this, but sometimes the council they lose sight of what the real issues are, it's all about profit making and not about people's health and people's lives. I am getting personal, but they do, they really do – I go on here: consequently, as the spokesperson of the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group, I have seen the devastating effects that this regeneration has on people. It has broken up whole families apart, many to lose their jobs resulting in children being out of school for months, moved into other areas and they can't get into schools basically. Many residents are concerned about losing their support networks and the health of those non visible vulnerable residents have deteriorated. The London Borough of Southwark has reneged on their promise to allow residents to return to the footprint of the Aylesbury estate; the London Borough of Southwark had initially stated that people would be allowed to return however subsequently I was informed that there was no right to return after redevelopment was completed. The intrusive means testing of leaseholders' finances is another issue that seems unfair. Forcing leaseholders who already own their own property outright to be means tested, I believe that my assessment should only be a matter of

affordability, and not force an individual to commit to something which is unsustainable once they have acquired it. The rehousing of secure tenants is not means tested. This is discriminatory. For the above reasons the CPO should not be granted.

(Anne Smith's inquiry statement, 30 April 2015)

Melissa Murphy's pointed cross-examination honed in on Anne's rehousing efforts, to disprove the charge that significant efforts to negotiate had not been made on the part of the local authority (efforts to negotiate being one of the requirements to allow a CPO to take place). With her questions Murphy tried to demonstrate that Anne had not engaged fully with the rehousing options offered by Southwark Council and Notting Hill Housing. Anne responded by refuting Murphy's claims.

Other 5 ALAG homeowners gave additional evidence, and more delivered written statements that were added to the case files for the inspector to consider. Victoria spoke on affordability: "The offer the council is giving us I don't think so I could afford to stay in the area. I am sorry for my English, it's not my first language". (Victoria's inquiry statement, 1 May 2015). Patrick (pseudonym), spoke about having his flat valued by a Council-appointed surveyor: "the best I can describe him is like a second-hand car salesman, he came up and kicked a few tiles, and then give me a big doom and gloom story about where I was living and he's glad he wasn't me. But we found out since that he wasn't actually RICS registered." (Patrick's inquiry statement, 1 May 2015). Amanda was next: "I have spent 27 years living in a cosmopolitan Southwark community, and paying my dues to Southwark Council. And how do they repay me? By issuing me a compulsory purchase order and making me indirectly homeless."

She continued with a reflection on the financial burden of legal processes:

"Southwark Council knows that not all leaseholders on the estates are in well paid jobs to afford a lawyer (...) They are using the court as their weapon to intimidate us.

(Amanda' inquiry statement, 1 May 2015)

By the third day of the inquiry the inspector accepted the arguments put forward repeatedly by the objectors, that the 'playing field' between the two parties was so deeply unequal that the inquiry could not possibly proceed under such conditions. Without professional legal representation, 35% Campaign and ALAG were not able to be competent players in the legal arena, where conflicts are transformed into "specialist dialogues" and "juridically regulated debate" between professionals (Bourdieu 1986, p. 830-831).

On 1 May 2015 the inspector granted a 10-day adjournment to allow ALAG time to secure professional legal advice, and raise funds to appoint a barrister. On 14 May the inquiry resumed, but the objectors, despite their best efforts, had not been able to find someone who was willing to represent them at such short notice. The objectors applied for a further adjournment. Jane Rendell argued:

“I take the point that the date for the inquiry was in the diary for a long time, and why wasn’t legal representation sought earlier (...) I don’t think anyone expected Southwark to come with full legal representation. There were very serious attempts to secure legal advice before, a solicitor did come forward (...) but the cost was prohibitive; at that point perhaps the leaseholders didn’t realise quite how important legal representation is in a situation which, quite frankly, is rather adversarial. So having started the inquiry it’s become absolutely clear that in order to be able to have a situation of equality of arms. I know this isn’t a formal legal inquiry, but it feels very much like one in form. I think it’s become absolutely apparent that if Southwark is to have legal representation that objectors also need some  
(Jane Rendell, 14 May 2015).

The inspector granted the objectors’ an additional week, during which they finally secured the support of a barrister who would provide some of the work for free. The objectors were back at the Den on 14 October, this time with Chris Jacobs as legal representative and with some additional experience of the legal space under their belts.



*Image 31 The inquiry resumes with Chris Jacobs representing the objectors*

Mr Jacobs had submitted a reworked statement of case, and a few witnesses stepped on the witness stand again with updated evidence. Jacobs lead the witnesses through their evidence though precise questions which elicited clear answers. These were statements that could be taken as evidence by the inspector under the logic of the law. In this way Jacobs was able to establish an argument through the delivery of unequivocally stated facts, which he supplemented with clarifications about the relevance of certain aspects of the evidence. Anne Smith's deposition under the guidance of Chris Jacobs is particularly interesting. Here is a short extract of her second deposition:

Chris Jacobs: When did you move into your flat?"

Anne Smith: In 1998

CJ: When was it that you bought your flat?

AS: In 2005

CJ: What attracted you to the estate?

AS: I liked living in the area, it was a good investment and I was also told that the estate was going to be refurbished. It was a long-term investment. The community was predominantly ethnic minorities from the Caribbean and from Africa, so I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it because I lived there as a tenant before I became a leaseholder.

(....)

CJ: You spoke of the ethnic make-up of the estate. Are you aware of the ethnic make-up of leaseholders on the estate?

AS: Currently in our group there was 11 objectors, of which 9 of them were from BME groups, ethnic minorities, and also we have people outside of the phase, who joined the group, and about 100% of them are BME as well.

(Anne Smith's inquiry evidence, 14 October 2015)

The importance of the line of questioning on the ethnic composition of the leaseholders for the case overall will become clearer further on. My point here is that Jacob's work was to mould the arguments and the witness depositions to fit into an evidentiary framework that could be used and decoded by the inspector, and in turn by the Secretary of State. Over the course of the following days a few witnesses were recalled to clarify some points, and to speak to new evidence that had been added to the inquiry documentation in the intervening months. Jane Rendell had further developed her arguments about the information that had shaped the Council's Cabinet to decide to demolish and redevelop rather than refurbish the estate in 2005, thanks to some new evidence that had come to light since her first statement.



*Image 32 ALAG leaseholder speaks to barrister Chris Jacobs*

Jacob's presence palpably altered the dynamics in the room, and made the case appear more coherent and streamlined. All questions and interactions with the inspector and the Council were now handled by him, making proceedings faster and less confusing. Chris also continued to work closely with the objectors, taking advice and direction from them about documentation and argumentation. After two and a half days in the Den's inquiry room, the Inspector closed the inquiry and went off to write her report to the Secretary of State.



*Image 33 Southwark Council's legal team leave the Den*

## 5.9 The Ruling

The time of waiting started. After the stress of the inquiry and the time spent preparing, now the outcome of Anne and ALAG's cases was in the hands of the Inspector, and of the Secretary of State who had the task of adjudicating on the case. After the 2015 general election, the Brexit referendum took place in June 2016, and shortly afterwards a new Prime Minister and cabinet took office. The decision announcement was postponed several times during this period of political upheaval.

Meanwhile, the squatters and housing activists who had originally occupied part of the uninhabited buildings in the First Development site in early 2015 continued to campaign in the local area and run a weekly information stall in the market. In early January 2016 a national housing march against the new Housing Bill passing through parliament was held, with a contingent of Aylesbury residents participating. March 2016 saw a local March for the Aylesbury, organised by Defend Council Housing, and it was followed by a renewed occupation within the FDS. Over the following months a series of small scale direct actions centred on housing justice took place across London, such as a protest at real estate company Savills' headquarter.

Whilst this widespread ferment around housing issues was taking place, for the most part ALAG homeowners did not get directly involved and continued to struggle with life in the First Development Site. Since the beginning of 2015 the area had been surrounded by a metal fence. Anne, Amanda, Judi and the other residents continued to enter and exit through two gates guarded by security personnel. Anne made some of her negative experiences during this time public through the local press – Southwark News run an article on her experience of being evacuated in the middle of the night due to a suspected gas leak, only to see her trapped in the lift upon her return from the hospital the following morning. A few months later another article focused on the lack of lighting in the corridors, lifts and stairwells<sup>12</sup>. She would also later speak of the problems that the discontinuation of the area's post code created – post was returned to sender and her bank account frozen on account of returned statements. After the intensity of the inquiry, time slowed down whilst anxiety and uncertainty set in.

It was almost a year after the last day of the inquiry, spent in this limbo of deteriorating material conditions, that the decision about the compulsory purchase was finally announced. On 16 September 2016 a letter from the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Sajid Javid arrived in the inboxes of all interested parties, announcing that he denied Southwark Council the permission to proceed with the compulsory purchase. In a blog post published a few

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<sup>12</sup> <https://southwarknews.co.uk/news/housing/8458-2/>

days later, the 35% Campaign announced the news as a “great victory” for the leaseholders and a “humiliating blow” for Southwark Council.

A flurry of emails and phone calls amongst ALAG’s support network ensued. “I still can’t believe it!”, one of objectors’ inside support team wrote in an email to me that day. The decision was widely reported on, with The Guardian<sup>13</sup> running a piece on it, as well as trade magazines Inside Housing<sup>14</sup> and Architect’s Journal<sup>15</sup>, and legal firms blogs like Hodge, Jones & Allens<sup>16</sup>. A feeling of shock exuded from the formal and informal commentariat over those first few days and weeks following the publication of the letter. The Architect’s Journal titled their analysis piece “Aylesbury Estate CPO ruling: what went wrong?”; Jayesh Kunwardia wrote that “The case has wider implications on similar social housing estates across London and the UK considered for large scale regeneration projects”. A blog post on the Herbert Smith Freehills LLP<sup>17</sup> website reports of a Southwark Council source describing the ruling as ‘bizarre’, and also considers it ‘surprising’.

Sajid Javid’s ruled that there was no ‘compelling case in the public interest’ to confirm the compulsory purchase order. The main ways the scheme failed to pass the test of public interest hinged on “Social, economic and environmental disbenefit to leaseholders” ; importantly, it stated that “The council has not taken reasonable steps to acquire land interest by agreement”. It appealed to the European Convention on Human Rights, stating that the breach of article 8 was not justified, because elderly residents would be particularly badly affected by their inability to secure a new mortgage. The most significant part of the letter however referred to the Public Sector Equality Duty: “The Order, if confirmed and the scheme if carried out would have negative and positive impacts on protected groups as a result of the proposal. The Secretary of State finds that, on balance, there are significant negative impacts on protected groups if the Order is confirmed.”. The protected groups that Sajid Javid agreed would be particularly badly affected were once again the elderly, children, and those from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BME). This is a theme that divided the Inspector and the Secretary of State: whilst Javid agreed with most of Coffey’s recommendations, this is one where he departed from her report. Inspector Coffey had in fact concluded that BME residents were not affected more adversely than white British residents – a point that Javid contradicted and for which he provided some additional explanation: “There is also likely to be a negative impact on their ability to retain their cultural ties, undermining their equality of opportunity with other ethnic groups (such as white British) who may not be so disproportionately affected. This is particularly so, in that white British culture is more widely-established across the UK, including at housing sites to which residents may be moved,

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/16/government-blocks-controversial-plan-to-force-out-housing-estate-residents?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/16/government-blocks-controversial-plan-to-force-out-housing-estate-residents?CMP=share_btn_tw)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/javid-rejects-aylesbury-cpo-bid-on-human-rights-grounds-48078>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/aylesbury-estate-cpo-ruling-what-went-wrong>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hja.net/expert-comments/blog/housing-help/compulsory-purchase-order-on-aylesbury-estate-in-southwark-blocked-by-government/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=7d876b71-cdee-48a9-ad05-240a210b0d82>

whereas minority cultural centres are often less widespread, which is likely to make cultural integration harder for those of BME origin who are forced to move than those of a white British origin.”

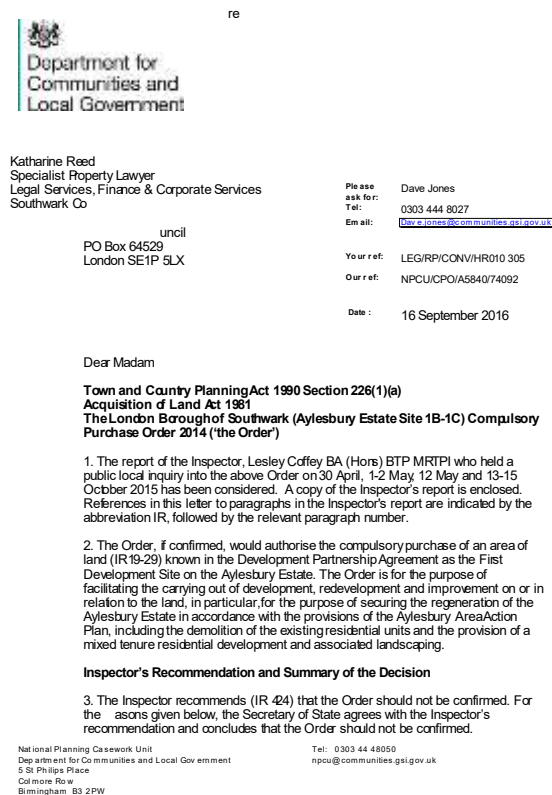


Image 34 Sajid Javid’s letter not confirming the CPO was sent to ALAG leaseholders on 16 September 2016

Despite not confirming the compulsory purchase order, the letter also established the Secretary of State’s positive view on the Aylesbury regeneration project, and on regeneration more generally: the scheme was considered economically viable and set to bring overall social and economic benefits. The letter concluded with a suggestion that with an amelioration of the offers to leaseholders, the order could be resubmitted and would most likely be confirmed.

ALAG leaseholders were surprised by Javid’s decision, but felt vindicated by his recognition of the disproportionate effect of the CPO would have had on those from ethnic minority backgrounds and those older leaseholders for whom securing a mortgage would be impossible. Of all the arguments presented to the inquiry, those were perhaps the ones that emerged most strongly from the personal testimonies of leaseholders. While the objectors’ team celebrated the win, it also waited on Southwark Council’s next move. Would they now call off the regeneration, refurbish the empty buildings and move tenants back in? That seemed rather unlikely. Would they make an improved rehousing offer to the leaseholders, perhaps with higher financial valuations, in line with local housing market prices?



Southwark Council appealed Sajid Javid's ruling through the High Court, arguing that in his statement he had not adequately considered a change the so-called '16K rule'<sup>18</sup> policy (35% Campaign, 8/5/2017)<sup>19</sup>. The outcome of the appeal was that on 21 April 2017 Javid signed a consent order for his 2016 ruling to be quashed, and he called for a fresh inquiry to re-examine the public interest of the scheme. 35% Campaign saw this as a renewed opportunity to contest the regeneration in an inquiry. It set up a fundraising campaign for this renewed legal effort which appealed to a 'Right to Community' for the leaseholders, thus aiming to introduce the recognition of the importance of collective neighbourly networks. This angle also aimed to firmly place the case beyond the private financial interests of homeowners, arguing thus that their loss was more than economic.

35% Campaign's extensive network of supporters, and the high visibility that the Aylesbury campaigns had had over the years, meant that the fundraiser was successful in raising approximately £30,000. Half of that sum coming from online contributions, and the other half from offline collections, a large amount by any crowdfunding standards. ALAG, 35% Campaign and their supporters were able to transform the case of the homeowners on First Development Site on the Aylesbury into a key battle ground in the housing justice movement and direct attention and resources towards it. 35% Campaign chronicled the case through its popular blog and social media, foregrounding arguments about Southwark Council's failure to deliver social housing and securing section 106 agreements. Arguably the widespread support within the housing justice movement was secured by making the story into an exemplar of the State-led gentrification of housing estates, a process that was familiar to many other estate residents and housing activists across London. In this sense, the FDS Aylesbury CPO inquiry became a symbol of much wider struggle against the estate regeneration schemes kickstarted by the New Labour's urban renewal programme. Jerry Flynn contends that the campaign was "seeding fertile ground", as ALAG's campaign build on decades of housing activism on Aylesbury and Heygate, which, he writes "left Southwark with a poor reputation on regeneration promises." (Flynn, commenting on a draft of this chapter, 5/2/2024).

The campaign catalysed interest even though at heart the case concerned a group of homeowners who had made use of the Right to Buy policy, arguably the most powerful tool in the privatisation of public housing (Mullins and Murie, 2006), of which many in the housing justice movement are deeply critical of. Despite this the equilibrium between the public case and the private interest of the homeowners held, and the underlying contradiction was kept at bay.

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<sup>18</sup> The '16K savings rule' required homeowners to reinvest all their savings bar £16,000 into any new property they might acquire through their rehousing schemes was lifted by Southwark Council just after the end of the public inquiry.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.35percent.org/posts/2017-05-08-aylesbury-cpo-what-has-really-happened/>

## 5.10 Living within Demolition



*Image 35 Chiltern House enshrouded in a white covering: November 2017*

The scheme was now running years behind. The regeneration timeline indicated that by 2017 the first residents would be moving into newly built houses on FDS. As I looked out of my window during the winter of 2017, I could see Chiltern House still standing, empty, covered in white sheeting, ready to be demolished. Only three leaseholders still lived in the area: Anne, Amanda and Judi. Their refusal to move before receiving what they considered an adequate level of compensation from an administration that continued to play hardball, had now contributed to delaying the entire project by a number of years. I wrote in my field notes that winter “the victories won so far by FDS leaseholders created more of a sense that ‘holding on’ is worthwhile. This logic is certainly working for Felix and Prudence, and Deji and Grace”, ALAG members who were at that stage negotiating the buy backs of their own properties in another area of the estate. At the same time, more and more of the original FDS objectors reluctantly accepted ameliorated relocation offers, as living conditions within the site continued to deteriorate. Anne, Amanda and Judi were holding on by their teeth, as they were now living in an almost abandoned area and struggling with frequent breakages to the lift services, lighting in communal areas and heating. As demolition work began within the fenced zone it brought its own share of disruption and nuisance.



*Image 36 The First Development Site*

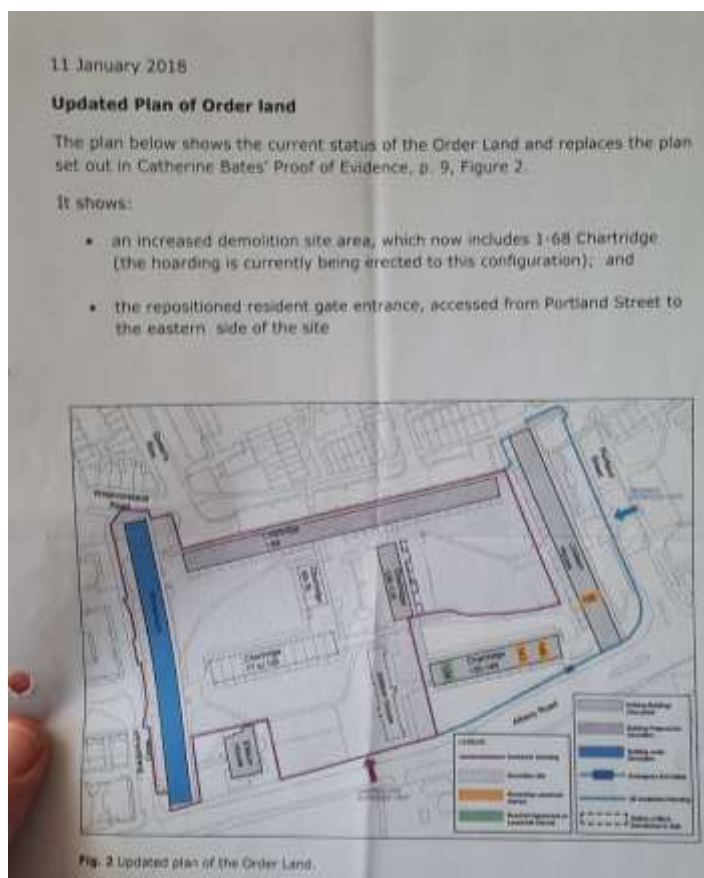


Image 37 A map of the First Development Site ('the order land') presented as evidence during the inquiry

## 5.11 The Revised Inquiry

The date for the second public inquiry into the compulsory purchase order for FDS site 1b/1c was set for 9 January 2018. In mid-December 2017, ALAG held its last meeting of the year in one of the last functioning community halls on the Aylesbury estate, Thurlow Lodge. Anne and Toby reminded everyone of the public inquiry starting on 9 January ("Unless it's postponed again between now and that date...!"). A few new ALAG members were going to testify for the first time, and everyone else was encouraged to show support by attending.

The revised inquiry had an overall different feel. The location was moved to Southwark Council's head offices in Tooley Street, in a bright, official, institutional location. Many of us had by this point become very familiar with the space, after attending cabinet meetings, demonstrations and private meetings with councillors and council workers on a regular basis. It seemed altogether a more fitting space, not the least because it is served by direct buses, it is near to cafés and supermarkets, and is fitted with conference microphones at each table, a PA system and on-hand tech support. On the first day, a detailed printed programme was distributed to all those attending, outlining the order of witnesses for the three-and-a-half-weeks that the inquiry was planned to sit for.



*Image 38 The second inquiry at Southwark Council's headquarters*

Chris Jacobs represented the objectors again, and everything felt much more professional, though not less emotional. Of the original 18 objectors at the inquiry in 2015, only 3 were left now – Judi, Anne and Amanda, with Judi representing herself, and Anne and Amanda, as ALAG, represented by Chris. Chris took charge of the legal direction of the case, and brought the necessary authority and skill, boosting the team's confidence. Regardless, 35% Campaign and ALAG continued to carry out a large amount of preparatory work, compiling document bundles, note-taking, attending late night meetings after each day's hearing to prepare for the next. While some of the stress was eased by professional representation, the level of commitment required continued to be very high.

We settled into the rhythm of the inquiry quickly. I sat in the public gallery audio recording, next to Toby who took notes, and typed them up every evening for the barrister and for the team. We spent recesses and breaks eating our packed lunches together with ALAG members, supports from other housing campaigns, researchers and journalists, and during these times chit chat flowed freely.



Since the first inquiry, 18 months prior in October 2015, both parties had refined and developed their arguments, informed by Sajid Javid's 2016 reasons for not confirming the compulsory purchase order, namely the concerns with the disproportionate negative impact on residents who were elderly or from ethnic minorities. The objectors had chosen to pursue arguments that would further the idea of a Right to Community. In addition to updated statements from Ben Campkin, Jane Rendell<sup>20</sup> and Loretta Lees (based on original research she had conducted in the intervening years with Aylesbury residents under the auspices of an Economics and Social Research Council grant on the effects of council estate renewal), the objectors had also secured statements from geographer Richard Baxter, who had conducted research with Aylesbury residents, and from academic and author Anna Minton, author of two major popular books on urban regeneration and land speculation (2012, 2017).

The local authority conversely had engaged two expert witnesses to carry out and present pieces of original research to respond to the objectors' key arguments: Michael Leary-Owin, an academic at South Bank university, produced a 'gentrification balance sheet' on the effects of the redevelopment; and James Beard produced an equalities assessment. I will return to these shortly. During her opening submissions, Melissa Murphy delivered a critique of the objectors' team, separating out the three remaining leaseholders from the campaigning groups supporting them. She summarised the three leaseholders' case as pertaining strictly to their property interest. She then stated:

“(Opposition to the compulsory purchase order) has been exaggerated for agitational reasons, by campaign groups and individuals whose principal points are not linked to the interests of the remaining leaseholders; their evidence contains a polemic, relentlessly negative approach to the assessment of the scheme that underpins the order.”

(Melissa Murphy in her opening submission, 9 January 2018).

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<sup>20</sup> Rendell did not get a chance to present her evidence after all, as we will see, however she published some of her case in Rendell 2019.

She argued that once the scheme was to be under way, this polemic criticism would fall away. What is notable here is the peremptory step towards discrediting those objectors' arguments that transcended the very tangible issue of individual leaseholder compensation, which provided a framework to understand the presentations that followed.

Commissioned and paid for by Southwark Council, Michael Leary-Owin produced a 'gentrification balance sheet' based on secondary sources in which he analysed the pros and cons of the redevelopment. His assessment was that overall the benefits would outweigh the disbenefits. Despite Leary-Owin's reliance on a limited range of secondary sources, his testimony held its sway with the inspector for providing what Melissa Murphy defined as "fair minded, balanced assessment". It aligned with an evidentiary logic which assigns veracity to those positioning themselves as neutral, impartial analysts – against which stand those objectors (and their witnesses, by implication) with 'relentlessly negative' attitudes, as per Melissa Murphy's opening statement.

Michael Leary-Owin's presentation also contained an analysis of the idea of community which made a mark with the objectors for it clearly aimed to undermine their Right to Community arguments. He posited the existence of two types of community, which he simply dubbed 'community type 1' and 'community type 2', the first place-based, and the other based on shared interests and distributed in space. In response to the idea of a right to community put forward by the objecting team, Leary-Owin downplayed the effects of the spatial displacement of residents by arguing for a nuanced understanding of community ties.

When Leary-Owin presented his thesis, I was sitting in the public gallery next to Felix, Prudence and Victoria. They found this analysis ridiculous, but had limited ways of expressing their views. For those in the public gallery, there was little scope to make their thoughts and feelings heard, and inspector Whitehead had reprimanded any reaction from the gallery harshly. Now it all started with barely repressed laughter, loud sighing and shaking of heads. Unable to repress her feelings any longer, Victoria loudly stomped out of the room. Unusually, the inspector asked if anyone had comments, and Felix blurted out "He is getting on my nerves, he is talking a lot of rubbish!" before also theatrically leaving the room. Felix, Victoria and Prudence were especially offended by Leary Owin's arguments about the residents' abilities to forge and maintain links and relations across spatial and temporal divides - which they knew well as diasporic Southwark residents - and his implication that place based connections are therefore expendable. A conversation with Felix, Victoria and Prudence about their lives would have revealed instead that they have had the skill and ability to both nurture transnational familial links and interest-based relationships (for example as members of faith communities), as well as place-based networks. These latter ones are not any less relevant in the presence of the former. Michael Leary Owin's superficial typification of

community elicited such a strong reaction in my neighbours because it was reductive. But it also struck a cord because it touched upon something real – a lack of alignment between the way the concept of community is used to elicit exclusionary sentiments of belonging, and the way these particular residents build collective networks of obligations, reciprocity, proximity and interests.

The second key evidence produced by Southwark Council was an equalities impact assessment produced by a global engineering, management and development consultancy firm, Mott MacDonald. Technical Specialist James Beard authored the report and presented the evidence. He argued that the redevelopment could negatively affect the remaining leaseholders on equality grounds, but that in his professional opinion, the Council had put in place sufficient measures to manage and to mitigate these impacts. Through these two expert witnesses, Southwark Council sought to address the motivations for Sajid Javid's ruling, and to disprove the right to community arguments.

The inquiry went into a break at the end of January 2018, and was due to resume in mid-April. In those intervening months, ALAG and Aylesbury Tenants and Leaseholders First met on a regular basis, responding to an acceleration in the rehousing of residents from the Taplow and Wendover blocks (phases 2 and 3 of the regeneration), and to the works on Plot 18 that affected other ALAG leaseholders.

On 3 April, the bombshell dropped: Judi was informed that Anne and Amanda had accepted a rehousing offer under a non-disclosure agreement, and that 35% Campaign had withdrawn their objections from the inquiry. The news spread like wildfire via phone calls and messages, with ALAG members shocked that they had not been informed of the new by their spokesperson.

Anne instead called a meeting for the following day. As we congregated in Thurlow Hall, anger and frustration boiled over. Toby and representatives from 35% Campaign explained that this was the best possible outcome for Anne, Amanda and all other leaseholders. The barrister had advised the objectors that they would not win the inquiry, and that striking a deal at this stage would assure the best possible result for Anne and Amanda, whom he represented. Crucially, the leader of Southwark Council Peter John had on 16 March approved modifications to its existing shared equity policy to leaseholders, introducing an equity loan option, which would make it possible for (eligible) leaseholders to own 100% of a council flat, while investing a minimum of 25% of the market value from the sale of their current flat and taking 'a charge' on the remaining portion. The council would, in effect, not charge for the proportion of the flat the leaseholder could not afford to buy (at least, not until the sale of the flat or the death of the leaseholder). The revised shared equity policy also introduced additional ameliorations, namely, in 35% Campaign's summary: "The required minimum equity share was reduced to 25% where previously it was 50%; the leaseholder



is not means tested or obliged to sink savings or their home loss payment into the scheme or re-mortgage; the Council covers in the additional Stamp Duty charges". The policy change had been negotiated as a direct effect of ALAG's arguments at the inquiry, and represented a distinct improvement on existing rehousing offers.

Despite these wins, many ALAG members felt betrayed by the settlement, and did not hesitate to express their feelings during that very tense meeting. Other members focused on understanding the details of the modified policy and its implications. Many were angry for two main reasons. First, the negotiations had been conducted without informing the wider ALAG membership, who felt their trust had been breached. ALAG leaseholders were all aware that settlements would be made at some stages, and there was a consensus that this was understandable and acceptable. However, they did object strongly to these decisions being taken in secret. Second, the equity loan policy was almost unanimously rejected as a significant improvement on previous offers, because of restrictive clauses regarding inheritance rights, subletting rights and the obligations to pay for major work charges. I will discuss why these details are crucial for leaseholders in chapter 7.

The following weeks and months were challenging - Judi had not been included in the deal and continued with the next phase of the inquiry. On 17 April the inquiry resumed once again, with Judi on the objector's side, with no legal representative, and no support from 35% Campaign. The Council's legal representatives moved through the case quickly and pointedly cross-examined Judi's few remaining witnesses. Judi was repeatedly put down and treated with contempt. She was then taken ill and failed to attend the last two days of the hearings. At this point the inquiry seemed to shift into a rote rehearsal of arguments, as the confirmation of the expropriation seemed now inevitable.

Indeed the Secretary of State gave the approval for the expropriation, and Judi's flat was compulsorily purchased. She continued to live there for another year after the hearings, waiting for the final decision to be published, and she finally and reluctantly moved out in April 2019. At the time of writing, six years after the end of the inquiry, she was still disputing aspects of the financial compensation she should receive and was waiting on a court to adjudicate on it. The settlement that Anne and Amanda entered created a rift that continued to mark ALAG's activities from there on; having lost their main leader, the leaseholders remaining in ALAG tried to reconstitute on different grounds. Over the years that the leaseholders of the First Development Site 1a/1b went through the CPO inquiry described above, the remaining leaseholders in later phases has also continued their own negotiations.

In particular, three lease holding households on Plot 18 had started to organise – and their histories are at the heart of the next two chapters, Second-Class Post and Home Investments.

While many were disappointed by ALAG's settlement, and the expropriation was ultimately approved, 35% Campaign and ALAG won two changes in Southwark Council's rehousing policy for estates undergoing regeneration - the scrapping of the 16K rule and the introduction of the equity loan. They also catalysed support for housing campaigning, and attracted media coverage. This campaigning moment built upon previous histories of struggle on Aylesbury and on neighbouring estate Heygate. It also created in the housing movement a sense of solidarity across different forms of tenure, as the campaign articulated the ways in which regeneration/demolition acted as a dispossessive force for leaseholders as well as tenants.

## **5.12 Conclusion**

The image of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project demolition that Ben Campkin displayed during the inquiry describes demolition as a one-off, spectacular event. It is my contention in this thesis that demolition requires much more than a wrecking ball and dynamite to come into effect – I conceptualise it as an assemblage of practices and processes ranging from the representational to the material to the bureaucratic. Different temporal regimes are at play within the demolition assemblage. The expropriation of homeowners is one of many practices required to accomplish demolition. The Aylesbury Leaseholder's Action Group engagement with the legal compulsory purchase process is one instantiation of residents' refusal to accept the expropriation, one that echoed well beyond the confines of the estate itself. The tempo of the quasi-legal procedure of the inquiry, which hinges the local administration's processes and timeframes, as well as those of central government, is marked by long periods of suspension and waiting, punctuated by relatively short but intense inquiry sittings.

ALAG, an informal group of diverse homeowners from minoritized backgrounds, catalysed the support of a wide network of organisations and individuals critical not only of the expropriations, but more widely of the project of housing estate regeneration and urban renewal, to fight their legal case. This resulted in a temporary and at times fragile alliance – one that rested upon a number of key tensions. The most fundamental remains the ambiguous position of homeowners who bought their council homes through the Right to Buy policy, at discounted prices, and who therefore implemented one of the most powerful privatisation drives ever seen in the UK. That exactly their struggle against the violence of expropriation would become the focus of a wider housing justice campaign remains an interesting conundrum, and one that complicates simplistic analyses of the forces and subject positions at play.

There are more tensions and contradictions to unpack here. For ALAG, engaging with the quasi-legal frame of the public inquiry was also predicated on a reliance on academics and activists who could turn 'experience' into 'fact'. The ability to 'act as an expert' in the inquiry rests upon social,

cultural and economic capital. If in one sense ALAG's lay experts challenge conventional ideas of where expertise lies, in another participation in the inquiry required a use of expertise defined along classed, racialised and professional lines. Moreover, securing the support of the solidarity network was also predicated upon ALAG members balancing their private interests with wider politicised arguments about the value of social housing, thereby their ability to fashion themselves into 'deserving victims' was as important as other types of advocacy work they might have been performing in this setting. Placing their demands against expropriation and/or for just compensation within wider collective demands was thus a necessary pre-requisite to catalyse support. However this would also be in tension with a private ownership model that is exquisitely individualised. In Chapter 7, Home Investments, I will focus on another group of homeowners whose strategy was based on collective negotiation.

I am not interested here in the positions of individual homeowners within ALAG as such – like any group, ALAG held together a range of interests. Some members were mostly focused on demanding a just financial compensation, while others were interested in questioning the Council's regeneration strategy more broadly. Rather, it is more interesting to ask what these various underlying tensions suggest about the contemporary moment in housing – out of a complex field "of force and contradiction" (Fortun, 2009, p. 53) an image of housing estate demolition in the present moment can start to emerge. What emerges is an image of the unstable subject position of a class of housing estate residents who, having accessed a modicum of social mobility through their investment of homeownership are then finding themselves denied it through a further privatising drive on the part of the local state, encouraged by central government policies.

A second consideration that emerges concerns the effect of the rise of property and land values. ALAG leaseholders bought their flats through the Right to Buy at subsidised prices. The prices offered to them in compensation exceeded these by many orders of magnitude. However these compensation figures do not enable homeowners to remain in the neighbourhood, or for that matter, in the city, as homeowners. Therefore in real terms they are dispossessed of property and community, and this speaks of the appreciation of land values and of large rent gaps (Smith, 1996) that characterise the neoliberal city. In the next two chapters of this thesis I continue to reflect on the position of leaseholders and on the creation and destruction of value as a key factor in the demolition assemblage.

## Visual interlude #5







## 6. Second-Class Post

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter and the next focus on a subset of ALAG leaseholders: three households who owned their flats on a small so-called family block, Northchurch (I use the shorthand 'Northchurch three' at times in the text). Northchurch was initially part of Phase 3 of the regeneration, but in 2015 was taken 'out of phase', added to the development of an area called Plot 18, and brought forward for demolition. The Northchurch three therefore negotiated with the council separately from the other ALAG leaseholders, because of the specific timing and situation of their particular buy-back. The Northchurch three continued to be part of ALAG and supported the ongoing public inquiries discussed in the previous chapter, and what they witnessed in those fora informed their actions.

This particular case study brought to the fore questions of racialisation, and of the relation to property ownership and to property dispossession for racialised working-class homeowners in particular. I open with an episode in which the three leaseholding households experience an administrative error in the way the expropriation order for their properties is progressed. A second-class stamp is used, rather than a first class one, and the homeowners are able to symbolically leverage the assonance between second-class post and second-class citizenry, in a way that is picked up by a local newspaper and amplified.

I argue that the ability to leverage this mistake hinges on a long history of racialised housing and property dispossession, that lies at the foundation of contemporary British liberal democracy. I start my argument by providing a definition of liberal citizenship and an overview of the way property rights are intrinsic to early formulations of citizenship. Brenna Bhandar's *The Colonial Lives of Property* (2018) - itself influenced by Cheryl Harris' *Whiteness as Property* (1993) - provides a guiding framework as I then examine the connection between property rights and race that was established in the early colonial period.

Subsequently I turn toward Hammond Perry's (2015) study on race, Black Britishness and citizenship to shift the point of view towards a perspective of struggle: the rights claims enacted by imperial subjects shaped a more expansive and grassroots understanding of citizenship and belonging to the British polity. The post-war history of spatial segregation along racial lines (of which I give an overview), is also a history of claims to home and space, and to the creation of distinct "black senses of place" (McKittrick, 2011), despite and within the marginalising dynamics at play. Here I return to the Aylesbury leaseholder's predicament in more detail. I provide an overview of the way scholarship has analysed contemporary housing estate redevelopment and its attendant displacement, and propose that the expropriation the leaseholders are subjected to



should be classed as racial banishment, in light of the history and trajectories outlined in the rest of the chapter.

Finally, I will delve into the strategies that ALAG homeowners have been using when faced with the threat of expropriation, and I argue that these can be understood as a politics of refusal: refusal of a denial of citizenship and personhood, which is leveraged in part by appealing to a discourse of individual rights, as well as collective ones. Homeowners in this context are appealing to the 'possessive individualism' of the right to own property, and insisting on the right to be included in the possibilities that ownership affords for social mobility and financial benefit. Concomitantly, and crucially, homeowners are also insisting on their right to *not be dispossessed* of their property. This additional layer brings with it a much more expansive understanding of the position of racialised working-class homeowners in this context – the homeowners do not simply assert their 'right to own' (in a liberal framework), but they *refuse* the logics of their racial banishment, which is predicated on the entanglement between personhood and property, and their historical denial.

## 6.2 The Deputation

On Tuesday 31 October 2017 I met with a group of ALAG members at the bus stop on Thurlow Street, the main thoroughfare on the estate, to catch the 136 bus to the council's headquarters in Tooley St, between the London and Tower bridges. From the upstairs seats of the double-decker we watched the imposing architecture of Wendover House on one side of the street, and of Taplow House on the other, pass us by. The bus then wound along its usual route through the Elephant Park building site, where once the Heygate estate stood; past Elephant and Castle, a major junction in the thralls of its own redevelopment; and further up towards the northern reaches of the borough of Southwark, close to the river Thames. The 20-minute bus journey seemed a whirlwind tour of urban regeneration and took us from the heart of the Aylesbury estate to an area of offices, national art institutions and upmarket dining: the contrast could not have been starker. We were nervous during that bus journey. Felix, a key member of the ALAG group, and a resident of the Northchurch block, was to deliver a deputation to the monthly council cabinet assembly. A few of the ALAG leaseholders had attended and spoken at one of these meetings before, but many had not. For Felix it was the first time delivering a deputation and speaking in front of the local administrators, and he was starting to feel anxious about it.

After clearing security at the Southwark Council headquarter, we entered the room together. The gathered assembly sat in a shoe horse formation: the leader of the Council Peter John in the middle, chairing the meeting, flanked by cabinet members and officers. We sat ourselves down in the public gallery, together with council workers, journalists and others waiting to hear the outcome of discussions and decisions, or to deliver deputations about one issue or the other. The agenda for the day featured 23 items, including number 11, on dog walkers in the local parks ("Introduction

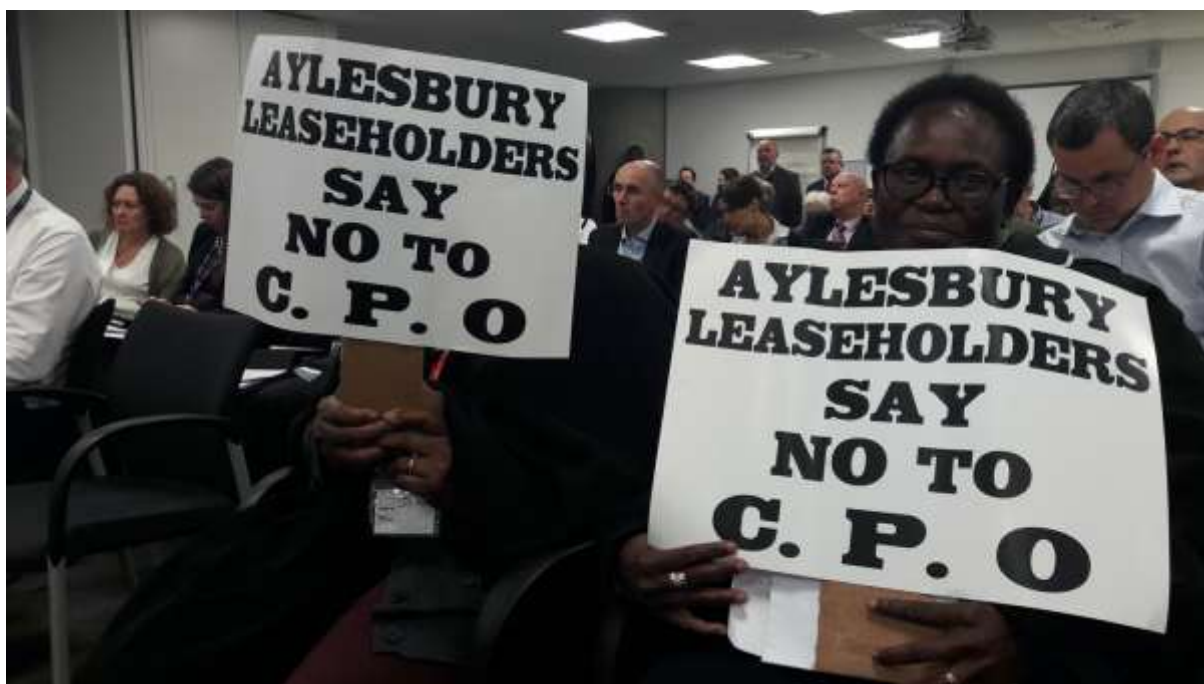
of public space protection orders to tackle dog related anti-social behaviour”), number 15, “Consideration of options for broadband in Rotherhithe and improving connectivity in the borough as a whole”, and finally, number 22, “Aylesbury Estate: Community Facilities at Plot 18 Delivery”, which is the one we were all here for. The rather bland agenda title was expanded upon in the document Appendix 1, in which the aim of the vote at the assembly became clearer: “To resolve to make a *compulsory purchase order* under section 226 (1) of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990.” (Southwark Council, 2017). The meeting was conducted in an atmosphere of official sobriety and formality – with a precise order of business and a tightly restricted regulation of speaking orders and timings. The chair moved through the agenda items, following the protocols and conventions of such official occasions. We sat impatiently, waiting our turn.

What brought the leaseholders to this meeting? The previous Thursday evening I received a frantic phone call from Toby, a retired councillor who was very active in supporting the Aylesbury leaseholders. He told me that the upcoming Cabinet meeting agenda, which had just been published on the institution’s website, contained an item indicating that the local executive councillors would discuss and look to approve a report on the Compulsory Purchase of three properties on the Northchurch block. This in effect would be the first step towards the Council exercising its powers to expropriate these particular properties, as an agreement with the homeowners about the resale conditions had not been reached. This piece of news came as a shock, despite the fact that the leaseholders were aware that their refusal to sell back their flats to the Council at the given conditions would eventually result in the powers being deployed. And yet nobody had seen this coming at this time, and nobody had alerted them to the fact that the process was being activated and was going to be voted on at this meeting.

At this point, on the Thursday evening, only three working days before the important meeting was due to take place, the deadline to put in an application to address the Cabinet meeting with counterarguments had passed. This meant that the leaseholders had missed the chance to apply for a deputation, i.e. a 5-minute time slot during Cabinet in which to make a statement and receive a response from the representatives. Deputations are one of the main tools that a citizen can use to question issues pertaining to planning and local democracy directly with the council members, in a manner that is officially recorded and minuted. Missing the opportunity to put one in, after having waited for the moment the CPO process might be activated, was greatly frustrating for Felix and his neighbours in the Northchurch block. Leaseholders also were keenly aware of the fact that deputations and similar tools had little direct impact on their cases: however little faith they had in using the local State’s mechanisms for involving them in decision-making, they continued to make use of it as a way to leave a trace of their dissent, thinking that a later date, during a potential public inquiry or court hearing, the official record of such statements might become useful evidence in their favour. The leaseholders were therefore actively and consciously engaged in a process of

constructing an official archive of dissent and objection, not because they necessarily believed that their opinions would be listened to in that forum, but because they were learning from experience that the act of creating bureaucratic trails could prove fundamental in the process of claiming their rights in the long run.

On the Friday before the meeting, Felix put in a request via email for a late application on the grounds of not having been informed of the agenda item that concerned him and his neighbours so closely. On Monday the application was accepted, and on Tuesday we were on. Because of our presence in the room, Item 22 was moved up the agenda. After a heated debate on the rights of dogwalkers in Southwark parks, the chair and leader of the council Peter John called Felix and three other ALAG members to deliver their deputations. The group took their seats on a row of chairs facing the assembly, with their back to the public gallery. The rest of us continued to sit in the front row of the gallery. Prudence and Grace silently lifted their cardboard placards, reading “Aylesbury Leaseholders say no to CPO”, and held them up facing the cabinet while Felix read out the statement that we had written together.



*Image 39 ALAG leaseholders holding up signs during a Council Meeting*

The deputation, born out of the collaborative effort of leaseholders involved in other compulsory process orders, the Northchurch leaseholders, Toby and myself, argued that a compulsory purchase order for Northchurch 57-76 was not warranted by the planning documentation; that the existing Planning Consent indicated the site was needed for a temporary car park, hardly a good enough reason to justify a procedure as grave as a compulsory purchase; it pointed out some procedural inconsistencies; and concluded with the sentence “Therefore there is no compelling

reason in front of cabinet today to deprive us of our homes and investments, and the cabinet should not agree to commencing compulsory order proceedings” (ALAG, 2017).

The Cabinet members listened in silence, with neutral facial expression, averting their eyes. After Felix was finished, they did not discuss the content of the deputation or ask any questions. After waiting for a moment, the leader of the Council instead addressed his officers: “Were the Northchurch leaseholders notified of the report and upcoming discussion about the repossession of their flats?”



*Image 40 ALAG leaseholders delivering a deputation during a Council meeting*

Yes, replied the officers, they were notified by post.

At this point, breaking procedure, one of the leaseholders piped up loudly from the public gallery: "The notification letter arrived only YESTERDAY". Without missing a beat, Felix now stood up, and brandishing the brown envelope that contained the notification, exclaimed: "And it was sent with a second-class stamp!".

A collective gasp crossed the meeting room. From the front row of the public gallery came teeth sucking, muttering and laughter. Heads were shaking in disbelief. The chair frowned sternly. He proceeded to reprimand his officers for not having followed due process, and issued an apology to the leaseholders. He also then promised to soon pay a visit to the residents in their homes. The atmosphere in the room had palpably shifted: from a rote recital of procedure and policy, to engagement and responsiveness. Whilst the promise of a home visit was a standard response that

the leaseholders were used to during meetings such as these, and one that seldom came to fruition, the issuing of an apology was more unusual, if not unprecedented.

After the unusual exchange, the meeting went back to its standard modality: the leaseholders left the desk and sat back in the rows of seats in the public gallery, while the cabinet voted on the report on the compulsory purchase order. The chair explained that despite the severity of the use of compulsory purchase, it was necessary to use it, and with little or no discussion on the details of the case or any comment on the content of the leaseholder's objections, the report was swiftly passed, therefore moving the Northchurch case closer to an expropriation.

The following day the weekly newspaper Southwark News dedicated its front page to the story and titled it *Second Class Citizens*, featuring an image of Felix as well a long article and an editorial. The unsigned editorial was critical of the Council, and concluded with the following words: "...leaseholders who find themselves in this difficult situation should expect to be treated with fairness and sensitivity. Both of these are entirely missing in this instance – and they have been treated with contempt." (*Southwark News*, 2017, p. 2).



Image 41 The article in Southwark News



The matter of form regarding a brown envelope being sent too late, with a stamp of low value, captured both the sensibilities of the local political representatives and of the local press. While for the councillors the matter remained encased in a question of due process, the leaseholders, via Southwark News, were successful in creating a link between the second-class treatment of the residents on the postal notification matter, and the second-class treatment of residents within the regeneration project tout court. The second-class post stamp became a metaphor for the way residents, and leaseholders specifically, were relegated to second-class citizen status by the regeneration process.

What is striking about this episode is that in the ongoing conflictual relationship between the local authority and the leaseholders, this was a rare case in which the leaseholders condition elicited a feeling of sympathy that was expressed in public. The apology from the leader of the council Peter John needn't have been genuine to have struck a chord. Through the image of a second-class stamp, the classing of the leaseholders as second-class citizens had been readied and exposed. In practice nothing changed: the Cabinet voted in favour of the decision to move forward with the expropriation, without debating the issue or engaging with any of the objections raised in the deputation, but the symbolic force of the moment was not lost on any of those involved.

### 6.3 The Emergence of Liberal Citizenship and Property Rights

Genealogies of citizenship trace the roots of the concept to the civic republicanism of Greek city-states theorised by philosophers Aristoteles and Pericles amongst others (Isin, 2002; Lazar, 2013). However the liberal tradition of citizenship as developed during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries can be considered to shape contemporary social organisation most directly (Heather, 1999) and it is to this tradition that I will briefly refer to here.

In the frame of the epochal transition from feudalism to democracy in western Europe, social contract philosophers theorised social organisation and the developing relation between individuals and the State, which came to supplant the relationship between monarch and subject. Thinkers such as John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes developed influential theories of citizenship and social organisation, in which the issue of ownership and property rights were

central to the understanding of the emerging relation between individual citizens and State (Lazar, 2013). In his 1689 *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke argued that Men, “by Nature, all free, equal and independent” (quoted in Lazar, 2013, p. 43) consent to becoming part of a community regulated by law in the form of government in order to protect their individual property. The defence of private property is one of the central incentives for men to abandon their state of nature, renounce their individual freedoms and accept to live within the confines of the legislative and executive power of the State. Becoming citizen and accepting the attendant duties and rights that come with this status, is in Locke’s view therefore inextricably linked to the ownership of land and property. Foundational constitutional documents penned in this historical period reflect the profound influence of social contract philosophy to the development of liberal citizenship and the central importance of the concept of private property within them. For example the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) states that property is an “inviolable and sacred right” (quoted in Lazar, 2013, p. 48). Historically the emergence of the category of the citizen is tightly linked to an idea of property ownership, and in this schema the State acts as the collective guarantor of individual property rights.

Moreover, the possession of property was posited as a pre-requisite to obtaining full citizenship. Most notably suffrage has been tied to property ownership, which was required to be able to exercise that most basic of political rights: the vote (Heather, 1999). Or, as Bhandar phrased it, writing about the early colonial period in north America: “Thus not only was property law the primary means of appropriating land and resources, but property ownership was central to the formation of the proper legal subject in the political sphere.”(2018, p. 4). The requirement to own property to be considered a citizen and thus to be able to exercise one’s rights clearly excluded large sections of the population. Women, working-class men and those enslaved did not possess legal rights of citizenship. It is thus widely acknowledged that the propertied white man is the privileged subject at the basis of liberal citizenship (for e.g. Pateman, 1988; Lazar, 2013). Exclusion along gender, race and class lines was foundational to the very idea of liberal citizenship. Harris (1993) reminds us that the United States Naturalization Act of 1790 granted citizenship to those who, in addition to a number of other characteristics, were white. These exclusionary foundational paradigms fundamentally shape the way citizenship has developed, and they continue to influence the forms it takes in the present. Rather than progressively and linearly becoming more inclusive of different categories and social groups, liberal citizenship developed and morphed in relation to difference, in particular to racial difference, without overcoming its exclusionary origins.

## 6.4 Private Property Law and Race

The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were not only a moment of transition from feudal social organisation to a democratic one, but crucially a time of colonial expansion and conquest. The dispossession of land from colonised populations as well as the transatlantic slave trade were underpinned and accompanied by the development of paradigms of racial hierarchy that posited the superiority of the white colonisers. Ideas and practices of racial domination underpin the very emergence of the concept of liberal citizenship and of the system of modern property ownership. Bhandar (2018) argues that English modern property law cannot be understood outside of the historical frame of colonial conquest during and through which it emerged. She writes

“There cannot be a history of private property law, as the subject of legal studies and political theory in early modern England that is not at the same time a history of land appropriation in Ireland, the Caribbean, North America, and beyond” (2018, p. 3).

Crucial to her argument is that the very legal concept of property is thoroughly infused with the racial ideology of the time and predicated upon the dehumanisation and dispossession of Indigenous, black and brown populations.

Locke, as well as developing a social contract theory, famously also theorised property as a right that flows from the application of human labour to land. Man is endowed with the property and faculty of labour, and when he chooses to apply it to a piece of land to make it productive, he can lay claim to that land as his. Locke’s theory of application of human labour in order to claim ownership of land acted as a powerful justification to the colonisation of land and dispossession of indigenous populations throughout the colonised territories. Bhandar’s original contribution is that the justification of private ownership hinged on ideas of racial difference and superiority of the white colonisers in relation not only to the ability to use land, but importantly on the ability to improve the land. The concepts of both “use” and “improvement” as interpreted by legislators was narrowly defined as the forms of agriculture and forestry practiced by the colonists. Indigenous land management practices were not recognised to have use and improvement value, thus validating the theory of terra nullius - empty land - available for settlement.

It therefore becomes clear that notions of liberal citizenship, racial difference and property ownership are bound together and historically developed in tandem. The possibility of political participation and citizenship was predicated on the ownership of land or commercial interests. As the possibility of legal private property ownership was predicated upon racial thinking and ideas of racial superiority and inferiority, political citizenship was thus constituted along racialised lines too. For example in Canada in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, natives with legal Indian Status as set out by the Indian Act, were not full citizens in that they were ineligible to vote and could not



privately own land, and applying for those rights was not only a long, difficult and limiting process, but also one that required them to abandon their official Indian status (Bhandar, 2018).

How does this history shape the present order of things? Bhandar writes that

“The colonial encounter produced a racial regime of ownership that persists into the present, creating a conceptual apparatus in which justifications for private property ownership remain bound to a concept of the human that is thoroughly racial in its makeup.” (2018, p. 4)

In her work she demonstrates this thesis in relation to case studies in present day Canada, Palestine/Israel and Australia, whereby she traces the historical roots of racial regimes of ownership that persist to the present day.

### **6.5 The Legacy of Emancipation on Rights Claims**

How is the historical entanglement between liberal citizenship, property and race relevant to contemporary Britain? In this next section I will shift the focus from official legal and political history to a perspective of struggle and liberation – to look at the notion of citizenship from the perspective of those “making rights claims” (Zivi, 2012) to clarify my argument.

In *London is the Place for Me* (2015), Hammond Perry traces the history of citizenship claims made by Black British people, with a particular focus on those of Jamaican origin. She argues that to understand contemporary citizenship in Britain and Black British citizenship claims, a historical long view that encompasses the history of empire and the abolition of slavery is necessary. The trajectory that led to emancipation and to the abolition of slavery within the British Empire played a fundamental role in shaping the idea of an “imperial citizenship” (Gorman, 2006), that is, of participation in an imperial community for those formerly enslaved and for racialised colonial subjects overall. Hammond Perry writes that “emancipation within the context of Empire manufactured a particular type of subjecthood for the formerly enslaved that was marginal and second-tier from its very inception”(2015, p. 26). However she argues that from their marginal position, Black British citizens enacted a vernacular theory of rights by engaging in the debates on citizenship, Britishness, imperial subjecthood and belonging. While liberal citizenship is predicated along the exclusionary lines outlined in the section above, the history of claim making on the part of those excluded reveals a field within which expansive ideas of belonging and subjecthood are developed and reclaimed (Putnam, 2014).

In post-emancipation Jamaica the formerly enslaved Black population claimed the right to access and own, as a means to increase their economic as well as political standing. As of 1840, voting rights were granted only to those men owning land of a certain value or who paid a minimum amount of tax, and rights to stand for office had even more restrictive covenants. Claims on ‘Crown

Lands' culminated in the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion. Claiming citizenship rights and claiming access to land were therefore linked claims, in recognition of the connected nature of property and citizenship in colonial law (Hammond Perry, 2015). In Britain formal citizenship status was not enshrined in law until the 1948 Nationality Act came into being, which included the category of Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies, a single category for all imperial peoples. Imperial citizens of the colonies could thus legally travel to and settle in Britain. In 1962 and 1971 amendments were introduced with the explicit aim to reduce the migration from (former) colonies to Britain. Imperial citizens settling in Britain in the post war era, encountered a shifting landscape of formal citizenship rights, and a de facto colour bar that strongly limited their access to housing and work.

I have provided here a historical background, based on recent scholarship, of the way liberal citizenship, colonial expansion, modern property law and ideas of racial superiority were developed in tandem with each other. I have also argued that a history of 'claim making' from the margins has shaped ideas of citizenship beyond the purely legal.

How is this relevant to a contemporary discussion about housing and the demolition of housing estates? My aim here is not to trace a direct historical or legislative link between the way leaseholders on housing estates are dealt with in relation to demolition. I wish instead to provide a historical context within which the concepts that leaseholders are concerned with (property, rights, citizenship) have developed historically in relation to colonialism and in relation to ideologies of racial difference. This contextualisation aims to historicise the concepts of property, rights, and citizenship, and thus denaturalise them. It also provides an alternate history that reinscribes colonial expansion and violence, and its attendant ideologies as central to the shaping of contemporary UK. Moreover, I aim to provide a background without which the leaseholders' present dispossession appears like an individualised experience curtailed from a wider history of racialisation, dispossession and rights claiming. The way these ideologies of property ownership, racial difference and right to housing have played out in post war Britain is key in understanding the present moment and the significance of expropriation for ALAG leaseholders.

## **6.6 Overview of History of Racial Spatial Segregation in Housing in UK**

So far, I have discussed citizenship from a legal and political perspective. However, over the course of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a more expansive understanding of citizenship developed. This social form of citizenship is understood as the ability to fully participate in public community life as opposed to a merely political participation based on voting rights.

Anthropologists have approached their studies of citizenship with this social lens (for example Ong, 1996; Holston, 2005; Lazar, 2008). Importantly, concepts of citizenship as a process of 'claim making' are also central to this approach. One aspect of social citizenry is the right to housing. In

this section I will give a synthetic overview of the way spatial segregation in housing has developed in post-war London. Following on I present attendant histories of claim making on housing, to further situate the leaseholders' condition in a socio-historical context.

After the end of the Second World War the move to the UK of Black and Asian citizens from colonies and former colonies gained momentum. The arrival of approximately 1,000 people from various Caribbean islands on the Empire Windrush in 1948 at Tilbury docks marked the start of a season of intense migration and settlement<sup>21</sup>. Upon landing the settlers were faced with challenging conditions marked by intense racism, with the search for lodgings and employment being the most urgent and most difficult needs to fulfil. The records tell that a number of those who arrived on that first 1948 voyage of the Windrush were temporarily housed in Clapham Common Underground station, which had been used in war time as an air raid shelter (Ramdin, 2017, p. 191). This has been read as a foreshadowing of the exclusionary and marginalising spatial practices that developed over the following decades, and that are still visible in present spatial arrangements (Famurewa, 2022).

The sign placed on rentals reading "No dogs, no blacks, no Irish" is well known. It has come to summarise the overt racism that racialised home seekers of this period were confronted with. Ramdin's analysis of discriminatory advertisements in the Kensington Post confirms this further, finding that tags such as 'no coloured' or 'English only' were common (Ramdin, 2017, p. 195), if only a most visible example of the racism that the white English population subjected the new settlers to. Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka's poem Telephone Conversation (1963) satirically reproduces a call between a white landlady offering a room for rent, and a black man looking for lodgings. The poem is an elegantly penned reminder that the infamous signs on windows were but the tip of an iceberg of discriminatory experiences that racialised people were confronted when they reached the UK.

The newcomers reacted to this hostile and dangerous landscape by leaning on each other for support to gain an initial footing in London and other metropolitan centres. The areas where they did find accommodation were in "neglected patches of London, which had been in the process of 'decline and social downgrading'" (Ramdin, 2017, p. 192). These lodgings tended to be run down, overcrowded, and overpriced. The figure of slum landlord Rackman has become famous as a symbol of the exploitative practices of those capitalising on the very limited options that racialised migrants had when searching for a place to live. As Shawn-Naphtali Sobers so pithily summarises:

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<sup>21</sup> There is ample evidence that the history of black presence in the UK predates the post World War II migratory waves (e.g. Otele 2020; Olusoga 2021; Kaufmann 2017), and that this presence includes important figures, movements and student organisations that organised for the abolition of slavery, against racial prejudice and for colonial liberation (Sivanandan 1981; Ramdin 2017 [1987]).

“For many of the Caribbean settlers who arrived in the UK between the 1940s and the 1970s, everyday living was to find oneself in a state of perpetual protest” (Sobers 2023: 14).

While the racism of many white Londoners was certainly a fact that black and brown settlers had to contend with daily, Carter et. al (1993) posit that the State had a central role in creating and entrenching institutional racism, and it is this that needs to be centred when analysing this period in history. Shilliam and Renwick (2022) argue that the divergences between successive Labour and Conservative governments in the post war years in regard to house building and policies, converged on one crucial factor: the newly reconstructed cities were not planned with the people settling from the colonies in mind. The ideological differences between the two parliamentary political parties were overridden by a shared understanding of imperial subjects as second-class citizens, and not worthy of being granted the same rights as white British subjects. The legacies that had linked Britain to its colonial territories and peoples for centuries were now disavowed by the mother country, and the newcomers were considered aliens, with no right to lay a claim in the imperial centre. Shabna Begum (2023) for example highlights the strong historical ties between the region of Sylhet in Bangladesh and the east end of London, going back to the 18th century. These links, which saw Sylheti work as seafarers and travel between India and the UK for centuries, were denied and obfuscated when Bengali resettlement to the Spitalfields area of London gained momentum in the 50s.

‘Continuous residence’ policies for qualifying for council housing, which were implemented at the local administration level and varied by location, were one of the main exclusionary mechanisms that disfavoured migrants when accessing public housing. Continuous residence was a requirement that was often difficult to fulfil, or to prove, even when it was fulfilled. There is also anecdotal evidence that housing officers implemented unwritten policies that favoured white applicants on council housing lists. Arguably the Sons and Daughters policy (which allows council tenancies to be passed from generation to generation) introduced in the mid-1980s (Begum, 2023) continues this trend by favouring those already housed, who are more likely to be white. A convergence of state policies and attitudes of the white population converged in creating a pattern of spatial segregation that continues to be visible reproduced to this day in certain areas of the city. By the mid-1970s, research on existing data made it clear that vast differentials in access to housing along racial lines existed and had become entrenched. A series of reports were published that laid out the numbers: the Political and Economic Planning reports (1974), the government White Paper on Race Relations and Housing (1975), as well as a Runnymede Trust report on Race and Council Housing (Runnymede Trust, 1975), which analysed existing census data. The PEP reports find that black and Asian respondents to the surveys were disproportionately living in more overcrowded conditions and less likely to have access to basic facilities such as indoor baths than their white counterparts (Fryer, 1984, p. 387).

The areas where the settlers found accommodation tended to be already run down and the least desirable and valuable. In London, North Kensington, Brixton and Stockwell, and subsequently Tottenham, Southall, Hackney, Whitechapel and Peckham were areas where recent migrants settled. In the process these neighbourhoods became associated with their new inhabitants, in a process that entangles residents with their lived environment and associates one with the other. Shilliam and Renwick (2022) argue that this quasi-osmotic relation between people and places has characterised working-class urban areas since the 18<sup>th</sup> century: “those who live in squalor have been judged to be part of the dysgenic environment themselves – they are a part of squalor, rather than sufferers of squalid conditions” (Shilliam and Renwick, 2022, p. 2). A key element of the melding of people and spaces is a process of racialisation, which can be detected well before the arrival of imperial citizens, and that finds its origin in the idea of a societal ‘residuum’. This is reflected in Charles Booth’s late 19<sup>th</sup> century Inquiry into the Life and Labour of the People in London (1886-1903), a mapping of every street in London according to the alleged class of its inhabitants. The lowest category is glossed as ‘vicious, semi-criminal’ (Booth, 2016) , a residual societal element that is seen as exogenous to the national body. If in Booth’s time there was an idea of this group being outside of the Anglo-Saxon race, living in a state of primitive uncivility, with the settling of new migrants in the UK’s urban centres this process became even more strongly defined along racial lines. Vivid echoes of the association between place, race and ideas of marginality run through the history of the second half of the twentieth century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The lived experience of the homeowners who we left in the council cabinet meeting at the beginning of this chapter illustrates elements of the histories and trajectories I have sketched so far: for example, for Felix’s family, their arrival on the Aylesbury estate in the early 90s was the culmination of a long and fraught housing journey in the UK. The couple and their small children, newly moved to London from Accra in early 1980s, moved 19 times from one private rental to the other before finally being assigned a council tenancy. However, the new neighbours on their estate subjected the family to such a barrage of racist harassment that the local housing officer offered to rehouse them in a location of their choice (in line with a common practice of moving victims rather than perpetrators). The couple chose a two-bedroom flat on the Aylesbury estate, where they had some Ghanaian acquaintances, and where a growing African community provided a sense of familiarity and security.

Many threads converge in Felix’ family housing history in London: the difficulty of finding a stable home, the racism from white neighbours, and the desire to be surrounded by familiar networks and people. The Aylesbury estate’s history needs to be seen from this perspective also: as a location where the institutional neglect of infrastructures - managed decline - is interwoven with a decline in its reputation and desirability, and its development as a place that houses many residents of

racialised backgrounds. While there was never one predominant community, many people of West African origin identify it as an estate (and a wider area) where they can be amongst fellow Africans. This is not to say that it was or is a safe haven, or univocally seen as a desirable location. For example, Felix's neighbour Grace lived in Peckham in a council flat that her family had outgrown, and was looking for a larger place. After being offered a flat on the Aylesbury estate, she quarrelled with her husband about the opportunity of the move: he contended that it "looked like a housing estate", and that they should rather stay in their smaller Peckham flat. Eventually Grace had the upper hand, and the household moved, but this narrative helps to understand that identifications and readings of the area are and have not been univocal, and the negative connotations of the estate are pervasive and at times internalised and reproduced by residents.

However, it is fair to say that despite the relentless narrative of dereliction and marginality, many residents on the Aylesbury estate, many carrying histories of migration and/or racialisation, actively, wilfully and determinedly also went about making a life there. Grace herself reminded me of this often in our conversations, when she insisted that "WE made this place". It is important here to take heed here of geographer McKittrick's (2011) argument about the risk to reproduce a "reification of racial-colonial categories and, consequently, discursively overtax the suffering black body" (2011, p. 948) when analysing racial dispossession – so that a principal analytical focus on racialised dispossession reproduces a paradigm that univocally associates whiteness with presence, and blackness with absence and lack. She posits the importance of evidencing a 'black sense of place' that exists and thrives within geographies and histories of dispossession:

"(...) a black sense of place can be understood as the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter. Racism and resistance to racism are therefore not the sole defining features of a black sense of place, but rather indicate how the relational violences of modernity produce a condition of being black in the Americas that is predicated on struggle." (McKittrick, 2011, p. 949).

This history of racialised discrimination in housing in the UK is accompanied by a history of claim-making which saw the growing population of Black and brown residents develop strategies and movements to assert their right to the city and the right to a black sense of place.

## **6.7 Home Making Against the Odds**

In this section I reference some post-war histories of claim-making for housing rights. This account is necessarily incomplete. Rather than a full overview of housing struggles, it highlights a range of approaches through which housing justice can be understood.

Let's start with Grace's pithy statement: "We made this place". Shawn-Naphtali Sobers, in his *Black Everyday Lives, Material Culture and Narrative - Things in de house* (2023), uses the everyday spaces and objects of a terraced Victorian house in Bath (from the sowing machine in the living room to the Dutch pot in the kitchen) to trace a narrative of Black Caribbean life in the UK. By focusing on the materiality of the home, Sobers suggests that the life that is made and reproduced behind the "border zone" (2023, p. 13) marked by the front door, is an act of defiance against the dispossessive practices we have traced in the previous section. With McKittrick, a black sense of place is developed in the home geographies that Sobers takes us through. In a parallel move, in her history of the Bengali squatters movement in the East End, Begum (2023) is careful to centre the role that women played within that experience, as the ones who spent the most time in the house, often alone. This mean that in practice they were "the day-to-day guardians of the squat and were the ones most likely to experience and navigate the state and street violence that encircled those spaces" (2023, p. 67), whilst also continuing to perform homemaking, childcaring and other work duties in challenging conditions, often with limited or no facilities. Overall, this particular role that women performed with in the squatter's movement has been historically overlooked in the celebration of the more militant and political aspects. That is not to say that the Bengali squatter's movement should be underestimated – it is an exemplary example of 'a rights claim' through direct action, and one that has left a lasting legacy in the wins it achieved.

Trinidadian born novelist Sam Selvon's novel *The Housing Lark* (1965) revolves around a group of Caribbean young men living in Brixton in the early 1960s, and battling with insecure, expensive and substandard rentals. The group decide that the way out of their condition is to pool their resources to put a deposit to buy a house, so that no landlord can mess them around any longer. The men are able to pull through with the plan only through the intervention of a pragmatic and focused woman, and the novel does much besides its storyline to depict the atmosphere and a sensibility of the time with wit and affection for its drifting cast of characters. *The Housing Lark's* premise references the common practice of pooling resources through credit union systems - often based on similar structures as practiced in countries of origin (Shilliam and Renwick, 2022) that migrants used as a way out of the exploitative rental market, and into ownership. Sivanandan (1981) argues that this form of community organising to secure home ownership as a way of accessing safe housing, lay the foundations of Black self-organisation and self-reliance. In this case private ownership is a way of avoiding the discrimination and exploitation that was rife in the private rental system.

The examples that I have briefly overviewed show that access to safe and secure housing has been a significant terrain of struggle for racialised Britons in the post war years. Some of these struggles have been explicitly political (such as the Bengali squatter campaigns), and others have

hinged on the insistence that practices of 'home making' should be seen as an arena of resistance. For Felix's family, and many of their homeowners neighbours, purchasing a home cannot be understood outside of this history. Belonging to Thatcher's 'nation of homeowners' and leveraging the financial and social benefits of private property ownership, is entangled with a sense of defiance against a systemic historical exclusion from not just the right to own, but the right to inhabit the city with full citizen rights. The Badus and their neighbours were able to make use of the drive towards privatisation of council housing, through Right to Buy, to secure a place on the famed housing ladder. Some new homeowners were then also quick to further extract value from their properties, by either remortgaging or becoming landlords. Some leveraged the high rentals that an inner London location affords and used the income to move to the suburbs to larger homes that could accommodate their growing families. I write in more detail about the notion of investment into property and locality, and the liabilities of such investments, in chapter 7. In the next section I reflect on how best to define the process of dispossession that affected the RTB homeowners through the regeneration/demolition plans, in a way that encompasses the histories described above.

## **6.8 From Displacement to Racial Banishment**

Critical geographers and critical scholars of housing have analysed urban regeneration and council housing demolition that have been sweeping through the UK since the late 1990s, through the analytical categories of 'gentrification' and 'displacement'. Despite the fact that displaced populations are notoriously difficult to study (Watt, 2008), a body of literature on gentrification and displacement in the UK exists. Young and Willmott (1962) first famously described the loosening of family ties as working-class residents of Bethnal Green in London moved to new suburban settlements in Essex as part of the slum clearance of the mid-fifties. More recently, Atkinson developed a quantitative method for measuring displacement, the Longitudinal Study (2000), and local activist group SNAG has produced displacements maps based on research on the Heygate Estate (South London); Lees has done the same for the first section of the Aylesbury Estate to be demolished (Lees et al. 2008).

In the UK context, and in the London context, displacement from housing estates undergoing urban regeneration and/or demolition is predominantly spoken of in relation to class. Race is usually subsumed to class in these discussions, and not foregrounded as an analytical category (eg Watt 2021). Those who have centred racism and racialisation in housing have also drawn important connections between policing, poverty, the effects of post-2008 austerity and young people in particular (Perera, 2019; Cooper, Hubbard and Lees, 2020). In the North American literature and beyond, race is a central analytical category in the analysis of gentrification (e.g. Perry, 2013). Whilst local specificities do not always allow for the translation of analytical



categories across time and space, I wish here to take up the suggestion that Ananya Roy (2017) puts forward, to use the term “racial banishment” to describe a particular instantiation of displacement that can be found in the contemporary urban context. Racial banishment, Roy argues, references both the racialised dimension of instantiations of urban dispossession (such as evictions), and it also points to the involvement of the local State in implementing and enforcing displacement (for example by passing laws that ban particular behaviours in certain areas). She credits the concept of racial banishment to social movements such as the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and LA Community Action Network campaigning against eviction:

“Such a framework highlights the public means of evictions as well as of racialized violence, such as slavery, Jim Crow, incarceration, colonialism, and apartheid, that cannot be encapsulated within sanitized notions of gentrification and displacement” (2017, p. 3).

Racial banishment also references the history of the subtraction of personhood, “a banishment that is predicated on the permanently insecure possession of property and personhood” (2017, p. 9). I propose using this term to describe the displacement of Aylesbury residents, and in particular the situation of leaseholders. Leaseholders are the first to speak of the centrality of race in their displacement. Prudence put it thus: “they don’t want US to have even a little bit of anything!”. And the daughter of Prudence’s neighbour, much more directly: “They want to get rid of all Black and poor people from South London”. What shines through the words of those directly affected by the regeneration/demolition of the Aylesbury estate is that they understand their predicament as being about race as much as social class. While the leaseholders do not explicitly speak about intersecting histories of property rights, citizenship, liberal rights, these histories and experiences are evoked in their analysis of their predicament.

## **6.9 Conclusion: Refusing Dispossession and Racial Banishment**

I have established that the leaseholders’ experience can be defined as racial banishment. The question is: how have leaseholders responded to this racial banishment? What are the politics enacted by the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group? This chapter’s central claim is that the way ALAG leaseholders enact a critique of the racial banishment they are subjected to through the regeneration/demolition of the Aylesbury estate, is through a practice of refusal. This refusal is charged with a radical potential that remains in critical tension with the position of relative privilege that homeowners inhabit. I do not wish to resolve this tension here, rather observe it in some of its contradictions.

At one level, ALAG is an interest group that brings together homeowners to defend their individual right to own private property. In this sense, the groups’ *raison d’être* fits neatly into a liberal rights

paradigm in which private property is inalienable, and where Lockian ‘possessive individualism’ is central (Macpherson, 1962). In addition, the group has always channelled their campaigning efforts along legal, mediatic and bureaucratic routes, rather than activist or militant ones. For example, its main focus has been to challenge the local administration in meetings and public inquiries, and to create media stories in the local and national official press. The episode that opens this chapter is a typical ALAG intervention – using available, legal routes to express dissent. There has not been an interest in organising demonstrations or leafleting or the use of social media. In this sense, the group accepts and operates within the frames, pathways and logics of the State to object to the regeneration/demolition.

However, there are ways in which the groups’ practices expanded and exploded its own liberal rights-based approach and alluded to a more radical and expansive sense of politics. Central to my argument is that ALAG’s organising is principally founded upon a “refusal to be dispossessed and banished”, rather than a “right to ownership”. While these two drives are clearly linked and contingent upon each other, I focus on the former because it has remained undertheorized in the academic literature on housing estate regeneration/demolition in London and the UK. Campt writes:

refusal: the rejection of the status quo as liveable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation, i.e. a refusal to recognise a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible: the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented (...); the refusal to accept the status of black disposability (Campt, 2017)

Homeowners in the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group refuse the denial of their citizenship rights, which is also a form of “diminished subjecthood” (Campt 2017). This denial of citizenship takes the form of property dispossession, enacted by the state in collusion with land developers. The stance in ALAG is the refusal to accept the basic proposition of the regeneration: that residents have to vacate the land on which their homes stand. This basic principle is the driving force behind many of ALAG’s interventions: the refusal to accept this proposition and accept its consequences. Strategically ALAG members also choose to engage in negotiations to temper their dispossession (in the form of ‘negotiating better deals’), in what in chapter 7 I come to describe as forms of financial refusal, but they have often been able to do so whilst holding on to the basic principle of refusal of the logic of dispossession.

ALAG’s actions – the words spoken in the council assembly, the testimonies during public inquiries, the interviews with newspapers, the writing of emails and studying of documents - are an engagement with legal and administrative structures to express dissent and halt / temper dispossession. While all these gestures are important in and of themselves, there are additional

layers to them. As I mentioned in the earlier part of the chapter, homeowners quickly realised these actions would not make decision makers change their mind. However, they understood that expressing their position of refusal of the logic of dispossession on every occasion was building a cumulative archive of dissent that might become important later. Moreover, being present and introducing dissent into the tightly regulated spaces of council offices and court rooms, is a way of refusing invisibility, refusing to let things take their course smoothly, without discomfort. The words spoken by Felix in the deputation did that. So did the homemade placards, the serious inquisitive expressions of leaseholders sitting in the public gallery, as well as the bodily expressions such as sarcastic laughter, and exaggerated head shaking. Beyond the critiques of the regeneration/demolition based on failings in legislation, policy and procedure, ALAG members also continue to reiterate that the whole principle of the regeneration/demolition confers them to second-class citizen status.

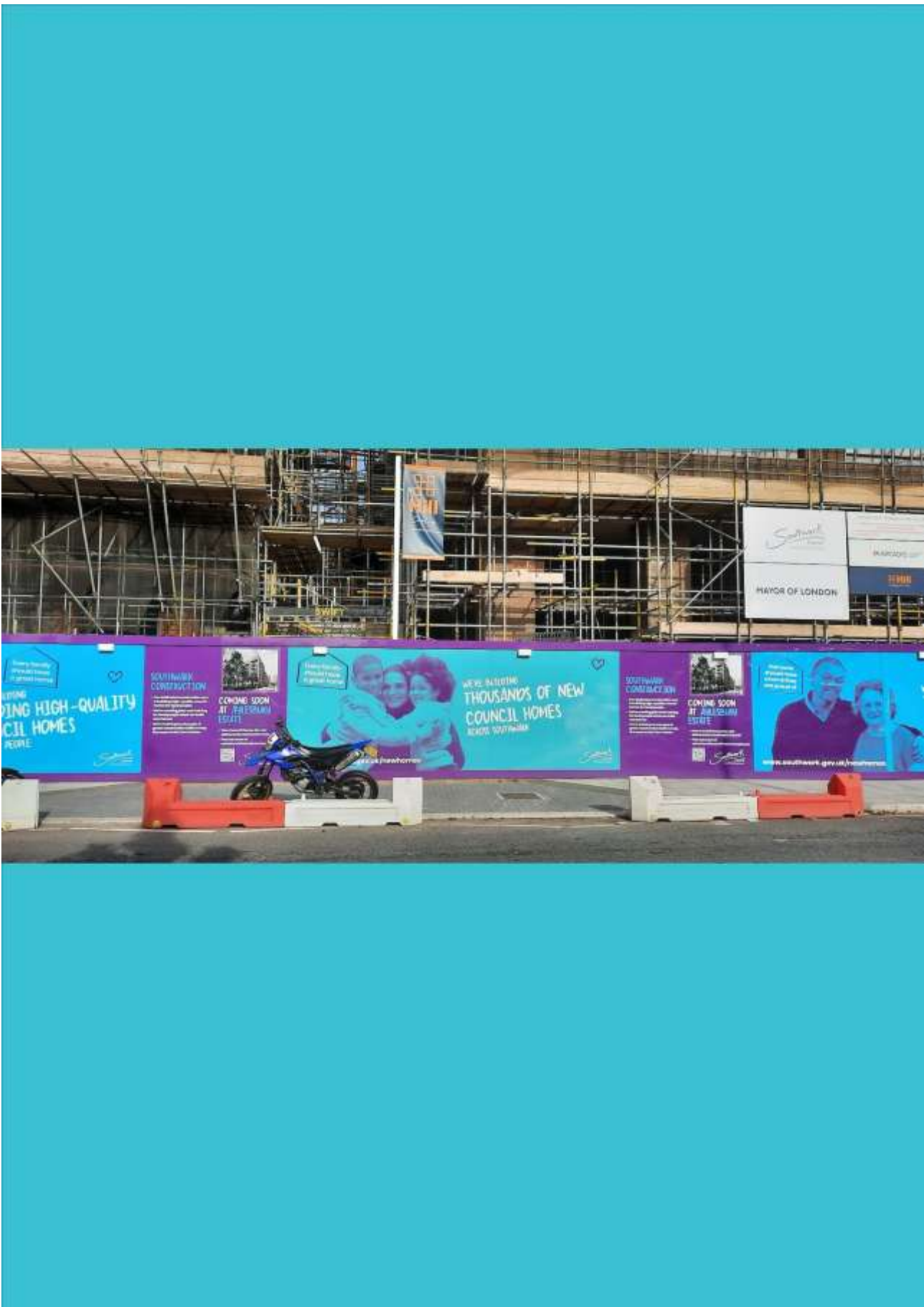
In addition to these public moments of refusal during inquiries and council meetings, ALAG homeowners also engage in less visible forms of refusal that play out in the everyday. ALAG's public appearances punctuate a drawn out and slow period of waiting, during which very little happens. This is the specific temporality of the Aylesbury estate regeneration/demolition: a series of accelerations and decelerations that are determined by a wide range of factors outside of the residents' control and field of vision. During the long fallow periods in which apparently 'nothing happens', leaseholders are often engaged in a very active, and often anxiety ridden, stance of holding still. For example, they will receive occasional letters and phone calls from the officers in charge of rehousing, encouraging them to engage with the rehousing process. This might mean filling in forms about their financial status, or viewing properties, or meeting with the officers to discuss their options. Refusing to engage in the process might look like doing nothing from one perspective: not answering phone calls, not responding to letters, not returning forms or providing personal information. From the residents' perspective it can look like a wilful bracing that takes conviction and aplomb. In a similar way, refusing to accept deals, non-disclosure agreements, and other forms of subtle coercion, can be both a negotiating tactic as well as a stance that does not accept the inevitability of dispossession.

Collectivising these different forms and modalities of refusal presents a challenge. The implications of the outcome of the dispossession process are momentous for households and individual futures, and the amount of stress that this brings is hard to underestimate. As well as operating as a group, ALAG homeowners clearly take individual decisions regarding how and when to engage with any rehousing or sale back process. Individual decisions to shift gears and 'sell up' or accept a deal are both accepted as inevitable within the group, but they are also often a reason for strife. At different points of ALAG's history this played out in more or less dramatic ways, with deep rifts within the group and with those who chose to leave it on their own individual terms. At other times,

the group has been able to avoid the individualising force private property ownership by insisting with Council officials that negotiations could only be conducted in a group setting, rather than individually. What is relevant here is that the homeowner's refusal to accept the logic of racial banishment through dispossession is always inevitably accompanied or followed by a very practical engagement with the 'buy back' or rehousing process which focuses on property values, and financial assessments. The homeowners' refusal is not an ideological or abstract stance, but it is intrinsically connected to a very tangible defence of property and investment. I will now turn to an analysis of these investments, and of the financial refusal of the Northchurch three to forego them.

## Visual interlude #6



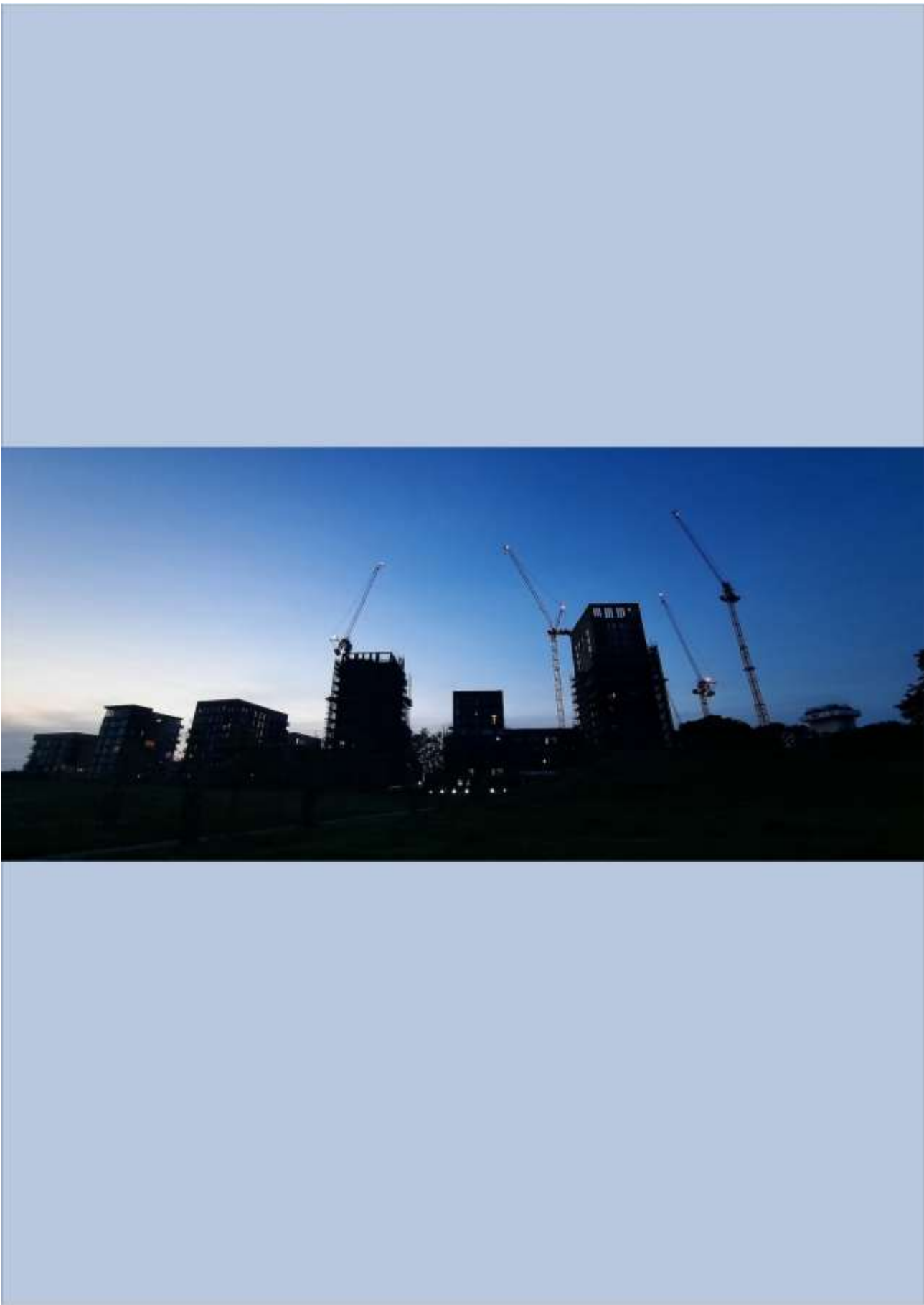












## 7. Home Investments

“Houses are unsettling hybrid structures. A house is, in all its figurings, always *thing*, *domain*, and *meaning* - *home*, *dwelling*, and *property*; *shelter*, *lodging*, and *equity*; *roof*, *protection*, and *aspiration*—*oikos*, that is, house, household, and home.

(Chakravartty and Da Silva, 2012, p. 361)

### 7.1 Investments

*I am with Felix and Prudence, walking through the network of back streets that connect the main shopping artery, the Walworth Road, to the Aylesbury Estate. We walk through rows of nineteenth century red brick tenement housing – they seem in good condition, they have quiet internal courtyards, simply adorned façades. Felix sighs. “We should have bought one of these, instead of our council house on Aylesbury. Do you know how much they are worth now? If we’d just...” He trails off, shaking his head, pained by having made what he considers a terrible financial mistake. The two buildings, the one he and his wife own, and these ones, are just a stone throw away from one another.*

*“If I have something that is precious for me, if it’s my everything, and you want to damage it, I will fight for it”. Steve, Aylesbury leaseholder.*

*Tina, a leaseholder in her 60s, objected to the Right to Buy policy on political grounds, but she believed ownership would provide her with more security than continuing to rent. When she found herself with a bit of money, she bought her council flat to ensure her future and her financial stability, only to find herself, years later, when her home was under the shadow of demolition, being “the most insecure I’d been in my life.”*

In this chapter I concentrate on the investments of Right to Buy leaseholders into their homes, and on the negotiations around their financial value that have unfolded over the course of the regeneration period. While in the previous chapters I focused on the managed material and infrastructural decline that is implicated in the monetary devaluing of properties and neighbourhoods, and on the histories of property and race, in this chapter I propose an understanding of property investment that includes a melding of material and immaterial concerns. With this I mean that investments in property entwine financial concerns, and the hope to create monetary gains in the future, with affective concerns. Taking as a starting point the theorisation of value as grounded in action (Munn, 1986; Graeber, 2001), I propose an anthropological theory of investment that encompasses both the monetary realm as well as the realm of time, effort,

attention and focus. Investment suggests both the hope for a positive return in the future, and it also implies the application of a degree of choice (within the constraints of a limited range of options).

The etymology of the verb *to invest*, and the related noun *investment*, is found in the Latin *investire* (in-vestire): to clothe, and its use over the centuries has morphed to describe “the act of being invested with an office, right, endowment”, until it ultimately took on the financial sense of investing capital for the purpose to grow it in value, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I am interested in the slippage between the active and passive form of the verb, and the confusion about who is the subject and who the object of the investment, which is present in the gloss “the act of being invested with an office, right, endowment”. The act of *in-vestire*, to put robes on someone else to bestow a privilege upon them, suggests a reciprocal relation between the investor and the invested that is lost in later meanings of the word, where it is the person doing the investing that is the active subject of the action. This resonates with anthropological understandings of investment, such as that developed by D'Avella (2019) who, drawing on a Strathernian-informed approach, posits a network of relationality between people and things:

“Like possession and attachment, investment speaks to both investing and being invested. Reciprocal relation through which people and things become together, investments are constitutive of both persons and things” (idem, p. 38-39).

If we posit that investments create relations between people and things, we can see that the Right To Buy leaseholders, by investing their finances and attention into their properties, are also in return being invested by their homes in specific ways. Their position as homeowners fulfils desires of social mobility, while the reputation of the Aylesbury Estate, and its material and immaterial devaluation, continue to mark them as second-class property holders. It is exactly under the harsh conditions of the regeneration/demolition buy-back regime that some of the underlying tensions of this condition come to the fore. In particular, I consider the way the devaluation and dispossession created by the demolition assemblage threatens the investments of leaseholders who have histories of migration and who experience racism and classism in their everyday life. My aim here is to complement Paul Watt's understanding of working-class uses of Right to Buy as a way of “shoring up traditional belonging” (Watt 2021, p.175), to include an understanding of how experiences of migration trajectories and racialisation inflect the purchase of property and its losses. I follow Chakravarty and Ferreira Da Silva (2012) in their call for expanding understandings of processes of accumulation, dispossession and debt to include “consideration of how these ‘new territories’ of consumption and investment have been mapped onto previous racial and colonial (imperial) discourses and practices” (idem, p. 368). The historical contextualisation for this has been provided in the previous chapter, Second-Class Post. Here I take this forward by analysing

the way different types of value (financial and affective) are inscribed into bodies, spaces and objects to create classed and racialised subjects (Skeggs, 2015), via the notion of investment.

In the second part of the chapter I focus on the way a subgroup of ALAG leaseholders<sup>22</sup> enacted practices of “financial refusal” in their negotiations with the local authority. The bitter disputes around financial value reveal the way ‘the market’, understood in classic economic theory as a self-regulating force based on the law of offer and demand, is shaped by a range of factors. When leaseholders contest and negotiate over the monetary market values attributed to their properties, they also contest the moral and ethical values at play in the valuation and they expose the spatial logics of racial capitalism (Chakravarty and Ferreira Da Silva 2012).

## 7.2 Building homes

Only after the Badu family had moved into their Aylesbury flat in the 1990s, did they learn about the negative reputation of the estate. “Why did you move *there*?!” people asked. If oral histories of the very first residents evoke a sense of excitement about moving into brand new modern buildings in the 1970s (Romyn 2020), the residents who moved in the following decades narrate of finding, as Prudence Badu put it once, “a dump”, one that they had to work hard on it to transform. In fact the estate had been from the late 70s a “hard-to-let estate” (Carter, 2008; Watt, 2021), where, again in Prudence’s words, “black cabs wouldn’t enter”.

Undeterred, the Badus invested into their home and into their lives. They trained in college, set up a successful take-away business in the nearby market street, and eventually bought their flat through Right to Buy, becoming homeowners in the UK for the first time. Their trajectory is not too dissimilar to that of many of their neighbours, who were able to get a mortgage and purchase their council flats at the heavily discounted price that Right to Buy offered. Some of these RTB homeowners express feelings of doubt and ambiguity about making use of a policy that they fundamentally disagree with, others see it as the only possible way to ever be able to own property. Regardless of the feelings towards the policy itself, the overarching consensus is that an investment in property is the sensible financial move to aim for. The association of homeownership with financial security and sound investment is an integral part of the ideological drive towards the naturalisation of homeownership as the default form of tenure, with which Right to Buy is deeply entwined.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the UK homeownership became the predominant form of tenure, with a significant expansion taking place from the 1950s onwards. This shift is both

numerical and ideological. Figures (however uncertain) show a move from 10% home ownership in 1914, up to 65% in 1986 (Saunders, 2021), to reach levels much higher than most European counterparts. Post-war, governmental policies encouraged and supported the growth of homeownership. Government literature on the subject described it as the form of tenure that would produce subjects less likely to rebel against the constituted order of things (Jones and Murie, 2008). Biopolitical analyses have also focused on the way homeownership has become internalised by individuals as the appropriate way to manage one's housing, and the normative way of living (Gurney, 1999; García-Lamarca, 2022). One's sense of self, of success, achievement and life purpose has become intimately tied to the ability to own one's home. A person who invests their finances into property, is in turn invested by the fact of ownership which imbues them with status and value.

The power of the Right to Buy policy was to combine this biopolitical dimension of property ownership with an ideological attack on public housing: the enormous privatisation of public housing that RTB created was intimately tethered to an understanding of the self as invested by and in homeownership. The particularly staggering rise in the value of property in global cities like London<sup>23</sup> also contributed to buyers seeing RTB as an unprecedented chance to benefit from the differential between the initial investment required and the inevitable rise in property values. This has led to what Minton and Watt have described as a "private landlord owning plutocracy" (as opposed to the property-owning democracy that the RTB policy creators had wished for (Minton and Watt, 2016 quoted in Watt 2021, p. 55), with RTB properties being both sold on the private market or let to capitalise on London's inflated rental market.

If Thatcher's Right to Buy policy (introduced in 1980) harnessed the ideological and financial power of homeownership to privatise the social rented sector and to further increase homeownership rates, New Labour did not significantly reverse the direction of travel and did certainly not abolish Right to Buy. If anything, Blair's Urban Regeneration policies were geared towards privatisation of housing estates through different strategies, ones that further entrenched market logics in the management and ownership of the public housing stock. Right to Buy thus hinged on the growing ideological centrality of homeownership as the normalised aspiration for individuals to aim for. It concomitantly contributed to the privatisation of the public rental sector. Council tenants who took up RTB bought into the aspiration of homeownership, even if at times they were critical of the agenda of council house privatisation. An ethnographic analysis of RTB however provides some nuance and critical detail regarding individual motivation and life trajectories, which helps complement the political economic analysis of the policy.

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<sup>23</sup> By way of example, the UK House Price Index (<https://landregistry.data.gov.uk/app/ukhpi/?lang=en>) indicates that in the 20 years between January 1998 and January 2018, the average price for flats and maisonettes increased from £85,657 to £452,766, an increase by almost 400%.

A proportion of Right to Buy leaseholders certainly were able to 'put their properties to work', especially those in locations that commanded high rental and sales prices, by either letting them out or reselling them. A number of ALAG leaseholders were also letting their flats while living elsewhere. In this sense, one of the effects of RTB is that the move of publicly owned housing into private ownership also translated into the introduction of those properties into economic circuits of rental (Watt and Minton 2016). In later work based on in-depth interviews with RTB leaseholders, Watt however expands his arguments and focuses on the motivations that pushed council tenants to use RTB in the first place. He found that working-class Right to Buy leaseholders use the policy as a "right to stay" (Watt 2021, p. 178), to strengthen their ties to place and community, rather than as a purely financial investment. In this way he distinguishes working-class residents' financial strategies from those of middle-class homeowners investing in the property sector guided principally by financial motivations, for example through schemes to 'buy to rent'. Watt's findings align with previous studies conducted on a housing estate in Exeter where residents used Right to Buy as a way to "preserve their place in the community" (James, Jordan and Kay, 1991, p. 29) as well as a way of increasing their housing security in the face of impending changes in the council housing and benefit systems.

Here I complement Watt's analysis with a specific focus on RTB leaseholders who have experiences of migration, and for whom RTB, and property ownership more in general, possesses specific nuances. Many of the RTB leaseholders that I researched with have a history of migration; while life trajectories differ enormously, a significant number moved to the UK from West African countries as young people in the early 80s, then went on to having families, and are now nearing retirement age. This group is far from homogenous, but it is significant that leaseholders who engaged in the collective bargaining I witnessed, were at a similar life stage, with grown children and a certain degree of financial stability. They have jobs in accounting, in the building trade, some run small businesses, drive taxis, work for the local authority and the NHS as nurses and technicians. Many of their children are university educated and have their own professional careers. Despite the challenges described above, they are a group who over the years enhanced their social and economic position, and are on trajectories of upward social mobility. The ownership of property is and was a key corner stone to this mobility: the financial capacity to make use of RTB was one key way of increasing their and their families' financial position in the future. Social mobility made the purchase possible, and in turn the purchase was a cornerstone of any future social mobility.

For people who do not make up the traditional white working-class council estate resident, but who made estates their homes in more recent decades, RTB is a way to further emplace themselves in the country, as well as in the locality, and to realise the project of "remaking oneself" within the diasporic and migratory experience (Akyeampong 2000, p.186). This remaking is linked to the



achievement of social mobility, the ability to support kin and networks in countries of origin, and give sense to one's migratory experience. Key to this is a sense of intergenerational responsibility: property ownership is the most key element of intergenerational wealth transmission (Savage, 2015), and this is a class dynamic that first generation migrants are mostly excluded from. It is very clear to the Ghanaian and Nigerian parents who I worked with, that the most effective investment into their family's financial future would be based on getting that fated first step onto the property ladder.

When talking about the benefits of homeownership with ALAG RTB leaseholders, two main themes consistently emerge: buying property is a way of providing an inheritance for their children, and of securing a pension. This is consistent with the trend towards "asset-based welfare" that has been observed since the 1980s (Lowe, Searle and Smith, 2012). The retrenchment of the welfare state coupled with the expansion of available mortgage products has meant that people have, since the 1980s, increasingly been using their properties as a form of long-term financial security, and one that can be mobilised to access cash through mortgage-backed securities when needed over the course of life cycles. This is not specific to RTB leaseholders but research into asset-based welfare shows that the motivations for investing in property resonate with the Aylesbury RTB leaseholders' ones: a wish to invest to secure an inheritance for children and as a way to create a pension. These motivations additionally align with Paul Watt's findings in researching with RTB leaseholders on estates undergoing regeneration, where he identifies "enhancing their family's long-term security" (Watt 2021, p. 175) as one of the key drivers for taking up RTB. This also fits with what has been described as a shift from a logic of thrift and insurance as strategies for financial security and saving, towards one based on various forms on investment, of which property ownership is a key one (Langley, 2008).

In this sense RTB provided migrant council tenants with a way of emplacing themselves in financial terms, as well as in social terms (of creating a rootedness in a locality). Investing financially in their homes through Right to Buy went hand in hand with investing in them as family homes, in rooting themselves in the neighbourhood both taking advantage of its offerings and shaping it in their image. The Badus' take-away shop combined fish and chips with Ghanaian dishes, catering for both the traditional white working-class taste and the growing west African presence in the area. They developed networks of mutual support with their neighbours, looking after each other's kids and socialising together. They speak of appreciating both the way their neighbours hailed from different parts of the world, the mix and diversity of experiences that exposed them to, and the proximity with fellow Ghanaians and other west African communities that had attracted them to the area in the first place. "We made this place" is a phrase that was often used by this generation of residents, who came to live alongside the initial set of tenants who moved in when the estate was first built. The value 'this place' holds as a home – as a financial

asset but also as a home to bring up a family in – was not always already there, it was worked for and created by the residents, for example through home improvement projects, neighbourly networks of solidarity around childcare, and protection of growing children's safety and securing access to good education.

It is not straightforward to separate investment in property into a financial form of investment and an affective one. Whilst Watt's typology can be useful in separating out those forms of financial investment that are univocally aimed at producing future financial returns, RTB homeowners who invest in property often do so on multiple counts, such as creating a safe and liveable home environment, one that is especially conducive to homing children in an otherwise hostile world. In a global neoliberal system shaped by histories of colonialism and imperialism, the project of "making oneself" and one's family is however as much a financial one as a moral one. Narratives of homeownership thus interlace the language of finance expediency with expressions of familial and intergenerational responsibility.

I therefore understand the investment of RTB leaseholders as one that combines the making of a safe, clean, reputable space with a financial investment - and the two dimensions cannot be easily separated from one another. In this sense, my understanding of investment reflects anthropological theories of value which tend to both dimensions of the term: financial value and the ethical/moral values (Graeber, 2013). Graeber argues that the element that distinguishes value and values is the link of the former to money, and therefore to a system of commensurability and exchangeability. Values, on the contrary, cannot and shall not be monetised (Graeber 2013). Dichotomising value and values rests upon the belief that the financial sphere operates autonomously, and in a technical manner (Ortiz, 2013). This separation of the financial sphere from the affective one has however been revealed as spurious by sociologists and anthropologists (Zelizer, 1994). The ownership of home reveals the myriad ways in which economic value is inextricably linked to values of care for family and community, and to values relating to a sense of place and of investment in a locality. In a parallel way, investment is as much about a financial commitment in the hope for a future return, as it is a movement towards emplacement and the creation of a rooted life in the here and now.

The concept of "investment ecologies" further expands the scope of an anthropological understanding of investments (D'Avella 2019). Ecological thinking helps to centre the network of relations within which people perform investments and within which the act of investing places them. In the particular instance of RTB leaseholders, property ownership bestows the buyer with a specific subject position, that of a property owner, who possesses superior financial and personal qualities in relation to tenants and, more specifically, council tenants. The normative scale of value - financial AND moral, posits homeownership as the superior form of tenure. Additionally, the value

accrued by homeownership does not stop with the homeowners themselves, but is reflected onto their children, as the future inheritors of the property. An ecological and relational understanding of investments is particularly useful when considering the temporal dimension of investment in homeownership as an intergenerational and familial project. This requires an understanding of migration as an intergenerational project as well, one that does not have a natural end point but continues to be in the making over time (Henry and Mohan, 2003). Rather than taking an individual's life journey into account, this approach focuses instead on kin networks, extended families and multiple generations, and on life cycles. Buying a flat as a way of ensuring an inheritance for children and grandchildren centres the trajectory of the family rather than the individual and links the success of the parents' generation to that of future generations. It also recognises that the use a lease holding family makes of a flat changes over time, over the course of a lifetime, as families grow, as children transition into adulthood and into independence, as parents age and transition into their pension years.

The Badu family, for example, after having lived in their RTB flat as a family for many years, moved out and rented their flat to strangers for a period; then their eldest son, freshly graduated from university, moved in with some friends, and in the long-term, the family would have liked all the children to be able to rely on the flat as a safe base in London, and, eventually use it as their inheritance. The flat would have therefore been in turn a family home, a source of family income, a safe haven for young transient adults, and an important source of intragenerational financial support. Describing such an investment as purely financial is downright limiting, although finances remain important, especially as property ownership is increasingly monetised through rentals, shorts lets and airbnb-fication, in a landscape of increased commodification and neoliberalisation of the intimate space of the home. The home's exchange value is not just deferred into a future in which a return on the investment is reaped, but it is also realised in the present through those short-term strategies of value extraction which might be increasingly central to households' financial strategies of survival.

### **7.3 Investment Vulnerabilities**

The way the history of the Right To Buy policy has been written is either as a top-level critique focussing on the macro-politics associated privatisation of public housing (Mullins and Murie, 2006), or as a celebration of its popularity with working-class tenants as a crucial mechanism of social mobility and financial security, as well as a marker of status and self-worth (e.g. Saunders, 2021). However, there is a less frequented perspective that centres liability and risk, what has been described as the possibility of RTB to obscure inequality and to impoverish rather than enrich (Carr, 2011).

More generally, the positing of homeownership as the privileged form of tenure obscures the liabilities of homeownership, which affects homeowners from marginalised groups, such as working-class and racialised homeowners, in greater proportion (Aalbers, 2008). Verdery (2004) argues that discourses around property have disproportionately centred “rights” as the main principle to understand private ownership. Drawing on her research on Romania’s transition to post-socialism and the privatisation of common agricultural land, she argues for considering the “debts, obligations and liabilities” (Verdery 2004, p. 139) associated with owning property. It is important at this stage to remember that the RTB financial investments in property that I describe here are based on mortgaged debt, and thus also hinge on leaseholders’ ongoing ability to service that debt over decades, to actually hope to reap the benefits of their investment in the future. There is a profound liability here that is analysed in a growing critical literature on homeownership and mortgage debt, that describes the way that marginalised, working-class and racialised people have been incorporated into the globalised world of finance through the extension of credit and the securitisation of mortgages. For example, García-Lamarca (2022) studies the Spanish subprime crisis ethnographically and argues that mortgages are a biotechnology that links global financial markets, everyday life and labour. Taylor (2019) analyses the predatory inclusion in subprime mortgage markets that has targeted black, working-class women in the United States. The RTB financial investments I speak of here are based on mortgage debt, and the risks associated with this – notably, the ongoing ability to service the mortgage and the reliance of the mortgage system on the global financial market trends and their fluctuations, crises and crashes. However central these are to contemporary ‘mortgaged lives’, they were not the prime concerns for ALAG at the time of my research.

There is a methodological note to make here: those who in various ways succumb to the liabilities and risks of ownership tend to fall through the cracks and are not as readily available for interview. It is important for the ethnographer to attend to the absences by paying attention to narratives, that might also take the form of whispers, rumour or hearsay, that might be indirectly reported. These narratives, however unreliable they might appear, are important to reclaim experiences that might otherwise go undetected. For example, I heard from my leaseholder neighbour Victoria about another neighbour who chose Right to Buy at a similar time as her, and who had not been able to deal with the stress and uncertainty of the maintenance bills that he kept being presented with. He eventually sold the property and went back to being a council tenant elsewhere. It is important to also recognise that I simply will not have heard the stories of those who lost their properties prior to the demolition/regeneration. Certainly there is also a history to be researched and written of RTB leaseholders who might have been affected by foreclosure and unserviceable mortgage debt. However, the concerns of ALAG leaseholders at the time of my research were less to do with servicing mortgage debt, and more to do with the loss of their homes as investment through regeneration/demolition – my conceptual choice to work with ‘investment’ (rather than debt) here

reflects the concerns and language of those ALAG leaseholders I worked with closely. The key areas of concern regard the financial valuation of their properties, and this is closely linked with an issue that has wider relevance for RTB leaseholders, especially those living in flats: the issue of repair and maintenance.

The issue of repairs and maintenance is a central problem in council-owned housing blocks where some of the stock is leased to homeowners (Carr 2011). Carr identifies the issue in the hybrid nature of the freeholder. In this case the freeholder is the local authority, who has both the responsibility of a public body towards tenants and that of a private landlord towards leaseholders. Local authorities need to recoup the costs of any major works from leaseholders. This leads to leaseholders being presented with what can be very high bills for works that they had no mechanism to approve or discuss. The experience of leaseholders is that major work bills can arrive at any time, and that there is no straightforward way of questioning them. Usually, a letter arrives that announces future work, with an estimated cost, followed by a bill once the work has been undertaken. Teo, a retired leaseholder who lived on a small disability pension with his wife, talked to me about getting incredibly stressed when a letter, any letter, came through the door - the uncertainty of the news it might bring produced an enormous amount of anxiety. He paid his major work bills to the council in small weekly instalments, but there was always the risk that larger, more unmanageable bills might be presented to him. Whilst there are channels and tribunals that can be used to challenge the charges, the experience of leaseholders is that the system is complicated and slow. It is so difficult to get an answer to even the simplest of questions from anyone in charge, that hardly any leaseholder engages with it in a meaningful way. Leaseholders feel that they have no control over the way the buildings that contain their homes are looked after and over how much is spent and how. The leasehold system as it exists in England and Wales is in itself of a “dual nature” (Cole and Robinson, 2000), in that leaseholders are legally long-term tenants with limited rights in relation to the management and maintenance of the property and the communal areas of the buildings. The costs of maintenance are however the leaseholders’ responsibility, and while in privately owned buildings leaseholders have a (limited) say over building works, on council owned properties leaseholders are excluded from decision making. There is an increasing body of journalistic reporting that highlights how this issue concerns growing numbers of leaseholders on council estates; for example, in January 2023 The Guardian<sup>24</sup> run a story on an estate in Islington in London where leaseholders were presented with bills in the range of £40,000-£60,000. In May 2019 Emma Lunn reported from the Tustin estate in Peckham, not far from Aylesbury, where a refurbishment effort was billed to leaseholders at over £100,000. These large sums are reported to threaten the ability of leaseholders to continue owning their homes.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2023/jan/16/leasehold-nightmare-why-owning-a-council-flat-could-land-you-with-a-wipeout-bill>

If the dream of home ownership included a wish for independence from the local authority and more control over their housing (see also James, Jordan and Kay, 1991; Cole and Robinson, 2000; Watt, 2021), the issue of major works and repairs deeply undermines leaseholders' sense of ownership, as well as creating a profound sense of financial uncertainty. Rather than extricating themselves from a relationship from the local authority, RTB leaseholders find themselves implicated in a different articulation of that relationship. This articulation, I argue, that reproduces the paternalistic and top-down approach of local authorities towards tenants, whilst also disavowing their responsibilities towards them, and placing financial burdens on the individual homeowners.

The requirement to pay into any major repairs not covered by the standard service charge bill means that leaseholders are often ambivalent about any large interventions on the buildings they live in. The absence of significant ongoing maintenance work, which takes the form of managed decline and leads to major breakdowns that become extremely expensive to deal with once they occur, exacerbates a sense of injustice, as leaseholders feel they are contributing to costs that could have been prevented if regular maintenance had been carried out. Ambivalence towards major works is especially in contention in estates under demolition like the Aylesbury. Homeowners do not see the bills for major works as a form of long-term investment in the buildings, one that could contribute to an increase in the future value of their individual properties. This kind of anticipatory calculus, intrinsic to homeownership as a form of long-term bet on an increase in property values, is compromised by the demolition plans, which disrupt the future value potential of the properties and do not allow for repairs to become financial investments. Investments presuppose a future time in which they will ripen, and this future potential is compromised by the plan to demolish. The bind is in part a temporal one: the long duration of the demolition means that buildings are inhabited for years and decades before being physically demolished, and they therefore would need to be maintained to remain in acceptable condition. However, this extended temporality does not translate into accrued value: while the physical buildings are still standing, their existence as financial assets is already in ruins. In this sense, demolition occurs well before the cranes start to take apart the walls and roofs of the buildings, in what can be seen as one of the demolitions' anticipatory effects.

As the demolition assemblage works towards undoing the possibilities of inhabitation, symbolic and material managed decline results in a process of devaluation that sinks property prices, and puts areas into a state of blight. This is a well described dynamic, common to areas undergoing demolition/regeneration. On the Aylesbury estate, the determination of the financial value of the properties under demolition became one key arena of bitter contestation: the act of producing valuations became heavily charged. When in 2005 Southwark Council decided to fundamentally change the shape of the Aylesbury Estate regeneration as it had been conceived of since 1999

from a stock transfer and refurbishment project to a demolition and reconstruction project, leaseholders were initially promised a 'like-for-like' rehousing option: they would be rehoused in a new property with the same characteristics as their current one. Vaguely defined in the communication literature distributed to residents, the concept of 'like-for-like' calls forth questions of comparison and commensurability that hinge on the establishment of parameters for comparing houses and flats to one another – a far from uncontroversial issue, as we will see.

By the time the official planning document that sets out the regeneration blue print with which subsequent planning application must legally comply (the Aylesbury Area Action Plan, or AAAP), was published in January 2010, the term like-for-like in reference to leasehold rehousing was not in use any longer, and the document refers instead to 'leasehold interest and acquisitions' strategies. Through AAAP the local authority committed to buying back leases through negotiation, and to using its compulsory purchase powers if negotiations were to fail. At the centre of the lease negotiations, regardless of the various options made available to homeowners, lies thus the question of the financial value of the properties in question. The determination of these figures through property valuations became in turn a central focus of the leaseholders' campaigning efforts and debates: the financial offers presented to leaseholders by the local authority have been and continue to be very low, as Prudence explained: "The offer that the Council is giving the leaseholders now is nothing to write home about. If you have a three bedroom, the money they are quoting cannot buy you even a broom cupboard."

Over the course of years of negotiations, it became clear that financial value, far from being an objective metric that could be deployed to calculate recompense for the leaseholders affected by the demolition, was rather a shifting metric. Taylor (2019) argues that the very act of property valuation is a political act, and that "property values are where culture meets economics" (Conley quoted in Taylor 2019, p. 106). Property values are based on a matrix of factors that range from hard established quantifiable facts (the number of bedrooms and the square meterage of a flat, the building materials used), to factors that are more ethereal, and that pertain to impressions, reputation, atmospheres, narratives about a neighbourhood and its residents. At the best of times producing property valuations is a complicated and imperfect act, one that cannot easily be standardised and be made accurate (see also D'Avella 2019 on practices of real estate valuers in Buenos Aires).

The low property valuations produced by the local authority reflected the material neglect of and lack of ongoing investment in the physical infrastructures of the estate (as discussed in chapter 4, Interrupted Flows), as well as the negative reputation of the Aylesbury as produced and reproduced by damning mediatic narratives, and the impact of the impending demolition. As I have discussed in detail in chapter 6, Second-Class Post, a dimension that is less widely discussed in

the literature on housing estate demolition in London is the way discourses of decline and failure has strong racial connotations. The low financial valuations are also part of a history of spatial marginalisation. When the 'reputation' of the Aylesbury estate is invoked, the subtext, rarely explicitly named, is of what AdbouMaliq Simone (2017) has dubbed "the black city": "blackness was something attributed more to particular urban spaces as a means of devaluing their residents and establishing these spaces as incomplete in terms of emerging norms and value of the "modern city"" (Simone 2017, p. 1). Racialised Aylesbury residents are keenly aware of this fact. The 'blight' that marked the estate, and that placed it outside the realm of market property valuations of the global city, is both produced by the long-term regeneration, by the planned disinvestment and, quite importantly but often left unspoken, by the narratives that mark it as a space racialised as black. The estate was thus blighted<sup>25</sup> by its past and its future. However, leaseholders were not ready to accept this state of affairs.

#### 7.4 Financial Refusal

As I have discussed in previous chapters, the Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group (ALAG) combined an overall critique of the regeneration/demolition scheme with efforts to negotiate better rehousing conditions, be it in the form of higher sales prices or improved compensation offers. They therefore both campaigned for halting the scheme altogether and thus for retaining their homes, as well as for improved home loss conditions. ALAG was skilled at combining these two aims and navigating between the different types of negotiations and narrations that accompanied each of the two aspects of their campaign. In chapter 5, Into the Lion's Den, I argue however that the limits and contradictions of this approach came to the fore at certain key moments of the campaigns, such as at the closure of the CPO public inquiry. In the rest of this chapter, I instead focus on the negotiations for improved financial conditions tied to home loss and rehousing, and I argue for an understanding of ALAG's position as one of *financial refusal*, which members put in action through a range of strategies that I will discuss in detail below.

Langley (2008), in his analysis of the way financialised logics permeate contemporary everyday lives in Anglo-America, identifies instantiations of 'financial dissent', which, he argues, are not of a collective or organised nature, and are often "ambiguous and compromised" (Langley 2008, p. 17). He includes socially responsible investments, credit unions, and art movements in this list. Roitman (2018) speaks of 'fiscal disobedience' in the context of a Cameroonian civil disobedience movement against the State's fiscal authority. Colau and Alemany (2013) analyse the Spanish grassroots organisation PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, Platform for people affected

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<sup>25</sup> The outcome of two court cases regarding valuation disputes have calculated that blight accounts for 10% of its devaluation.



by Mortgages) and its strategies to fight for the rights of homeowners threatened with foreclosures by engaging directly with the banks to demand renegotiation of debt repayment conditions. The modus operandi of the PAH is akin to that of a direct-action movement with a clear underpinning political analysis of the context of the mortgage crisis. These examples of social movements that engage with state and financial institutions, such as banks and lending providers and central government, provide a useful context and comparative position from which to analyse ALAG's position and strategies.

I define ALAG's position as one of financial refusal in the first instance to recognise the leaseholders' position of refusing the overall logic that underpins the threatened loss of their homes. Rather than accepting the local authority's rationale for demolition, ALAG developed a critique of the regeneration/demolition, and a fundamental understanding of its overall effects as dispossessive of leaseholders, tenants and the neighbourhood. This included refusing the temporal logic that the local authority operated under in their interactions with residents, of demolition as a *fait accompli*, as already accomplished: ALAG leaseholders instead continued to use a language and orientation that refused to accept that *things could not be different*. Secondly, the term financial refusal also encompasses ALAG's members understanding of their positions as 'vulnerable homeowners', with their histories marked by classed and racialised forms of marginalisation (as discussed in chapter 6, Second-Class Post).

So, while ALAG does not have roots in existing social movements, or an overarching critique of homeownership as a tenure, as for example the Spanish PAH does, through the development of these critiques, ALAG becomes more than a mere expression of individualised and depoliticised dissent. In addition to ALAG's critique of the spatial exclusionary policies implicit in the regeneration/demolition, financial refusal however also includes demands for financial forms of compensation and redress for the loss of home. Here home is defined as braided concept bringing together the notion of a rooted, affective space of familial relationality with that of an important financial asset: a financial investment, and a space to live embossed with the investments of time, care and work to make it a safe base for the household, as we have seen in the section above. It is at this intersection where the refusal to lose home as *both* 'shelter' and 'equity' (as the Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva quote opening this chapter puts it), that interesting tensions come to the fore. The language of the protection of financial investment is sometimes in strident dissonance with the language for the protection of home as shelter, exactly because the separation of those two domains posits it.

I will now turn to ALAG's strategies to enact their financial refusal. First, a short summary: the local authority had been presenting leaseholders with valuations on their properties that were well below the market values of homes in the surrounding neighbourhood, and incommensurable with the

prices of the buildings that were being built on the small areas of the estate that had already been demolished and rebuilt. Leaseholders have over the years responded to these low valuations in a number of ways. Some accepted the low offers, and unfortunately these former residents are outside the scope of this research, as I have not been able to interact and interview them. Many others have instead refused the offers: the low uptake of buy-backs ten years after the start of this process suggests that many bid their time, and did not enter into any negotiations, or agreements, often for years. The leaseholders I focus on here and over the course of the thesis are ones that have organised through ALAG and whose financial refusal has taken on a collective form. Here I focus in particular on three households, the Northchurch 3 leaseholders, who were part of the wider ALAG group, and regularly participated in the meetings, as well as holding their own, smaller gatherings to discuss their own particular situation.

A cornerstone of ALAG's practice was to break the silence surrounding prices and valuations, and to share as much information with each other as possible regarding financial matters. Whilst this has not always been a smooth process, with some leaseholders accepting deals with the council that involved non-disclosure agreements, it became a recurring ritual to share any updates on valuations publicly during ALAG meetings. During a gathering in June 2018, participants shared that the valuations for a three- and two-bedroom flat had come at £280,000 and £250,000 respectively. These represented distinct improvements on initial offers. John, one leaseholder owning a four-bedroom flat, had over the years received offers of £160,000 in 2014 and £235,000 in 2015. Sharing these figures publicly allowed the group to establish any discrepancies in the valuations, and helped shape a picture of what was happening beyond each individual case. The act of sharing in a group also provided a much-needed opportunity to break the isolation that households had been feeling, and to collectivise some of the stresses and anxieties that the process was causing. The realisation the issues were common and shared provided a much-needed psychological support.

During the meetings leaseholders often also compared the figures they were offered to the prices on the new housing developments that were starting to become available on the first Aylesbury development sites: during one meeting, members discussed how one housing development offered three-bedroom flats at prices starting from £590,000 – minimum income needed to purchase: £73,000, a figure well beyond the average income of the group's participants. While sharing these figures, scoffing, angry laughter and disbelief were common reactions within the group, and a cue to sharing stories. Victoria, a very active ALAG member, often told of the time she tried to view one of the new flats on sale across the road from hers: she was asked to disclose her income at the showroom's door, and she was refused entry after sharing the figure. The humiliation of that experience ran deep, and narrating it to the group was always a cathartic experience that helped Victoria feel less isolated.

The property valuations were important pieces of information for leaseholders because they provided a landscape of possibility for the future. These figures were not used to compare the price that they paid for their flats in the past (and thus to calculate how much value had accrued and how much they had gained financially), but rather leaseholders looked at them in relation to the options they gave them in the present and future. What they saw when looking at the figures, was in fact the preclusion of possibilities, an “evacuation of the near future”, to employ a well-known phrase by economic anthropologist Jane Guyer (1997). While the values had of course increased in comparison to the initial price they had paid for them (the Right to Buy can provide sizeable discounts<sup>26</sup>), the present depressed valuations “will not even get us a broom cupboard in this area”, as we have already heard Prudence say. The low valuations therefore, even if they represented a significant gain on initial investments, were a set-back at best, and an existential threat for many, in the journeys towards financial upward mobility for their households, and in their ability to continue living in London.

If the sharing of the financial offers from the Council allowed leaseholders to create a fuller picture of the buy-back process, it quickly became clear that a priority of the group should be the production of new financial valuations for their flats, as a way of creating counter-offers and negotiating. In fact, leaseholders do have the right to appoint an independent surveyor who is tasked with valuing the property, and with engaging with the council’s surveyors to agree on a price. The surveyor’s fees are paid for by the council, and they should represent the leaseholders’ interest vis-a-vis the acquiring authority. It is their role to conduct negotiations on behalf of the leaseholders. However, the appointment of independent surveyors proved to be a thorny subject. The council initially provided a list of surveyors that leaseholders could choose from, however ALAG leaseholders considered these surveyors to be “in the council’s pocket”, not trusting them to be truly independent and to represent their interests. Often these independent valuations did not differ too greatly from the initial valuations.

ALAG therefore set out to search for more suitable candidates to represent them, and organised meetings where valuers could speak to the group and pitch their services. Dan is one of the valuers who a number of ALAG members appointed this way. After working on land assembly, acquiring leaseholder interest for a large London regeneration project, he spotted an opportunity to work for leaseholders instead, and set up an independent business that targets them on housing estates as clients for his surveying business. In an interview, Dan told me about how he understands his role. He explained that whilst he is keen to act in the best interest of his clients, he also needs to act professionally and provide realistic valuations, and not inflate prices beyond what

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<sup>26</sup> In addition, ALAG leaseholders often remarked that if the major work charges they had paid to the local administration over the years were included in those calculations, the amount they invested in their flat would increase (without having had an appreciating effect of the valuation, for the reasons we saw above).

is reasonable. It is his job to make compromises and broker best possible deals, that include various types of compensation beyond the price of the property itself. The value of the property nonetheless remains at the centre of the process but any sales at a given price create market precedents which will then impact the prices across the remaining unsold properties on the rest of the estate. ALAG leaseholders, and Northchurch leaseholders in particular, had a tense relationship with their surveyors, often finding them wanting in their valuations and not forceful enough in their negotiations. Northchurch leaseholders appointed one surveyor but conducted the bulk of the negotiations themselves, as a group, and accompanied by a number of supporters like myself, Toby E. and other advocates from the 35% Campaign.

One of the valuation negotiation strategies that surveyors like Dan used was to identify 'comparables', that is to say, properties with similar enough characteristics to the blighted Aylesbury flats at the centre of the negotiations, but on sites that are not under regeneration. Sales figures from such comparable properties are then used in negotiations with the local authority's surveyors. When identifying comparables, Dan looked for concrete high rises in similar geographical areas, built at a similar time. Building materials and age were thus deemed to be the fundamental objective characteristics that could help determine a higher financial value of the Aylesbury flats, after all other associations, characteristic and metrics were removed from the equation.

In addition to arriving at their own valuations, the three Northchurch households decided to refuse the individualisation of the negotiations, and instead demanded to negotiate with the local authority as a group. They reasoned that this strategy would improve their chances of reaching a positive outcome, and would give them some advantage in the negotiations. The local authority initially rejected the demand, arguing that private financial information would need to be discussed and disclosed during the negotiating process, and that households would not want to share such intimate details with each other. Eventually however the local authority relented, and over the course of the two years during which I worked closely with the Northchurch 3, we attended meetings with council officials, putting forward deputations at council assemblies, and met with surveyors as a group, pushing back on any strategies to divide and rule. We also regularly met in one of our flats, transforming living rooms, kitchens and balconies into impromptu meeting spaces, and we did a lot of talking whilst waiting in the lobby at Southwark Council, on buses, and occasionally, in front of a pint in a pub.

When we started working together, the Northchurch group decided that they would only consider a straight up sale of their flats, but before reaching this decision they had to consider the other rehousing options that the council and the developer were offering. One option was to become a council tenant again: "Going back to the rent", as Kostas once put it, was considered by many

leaseholders a step backwards in the trajectory of upward class mobility that ownership promised, although it would provide a way of 'cashing in' on their initial RTB investment and having access to the difference in purchase price and sale price. Another option was to re-invest a percentage from the sale into the shared-ownership or shared equity of a property either on the new development on the footprint of the Aylesbury or in another development or estate elsewhere in the borough. The shared ownership and shared equity options, the council argued, would allow RTB resident leaseholders to remain in the local area and to continue to be homeowners. Leaseholders, however, understood this as a very unfavourable offer, and one that would decrease their rights, their financial standing, and ultimately undermine their project of home ownership as a long term multi-generational investment that facilitates social mobility and support the families through various life phases. Legal scholarship has indeed criticised shared ownership on the basis that, in legal terms, it fails to deliver the advantages of ownership attached to 'regular' forms of leasehold and freehold. It is argued that shared ownership falls short of many of the values commonly associated with homeownership, such as a sense of autonomy and independence, long-term security, the ability to release equity, and easy access to the value accrued by the property over time (Bright and Hopkins, 2011). Leaseholders in ALAG are keenly aware of these limits, especially in relation to the clauses imposed on subletting (and therefore using the property as a source of income), and the limits to the possibility of inheriting the property for non-domiciled family members, and beyond one inheritance cycle. These restrictions put limits on exactly that ability for the property to act as an intergenerational form of wealth transmissions which is so central to the attractiveness of property ownership in the first place.

Many leaseholders were also simply not eligible for the option of shared ownership, because of their inability to secure a mortgage, on age (too high) or earnings (too low) grounds. I argue here that those who might have been eligible for a mortgage, but who considered the shared ownership an unattractive offer, also objected to returning to a condition of debt through mortgaging, a solution that did not seem like an investment into the future, but rather a profound tethering to an exploitative financialised housing system, one that would never result in full ownership rights. Shared ownership was squarely a 'bad investment' in their eyes. And after the Aylesbury debacle, they were more cautious than ever not to make a mistake again.

In addition, despite the attractive brochures and show flats, many leaseholders were also not convinced of the quality of the newly built flats, which are seen as superficially attractive but constructed to poor standards and full of flaws, small in size, lacking in parking spaces and with high service charges. On the occasion when leaseholders went to see flats in new developments, they also found that they were offered flats in the most unfavourable locations on the developments, close to sources of noise and pollution or in dark corners. Once again, the risk of

spatial marginalisation, which the Northchurch leaseholders had extensively experienced throughout their lives, seemed to be looming large.

On these grounds, many leaseholders considered the shared ownership option as a downgrading of their condition. The Northchurch leaseholders in particular decided that they preferred to receive a sum of money in exchange for their properties; some of this sum would pay off existing mortgages, and the rest each household could decide how best to put it to use. The negotiation strategy that Northchurch leaseholders used was to ask for a total compensation figure of £450,000 and £400,000 for three and two bedrooms flats respectively, figures which were well above the council's offer. Felix put the offer on the table during one particularly tense meeting with the council's buy-backs team, who responded negatively, stating that "the value is the value", and as such, as an objective fact, the value could not change. The asking price was too high. Dan, the independent valuer that the Northchurch teams had appointed, told me that in his experience RTB leaseholders on regeneration estates are seen with great antipathy and generally labelled as greedy and money grabbing within council and developers' offices. He describes some of the language that is routinely used to speak about them as unsavoury, and lacking in empathy and understanding. Dan's anecdotal experience chimes with the way leaseholders experience their interactions around buy-backs with council workers. Leaseholders describe being talked down to, patronised, and treated with antagonism during their meetings.

The leaseholders continuously need to temper their request for higher valuations against the charge of 'greediness'. Leaseholders are keenly aware not to be seen to be requesting too much, and they often reiterate that they are only after "what is right", to "not be ripped off". The leaseholders' messaging is a balancing act. It has to encompass both the idea that they are entitled to the right price for their properties and to be treated with fairness within a predicament that is not of their choosing, and the idea that they are not acting in a shrewd way to exploit the situation to their financial benefit. During their negotiations with the council officials, as well as in any public communications with the press or in statement, they consistently combined a message about financial loss with one about loss of home and community ties to maintain this balance. During their negotiations, Northchurch leaseholders had turned the tables and engaged in a particularly pointed form of financial refusal: they had made an offer themselves, rather than responding to offers; and they refused to meet or engage with any council officials alone, and insisted to always be met as a group, and in the presence of witnesses, often in front of a video camera, an audio recorder or a phone. With this strategy they managed to de-individualise the negotiations, and with the help of supporters and witnesses, they hold on to their guns. In early 2020, more than five years after receiving the first letter from the council talking about buy-backs and threatening compulsory purchase, the Northchurch leaseholders settled for a compensation price of £425,000/£390,000, and walked away from their properties.

Once the sales had been finalised, the Badus and their neighbours organised a farewell party in one of their Northchurch flats, which they had now moved out from. I attended with Victoria, and we walked together along Northchurch's external deck passing boarded up door after boarded up door to reach flat 70, only one of three that at this point still donned a wooden door rather than metal sheeting. We stood on the flat's large balcony overlooking Plot 18, which was at this time a large dusty construction area, but previously had housed a small communal garden with three mature trees, as well as more low-rise blocks of flats, a football and volleyball court, and a large community centre. That evening looking out from the balcony over the bare ground and at the parked diggers, it felt like we were in an outpost holding on by teeth and nail in a derelict landscape. Felix had spent the previous week moving all the family's possessions out, and we sat in the bare-bone but welcoming living room: a single dim lightbulb hang from the ceiling, but in a corner a small table was overflowing with wine bottles and food, and the perimeter of the space was lined with chairs and mattresses to sit on. As the guests filed in, more bottles and snacks were added to the table, everyone took a seat, and soon enough the room filled with chit chat and music. The guests in the room that night included leaseholders who had already been through the process of selling back their properties, and others whose process would not start until many years later. The emotion in the room was palpable; as the sun set, the Northchurch 3 gave speeches, recited prayers, offered public thank-yous as the light slowly dimmed and the empty lot outside of the window turned to darkness. The Northchurch leaseholders gave advice to those still negotiating their own sell-back: "stick together"; "do not let them divide and conquer"; "ask for a price and stick to your guns"; "don't be intimidated"; "support the 'weakest links' in the group, don't let them give up". People took turns telling stories: that epic time Felix made the 'second-class post speech' at the council assembly; the way private couples argued and disagreed about when and for how much to sell; the frantic day the last offer was made and accepted, the stream of phones calls and messages between the families, the decision to settle. The feeling in the room was heightened. The Badus and their neighbours were both relieved that the anxiety and stress of the selling back process was finally over, after years of uncertainty, and yet they were also deeply saddened by the experience. Buying property had been an achievement fuelled by hard work and dedication, and was meant to become a legacy for their children, and a material proof that all their hardship and sacrifice had resulted in something. Ending it like this, with a battle, felt exhausting and humiliating, although the Northchurch 3 had also pulled off a victory of sorts.

Aylesbury leaseholders' narratives about their life trajectories and their involvement in the estate and in their flats speak about investments into place and into property that combine financial considerations with concerns about intergenerational continuity, development of community relations, education, and social mobility. Material and immaterial investments are deeply intertwined and cannot be neatly separated from one another. The investment in property through Right to Buy is situated within the migratory project that spans multiple generations and that is an

ongoing concern, and that fits into longer histories of colonial relations and into day-to-day hardships linked to an exclusionary job market and a racist social context.

Fully cognisant of the dominant narratives that depict black and working-class city areas as marked by failure, lack and social exclusion, leaseholders speak up against such narratives when they can, highlighting instead the success and achievements of their families and lives. I have started this chapter with the notion of investment and with the idea that leaseholders, in very challenging circumstances, made the Aylesbury their home and shaped it, as best as they could, in their image. The threat of dispossession, presented to leaseholders as the very unfavourable offers of shared-ownership or a return to a council tenancy, is most fully expressed in the low financial valuations that the council is offering for the buy-backs. The investment in property reveals its limits and the liabilities of low-income homeownership come to the fore, and it is therefore around the financial valuations of properties that much of the conflict congeals.



## 8. Conclusion

The Northchurch Three's final gathering was marked by an unusually emotive atmosphere. However, it also resembled the many other meetings I attended over the course of fieldwork: it featured a circle of chairs arranged in a small living space, with people squeezing in next to each other, perching, elbows touching. Gatherings in living rooms and kitchens create and nurture communities and networks – familiar, communal, political - and increasingly so since the many tenant halls and community spaces that had once been dotted around the estate, either closed down or were demolished. A great part of the research for this thesis was carried out in informal gatherings in living rooms, balconies and community centres, where residents and activists met and discussed their situation in relation to the regeneration plans, the demolition of the estate and the living conditions in their flats. Talk of broken heating and property valuations also invariably drifted into chat about much else beyond, from children to marriage celebrations, divorces, and business. The home *un*making of regeneration/demolition includes the subtraction of spaces for communal gathering – be they private homes, community halls, amenities and services. At the same time, refusing regeneration/demolition is in itself a process of renewed community building, with new relations and networks being forged under conditions of duress.

The overall aim of my research was to understand the demolition of the Aylesbury estate from an anthropological perspective. I posed three sets of research questions, the first on demolition itself; the second on residents' experiences of living within demolition and on residents' demolition refusal; and the third about the role of the visual within this field. The first set of questions asked: what constitutes demolition? Through what type of mechanisms is it carried out? What dynamics and instruments shape it? What is the materiality and temporality of demolition? How is demolition best conceptualised?

At the outset of my research, I conceptualised demolition as an assemblage of diverse processes that take place across sites, scales and temporalities. I arrived at this conceptualisation after an initial phase of research during which I understood that the 'work' of demolition far exceeds the physical dismantling of a building. The discursive *un*making of housing estates through narratives of failure and decay has received much academic attention (Campkin 2013 *in primis*). However, I found that this is accompanied by a raft of procedures that are legal, material, financial and infrastructural. These are far less prominent in existing literatures on housing estate regeneration and demolition. My thesis shows how these different, but interrelated aspects of demolition are activated at different times before arriving at a point of physical dismantling. At times they continue alongside and after the physical dismantling of buildings too. An ethnographic approach grounded in a materialist STS-informed orientation allowed such a conceptualisation to emerge. Taking as

my starting point the everyday life and concerns of engaged residents on the estate, I identified four key areas or processes that constitute the demolition assemblage: managed infrastructural decline; compulsory purchase proceedings; histories of racialised housing exclusion; and financial valuations. The law, the financial, the infrastructural, and the historical, are all domains that are activated in demolition. Through the case studies that I developed in each of the chapters, I have shown that the demolition assemblage braids together different concerns about home as shelter, dwelling, familial and intergenerational financial and affective asset. The *unmaking* of home affects all these interconnected spheres.

Over the course of the thesis I have shown that the interrelations between these distinct domains are equally important. In Urban Studies, an assemblage has been defined as a “gathering of heterogeneous elements consistently drawn together as an identifiable terrain of action and debate” (Baker and McGuirk, 2017, p. 4 quoted in The Rearrangements Collective 2023, p. 463). I understand this ‘gathering’ as the encounter between the distinct domains and processes. This implies an interrelation and a mutual dependency between, for example, the legal domain and the discursive and material ones. While each chapter of the thesis focuses on a specific domain, there are multiple connections between the domains that link them to one another. One key thread that runs through the thesis concerns the impact of racism on the demolition assemblage. I have shown that the economic and spatial marginalisation of racialised citizens shaped the demolition assemblage through and through. From the allocation of hard-to-let flats on the Aylesbury estate in the 1980s to tenants of colour, to the differential financial valuations of right-to-buy leasehold properties, histories of racialised violence and exclusion have accompanied the formation of the estate, its regeneration and demolition. The devalorisation of the estate is inextricably linked to its status as a ‘black space’. The association of raised pedestrian concrete walkways with putative ungovernable, criminal black residents, reemerges at the point in which surveyors assess properties as low in financial market value. I therefore argue that racialisation and racism, as well as class, are central to the operation of demolition.

While I conceptualised the demolition as an assemblage, I have not set out to describe and analyse the demolition assemblage in its entirety, as a complete whole. Rather, I have selected key processes as they emerged through my engagement with resident collaborators. In this sense, I have been driven by the interests and the concerns of those residents with whom I associated. The prevalence of resident leaseholders amongst my participants has shaped the direction of research in fundamental ways. The thesis’ focus on property relations, financial valuations and compulsory purchase reflects this. Important areas that I did not explore are the rehousing process of council tenants; the letting of empty properties to temporary tenants; the use of partially empty buildings by the homeless. These are aspects of demolition/regeneration that have either received attention in the literature or that could be pursued in a different piece of research. In conclusion,

my assemblage-driven approach does not aim to provide a complete and definitive understanding of all aspects of demolition. Rather, it aims to link a select number of processes that I have identified as key to residents' experiences of demolition. I will expand on the practical and theoretical implications of this approach further below.

An important point about the interrelation of the assemblage domains is the link between immaterial and material spheres. In the thesis I argue that class and racial stigmatisation and symbolic devaluation have material dimensions. The development of a discourse of failure, through the use of the term 'sink estate', for example, creates the preconditions that justify the need for demolition. However, discourses of failure do not solely operate in an abstract realm, rather they have concrete, tangible repercussions that are felt, seen and sensed by residents in their everyday lives. In chapter 4 I argue that managed decline – the wilful subtraction of routine maintenance work – impacts residents' health, sense of self, and personal ambitions as buildings and homes' conditions deteriorate. The corporeal experience of cold and damp contributes to the idea of failed buildings and at the same time is a sensorial, material incarnation of demolition. In the same chapter I show that the architectural feature of the walkways was a material manifestation of ideas of social welfare provision and deservingness. Their subsequent association with crime became materially manifested in their excision from the urban landscape through selective demolition. The walkway demolitions are both an anticipation of overall estate demolition, as well as an intervention that is felt in the everyday lives of residents in their attempts to safely and quickly walk to and from their homes. The demolition is felt and sensed in these material, sensorial and tangible terms by the residents who continue to dwell within a building undergoing demolition.

I found that the materiality of demolition is profoundly connected to value, both financial and affective. The loss of quality of life through managed decline accompanies a steady decline in financial property values. A key aspect of the demolition assemblage is therefore the devaluation of properties and neighbourhoods which is reflected in a loss in financial value. The work of repossessing homes, which is the responsibility of the council, produces a series of conflicts on the determination of property values. In chapters 6 and 7 I have argued that neighbourhood devaluation cannot be understood without taking into consideration longer histories of racialised housing exclusion in the UK. Building on black geography literatures I found that spatial marginalisation along racialised lines is entwined with financial devaluation. I argue that financial property values are part of the materiality of demolition, and over the course of the thesis I show how they are connected to managed decline and histories of racialisation.

Over the course of my research, I developed an interest in the specific temporalities of demolition. I have thus far established that the physical dismantling of a building is but one moment in a much longer, complex process. It is but the culmination of a series of related processes of *unmaking* that

take place in court rooms, offices, newspapers and living rooms. Each of these contains their own temporal dimension. In addition, the peculiar length of the Aylesbury regeneration/demolition facilitates and calls for an attention to time. I started the research for this thesis in 2014, and as I write these concluding remarks in 2024, it is evident that there is no firm closure to speak of. Over these last 10 years the 4-phased Aylesbury regeneration/demolition has seen phase 1 ‘decanted’ (to use the official council terminology), demolished and now almost entirely rebuilt, as has the small area known as Plot 18 where the Northchurch block used to stand. Amidst the high-density private and housing associating dwellings that have been erected, there are also some council flats, and a number of community provisions such as a library and a new health centre. The developer is re-applying for the phase 2 planning permission after the first application was stalled by a court case brought forward and won by Aysen and the Public Law Interest Centre. Tenants living in phase 3 are still being ‘decanted’, but the council has stopped leasehold buy-backs. While the regeneration/demolition is by no means complete, a new wave of housing campaigning which centres ecological concerns is issuing renewed calls for refurbishment and retrofitting. Far from being resolved, the future remains open, although the prospects for just and equitable housing provision for the existing residents remains scant – even if the regeneration of phases 3 and 4 is called off (as whispers suggest in some quarters), the issue of maintenance and repair remains as live as ever.

One of the ambitions of this thesis has been to take this condition of prolonged, suspended and fractured uncertain time seriously. Rather than being just an “evacuation of the near future” (Guyer 2007), the tidal wave of regeneration/demolition disrupts both the past and the long-term futures, as multi-generational trajectories of migration and social mobility are disrupted. This disruption is both very material and tangible, but it also affects people’s efforts of creating meaningful life narratives. The thesis additionally contends that within the extended temporality that characterises the Aylesbury regeneration, other, nested, temporal orientations can be identified – in particular gestures of ‘postponement’ and ‘anticipation’ are activated at various junctures by various actors. The frictions and dissonances that arise from different temporal orientations are resonant of Bear’s suggestion that conflict about time is a marker of the contemporary condition (2014). I have found that bureaucratic time of regeneration/demolition (as expressed in policy and law processes) is in friction with the lived time of residents. The prolonged legal procedures create a suspended time in which uncertainty and stasis predominate, as has been widely established in the existing literature on demolition. I however additionally found that residents learn to use anticipations of the future as strategies of navigating the uncertainties of the present. Rather than just remaining passively trapped in their present predicament, they use strategies to anticipate future negotiations. In chapter 4 for example I show that the production of photographic archives of disrepair is a way of anticipating future court cases with the creation of evidence. Similarly, in chapter 6 I show that the expression of dissent in council meetings on the part of activist residents is not about the hope for

an immediate effect, but rather a way of leaving a trail of dissent that can be leveraged at later stages of their campaign. Anticipation, I argue, is therefore not the sole purview of regeneration professionals. Urban planners, architects and economists rely of course on projections of the future to map out demolition/regeneration, through financial models, architectural drawings and roadmaps. However marginalised residents are in these processes, at times they use their limited room for manoeuvre to anticipate future conflict scenarios.

Conceptualising the demolition as an assemblage and focusing on its materiality and temporality, allows for a focus on discreet moments or dynamics that inform the overall project but alone don't predetermine it. An ethnographic attention to detail and a close-up analysis of the mechanisms, instruments and tools of demolition make it possible to focus on the opportunities for intervention, conflict and change within the overall process. Political-economic frames of analysis are useful in understanding high-level patterns and dynamics, but they run the risk of obscuring the complex field of negotiation and conflict that unravels on the ground and that constitutes the assemblage. Understanding the demolition in this way implies that change or intervention is indeed possible. Official plans are continuously adapted in response to external forces such as world financial crises, changes in policy, political influences. In addition, the actions of residents and other citizens have also the power to change the direction of demolition. My interest lays exactly in understanding how and why residents intervene into the demolition assemblage. Over the course of my fieldwork, I followed the lead of my resident collaborators in identifying junctures within the demolition assemblage where critical intervention was possible. I set out to ask at what junctures do residents and other actors encounter the demolition? Where, when and how do they enact forms of dissent and refusal towards it? How is dissent and refusal manifested, enacted and communicated? What effect do these acts produce? What kind of subjectivities emerge from the refusal to demolition?

Over the course of my fieldwork I found that residents engage with the demolition in a multitude of ways. While the threat of demolition produces animosity and anxiety, not all forms of dissent towards the demolition can easily be subsumed under the category of 'resistance'. I have instead chosen to use the term refusal to encompass activities that grind against the demolition plans, but do not always take the form of overt protest. The choice of the concept of refusal also highlights the already mentioned racialised dimension of the demolition assemblage. By incorporating a term conceptualised by scholarship on Black studies, it recognises the diverse forms of dissent that are enacted in a terrain shaped by racist histories and policies. Thinking about *refusal* also pushed me to incorporate actions that exceed the common tropes of political organising. I devote one chapter of the i-doc to an occupation of empty buildings that brought anarchist and anti-capitalist sensibilities to the demolition. However, I also considered it important to pause on less overt forms of critique, which were led by residents directly affected by the demolition.

I found that leaseholders are particularly active in refusing the demolition. The leaseholders' acts of refusal complicate a linear narrative of demolition as a subtraction of state-owned housing from the public. The leaseholders' use of Right to Buy and their participation in the mechanisms of social housing privatisation makes their position a complex one to navigate in a movement for the right to housing. The tensions that emerged during the compulsory purchase inquiry and the negotiations around valuations I cover in chapters 4 and 7, are expression of contradictions inherent in the Right to Buy project. Right to Buy enabled working class racialised council tenants to become homeowners, however the demolition/regeneration mechanisms reveal that property ownership continues to operate along differential lines. The demands and claims of leaseholders reflect this complex bundles of process. Possessive individualism and identification with property ownership are entwined with a critique of a differential right to citizenship, of which property ownership is one key determinant. Throughout the thesis I read leaseholders' forms of refusal through this lens. I argue that the figure of the 'vulnerable homeowner' emerges through the process of demolition/regeneration. Vulnerable homeownership remains liable to disruption, dispossession and interruption. It punctures the market narrative that posits property ownership as the prime, secure strategy of social mobility.

The temporality of the diverse forms of refusals that I describe is important: rather than focussing on the moment displacement, I paused on residents' experiences of 'living through' demolition. Looking at what happens before, or in the lead up, to displacement, and how it happens, allows for an opening towards the refusal of the inevitability of a certain outcome. The residents' forms of refusal from within demolition include requests to maintain and repairs their homes and buildings; the negotiations of just valuations; the rejection of narratives of failure; the creation of counter narratives that criticise experiences of managed decline, racism and devaluation. In other words, injecting the political economic frameworks that analyse housing estate demolition as a form of accumulative dispossession and privatisation with an ethnographic focus on the material, symbolic and temporal dynamics as they unfold, also opens spaces for situated critique. This approach considers residents as active and engaged agents within the regeneration/demolition, rather than simply as victims overcome by the powerful and unstoppable forces of economics and politics. This does not detract from naming the processes at play as dispossessive violence, but it allows us to learn a style of critique as developed by residents, one that is steeped in the everyday experiences of living through and in demolition. Central to this are the historical positionings of power that already shape the field and that mark bodies and spaces, and bodies within spaces.

A concern with the role of anthropological research and its ethics is central to my framework. I employed an array of visual methodologies to productively engage with these issues. I set out to explore the following questions: what kind of approaches to the visual can contribute to a critical

analysis of social housing demolition and resident displacement? How can the visual help us investigate and understand demolition, displacement and refusal? How can a filmmaking practice be political in this context? How can that be done effectively in a field so pervasively saturated with entrenched visual representations that reify their subjects into narrative straightjackets? How do we avoid reproducing such closed representations?

I chose to work within the contested field of demolition, and with the diverse range of residents enacting gestures of refusal, through a practice of 'engaged collaboration'. As I involved myself in resident-led activities, we grappled together with questions and concerns, and I used a range of creative methods to mediate, support, express and communicate these concerns. Rather than using a formulaic approach (for example, by giving myself the mission of 'making of a documentary film') I instead steered towards a practice of listening to my collaborators and responding to the needs that each specific fieldwork situation and relation demanded, in a dynamic way. This has resulted in a range and number of outputs, some tangible and others less so – starting from the short video clips for social media from the occupations' eviction, to the longer documentary film that brought them together in a more narrative form which was shown in public at housing justice events (see → Livingroomidoc / HousingCampaigns / FightfortheAylesbury film), to the creation of an archive of public inquiry recordings, as well as the co-creation of the Fight4Aylesbury public exhibition. This practice has also included writing and designing flyers and leaflets, and nurturing ongoing relationships of care, which are less readily visible in the thesis, but nonetheless are constitutive of my work.

Working with video became therefore one way of the ways in which I engaged in the field. Filming, making short videos, being present with the camera and voice recorder, creating archives of dissent, were ways of mediating my presence that helped develop relationships and gave me a role within the landscapes of refusal that I encountered. My 'engaged collaboration' approach meant that I contributed to an existing field of refusal through visual creations that I authored. These were developed in response to ongoing debates and events taking place in the field. They respected overall frameworks of engagement that my resident collaborators developed, and which centred on the rejection of stigmatisation. While I operated within these overall guidelines, I also engaged with ongoing debates, discussions and disagreements between residents. Rather than being a homogenous group, residents expressed a multiplicity of views and approaches towards demolition refusal. My visual contributions reflect my own interpretations and positionings within this fractured landscape, rather than mirroring that of any group or individual. Collaboration in this sense is a dialogical process through which the parties involved develop their outlook, through a shared practice of advocacy and activism steeped in everyday life.

Therefore, it is my contention that engaged anthropological research is most effective when it responds to the field in a dynamic way. It cannot escape debate, criticism and fracture – rather, those elements are constitutive of the process of engaged collaboration. I also argue that embracing and taking responsibility of their authorship is one way for the engaged researcher to contribute to the field. Relinquishing authorship is not always the most ethical way forward, although it certainly can be. During my fieldwork I both single authored short films, and I participated as a collaborator and supporter in collective creative endeavours, such as a the Fight4Aylesbury exhibition. An ethical research practice, I argue, responds dynamically to the changing demands of the field. Critically, it remains open to failure and to criticism.

This engaged research praxis resulted in a multiplicity of heterogeneous creative outputs. I resolved to present these outputs in the form of an i-doc to highlight this heterogeneity. The choice of using the i-doc also reflects the theoretical concerns that transverse the written chapters. Demolition understood as an assemblage of diverse processes is visually represented by the thematic strands that unfold from the central living room. Or alternatively, all the processes that constitute the demolition assemblage, converge back into the living room. The main concern when constructing the architecture of the i-doc website has been in giving form to this multiplicity of processes, in a way that is visible and tangible to the user. In one way, the interactive element is subservient to the larger aim to visualise the concomitant unfolding of demolitions processes and refusals. At the same time, the lack of a prescribed order in which to experience the materials also points to a refusal on my part to set up a univocal relationship between the elements and the themes by setting them in a particular order on an editing timeline, where scenes and sequences follow on from one another. The i-doc user certainly creates links and connections between the different materials, but the hope is that the lack of a pre-imposed order suffuses the experience with a sense of openness. Additionally, the open-ended form of the i-doc does not call for closure or for a sense of an ending as strongly as a linear film would – and it allows for some loose ends to remain so. It also allows for potential future additions and expansions, in directions still to be determined.

It has been my ambition throughout the thesis and the i-doc to not analyse the regeneration/demolition solely as an ending – of residents' inhabitation of a certain locale, but also of a certain idea of social housing as a public good and intrinsic to the post-war social contract. Instead I have foregrounded the relations and networks that continue to be built throughout this process, despite it and because of it. This insistence on 'staying within' regeneration/demolition is also an argument about searching for the continuities between what can be described as a post-war social democratic contract, and the neoliberal order that took hold from the 1980s onwards, rather than simply understanding it as a rupture. From the point of view of those residents that



have always been historically relegated to spatialised exclusion zones, this latest dispossession is but one more instantiation of an ongoing condition, in new forms.

While overall the regeneration/demolition is still very much under way, the majority of the residents with whom I worked during my research have now moved out. The moves themselves are not treated directly in the main body of the thesis, as for the most part my collaborators moved after I finished the main part of my fieldwork. However much I would have liked to pursue a line of inquiry into practices of home *remaking*, fieldwork demands an imposition of boundaries, and I drew mine around the geographical area of the Aylesbury: I chose not to follow residents after they had moved, at least not through research. However, I continued to develop relationships with some residents, and have kept in intermittent contact with others – this has included sharing parts of the thesis and the visual work with them, for example through the exhibition at Ayeen's. While preparing for the exhibition, I went to a local print shop owned by Nathan, the son of a leaseholding family who was part of ALAG for many years, and who I hadn't seen for a few years. As he printed a batch of Fight4Aylesbury t-shirts, I asked him about his parents, now elderly, who had moved out of London. I inquired about visiting them, perhaps to investigate the possibility of developing postdoctoral research into practices of home *remaking*, as the housing literature is thin in this area. Nathan reacted unusually strongly and said that his parents wanted to "forget all about" the Aylesbury, and that speaking about it would upset them no end, and he would really rather that I didn't. Other conversations with ex-residents also pointed in a similar direction: some did not want to see the films included in the i-doc, fearing it would trigger them too much. I have to admit that I was surprised by the strength of these reactions, just like Watt (2021) was: they brought home just how deeply traumatising the experience and memory of the regeneration/demolition continues to be, even for those who ultimately managed to negotiate an apparently acceptable rehousing solution. It also suggests that the issue is less about how far away residents are displaced or rehomed (although clearly distance from what one knows and is connected to is key), but how much the fabrics of community, place and infrastructures become frayed over years of regeneration/demolition.

While the information I have on these aspects of home *remaking* are anecdotal and have not been thoroughly explored yet, I have enough insight to hypothesise that the (ex) residents' effort to make sense of the regeneration/demolition and its long-term effects on their life trajectories and prospects is ongoing, and shaping to their home re-making in fundamental ways. I continue to think that research into this phase of the residents' trajectory on the Aylesbury would make an important contribution to the literature on displacement, and complement existing bodies of work. The displacement maps that activists and scholars have produced are a visually striking representation that would however benefit from in-depth qualitative data to bring them to life and tease out themes and concerns. However a sensitive and ethical approach would need to be

developed, so as to avoid re-traumatisation. Perhaps a process that aims to create individual and collective narratives and support strategies might be of interest to participants and provide a useful way of processing their histories.

Certainly, the creating and retelling of narratives and memories of regeneration/demolition is an important part of the work of sense-making, for residents as well as academics, policy makers, and civil society at large. I hope that this thesis and the i-doc represent a small contribution to the bodies of critical work that in a myriad ways forge narratives in which the triumphant official narration of regeneration/demolition as a solution to the 'problem of council housing', and by implication, the 'problem of council housing residents' are rejected. The double move to place the discourse of failure into a historical trajectory that saw the creation of an undeserving, racialised working-class, and to analyse it in detail in one of its most glaring contemporary incarnations, underlies this thesis. My aim has been to contribute to the critical literature on council housing regeneration/demolition in a way that centres residents' concerns and gestures of refusal. These gestures of refusal also point to the sites where the demolition assemblage is most active, and where residents have identified that intervention is possible: the managed decline of infrastructures, the legal trajectories of expropriation, the attribution of financial and moral value. I have also attempted not to shy away from the contradictions that distinguishes regeneration/demolition: in particular, the stories of Right to Buy leaseholders have been a prism through which to analyse the dynamics of public housing privatisation via Right to Buy, and subsequent re-privatisation via regeneration/demolition. In their condition as conduits of privatisation via Right to Buy, leaseholder inhabit a contradictory position that has made a more expansive analysis possible.

My overall approach in this work is also driven by a belief in anthropology's public mission to contribute to the imagining and creating of alternative ways of living and organising society – in line with current concern for an 'otherwise anthropology' (McTighe and Rashig 2019). Providing accurate readings of the present is indeed part of the work of imagining proposals for the future. Alternatives to a privatised and financialised housing system have more of a chance to be dreamt up and brought into being through a clear-eyed analysis of contemporary exclusions and their histories. On the one hand, within a capitalist system the decommodification of housing remains an impossibility, but with Madden and Marcuse (2016), referencing LeFebvre's approach, I do believe that the centrality of the housing system, and the attendant question of land, to the workings of contemporary racial capitalism, mean that conflicts around housing justice have the potential to intervene at the heart of systems of power. Working together with residents at the sharp end of dispossessive violence, to understand, narrativize and shape gestures of refusal, is therefore a small contribution towards the struggle for housing justice for all.

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## Filmography

*Concrete Heart Land* (2014) [HD video] Andrea Luka Zimmermann. UK.

*Concrete Soldiers UK* (2017) [HD video] Nikita Wolfe. UK

*Deadphant* (2020) [Super 8mm film] Ayo Akingbade. UK

*Dear Babylon* (2019) [2K video, 16mm film] Ayo Akingbade. UK

*Dispossession: The Great British Housing Swindle* (2017) [HD] Paul Sng. UK

*Fire in My Belly* (2021) [HD video] Ayo Akingbade/ UK

*Ghost Town* (2013-2016) [interactive database documentary] Enrica Colusso. UK

*Highbury* (2008-2015) [various] Katerina Cizek. Canada

*Home Sweet Home* (2012) [HD video] Enrica Colusso. UK

*Jaguar* (1967) [film] Jean Rouch. France

*Moi, Un Noir* (1958) [film] Jean Rouch. France

*Street 66* (2018) [2K video, 16mm film] Ayo Akingbade. UK

*The Changing Face of Camberwell* (1963) Winifred Crum Ewing

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-changing-face-of-camberwell-1963-online>.

*The Writing on the Wall* (1974) NA. UK

*Tower XYZ* (2016)[16mm film] Ayo Akingbade. UK

*Views of Vidigal* (2018) [HD video] Angela Torresan. UK

*We're Still Here* (2020) [HD video] Melissa Herman, UK