

Austerity urbanism and Olympic counter-legacies: Gendering, defending and expanding the urban commons in East London

Environment and Planning D: Society and Space

2018, Vol. 36(5) 812–830

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DOI: 10.1177/0263775817753844

journals.sagepub.com/home/epd



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Abstract

This article reflects on an occupation led by single mothers to contest the destruction of social housing in post-Olympics East London. In the process, it argues for a more gendered theorisation of the urban commons. Drawing on auto-ethnography, participant observation and qualitative interviews, the article argues three central points: First, that the occupation demonstrates the gendered nature of the urban commons and the leadership of women in defending them from enclosure; second that the defence of an existing urban commons enabled the creation of a new temporary commons characterised by the collectivisation of gendered socially reproductive activities; and third that this commoning has had a lasting impact on housing activism at the city scale and beyond. This impact is conceptualised as an ‘Olympic counter-legacy’ that is characterised by the forging of new relationships and affinities, the strengthening of networked activism and circulation of tactics between campaign groups.

Keywords

Housing crisis, urban commons, austerity, gender, social reproduction, occupation

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Introduction

In September 2014, a housing campaign headed by single mothers occupied two empty social housing units on the Carpenters Estate in Newham, East London. Newham Council had previously emptied the flats with a view to ‘regenerating’ the estate as part of their strategy to gentrify the area following the 2012 Olympic Games. The occupation by the Focus E15 campaign lasted for two weeks, before being evicted by the council. Local residents and people travelling from all over London attended workshops, comedy shows, film screenings, music gigs and meetings to discuss the city’s housing crisis. The occupation attracted attention across print, radio and TV media, with the women appearing on the front page of the online edition of *The Guardian* newspaper and featuring on Channel 4’s evening news programme.

This article draws on auto-ethnography and participant observation by three people involved in the ongoing Focus E15 campaign before, during and after the occupation. This experience is combined with 12 qualitative interviews with core members of the group and residents of the Carpenters Estate. It argues three central points about the significance of the occupation: first, that the occupation demonstrates the gendered nature of the urban commons and the leadership of women in defending them from enclosure; second, that the defence of existing commons provided the basis for the creation of a new temporary commons characterised by the collectivisation of gendered socially reproductive activities; and third, that this act of urban commoning has had a lasting legacy, evident in the circulation of tactics and strengthening of networked activism at the city scale and beyond. As such, we propose the notion of an ‘Olympic counter-legacy’ to conceptualise the sustained influence of the occupation on housing struggles in the context of austerity urbanism.

To begin, we examine existing research relating to gender, austerity and the urban commons, arguing that while austerity policies have been identified as having outcomes that specifically disadvantage women, the literature on urban commoning as a form of resistance to these policies has rarely reflected this. Next, we provide some background to the context of the study, outlining the way in which the housing crisis in London has unfolded and its relationship to the Olympic Games. Following this, we develop the three arguments outlined above and propose that an ‘Olympic counter-legacy’ has emerged through efforts to contest the processes of dispossession and displacement that have occurred in the wake of this mega-event.

Austerity, gender and the urban commons

‘Austerity urbanism’, as Jamie Peck (2012) has called the post-2008 round of public service cuts and welfare retrenchment, is alive and well in UK cities. Its effects, however, are spatially uneven, with the greatest impacts being felt in the most deprived urban areas (Fitzgerald and Lupton, 2015; Greer Murphy, 2016), and its excesses most visible in the housing crisis (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013; Vickery, 2012), a crisis that is deepest and most extensive in London. If austerity has a geography, it also has intensely gendered consequences (Greer Murphy, 2016). This is multifaceted across women’s disproportionate roles as public sector workers, service users and welfare recipients (Abramovitz, 2012), and has an intensified impact on single parents (Gingerbread, 2015) the majority of whom are women. In the UK, the impact on women has adopted a dizzying variety of forms (Unison, 2014). A full inventory of the cuts is too extensive for inclusion here (see Jensen and Tyler, 2015 for an overview). Overall, austerity increases the amounts of labour women must perform to plug the gaps left by state withdrawal (cf. Feminist Fightback, 2011); and dispossesses women of their means of the reproduction of life. As such, the on-going economic crisis, characterised by the

persistence of austerity policies, should be understood in gendered terms as a 'crisis of social reproduction' (Barbagallo and Beuret, 2012; Brown et al., 2013).

Importantly, such a crisis must be understood not only in terms of gender, but also in relation to its raced and classed effects. Its implications are not evenly distributed, but instead fall more heavily on the shoulders of those already facing oppressions based on class, gender and race (amongst others). In this context, white single-parent working-class women are amongst those who are most materially disadvantaged by austerity and most vilified as 'revolting subjects' (Tyler, 2013) in the hegemonic 'anti-welfare common-sense' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015). The long running pathologisation of working-class parenting has led to the discursive construction of working-class single mothers as abject and outside the confines of respectable working-class femininities (Mannay, 2014; Skeggs, 2005). Tyler (2008: 16) has pointed to the 'new vocabulary of social class' in which the figure of the 'female chav' has meant the mass vilification of 'young *white* working-class mothers' [own emphasis]. While not disavowing the clear structural disadvantage faced by working-class women of colour, this demonised figure has been specifically constituted racially as white. Such discourses, circulating around the figure of the 'chav mum', mark 'a new outpouring of sexist class disgust' (Tyler, 2008: 26).

It should of course be noted that austerity alone has not plunged working-class women into poverty, but has instead merely intensified the position that women have always occupied within capitalist regimes of accumulation. The on-going crisis has compounded working-class women's labour market disadvantage with rising levels of underemployment and the growth of poor quality feminised jobs including 'zero-hours' contracts (ONS, 2016). Austerity, then, constitutes 'a form of additional, rather than novel hardship' (Evans, 2015: 146). Since women are 'being pulled in two directions at once', both out of the home to sell their labour on the market while also being 'pushed back into the home through job losses and unemployment' (Feminist Fightback, 2011: 75), the home thus becomes a central site for women's struggle as unpaid reproductive labourers (Federici, 2012).

Austerity urbanism can be understood as the latest phase of neoliberal urban restructuring which has taken place globally since the 1980s (Peck, 2012). This restructuring has been theorised as a new round of the 'enclosure of the commons' as it involves the privatisation and dispossession of public and collective goods (De Angelis, 2007; Harvey, 2003). Within the literature on contemporary commons and enclosures, there is a growing interest in the notion of the urban commons. Urban commons exist in opposition to the commodity logic (Gidwani and Baviskar, 2011), although 'they are never complete and perfect and may even have components that contradict the ideal type' (Eizenberg, 2012: 765). Such commons can include streets and public spaces (Harvey, 2012); public and cooperative housing (Hodkinson, 2012a, 2012b); community gardens (Eizenberg, 2012); protest camps and occupied universities (Stavrides, 2016; Vasudevan, 2015); and informal squatter settlements (Gillespie, 2016). Hardt and Negri (2009: 137) argue that even the city itself should be understood as 'vast reservoir of the common'.

Rather than static spaces or resources, urban commons are created, maintained and defended through the everyday activities of city dwellers. According to Harvey (2012), public goods and spaces become commons when city dwellers take collective action to appropriate them. Legitimate collective property claims are established through 'sustained patterns of local use and collective habitation (and) ingrained practices of appropriation' (Blomley, 2008: 320). The word 'common', therefore, 'is as much a verb as a noun' (Chatterton, 2010: 626). Urban commons, such as social housing, decommodify urban goods and offer a degree of protection from market forces and autonomy from wage labour (Hodkinson, 2012a). However, since commons are constantly threatened with

enclosure through processes of privatisation, gentrification and the exclusionary policing of urban space (Gillespie, 2016; Harvey, 2012; Hodkinson, 2012a), they require communities to maintain and defend them (Gidwani and Baviskar, 2011). As Hodkinson (2012b) argues, actions to *defend existing* and *produce new* urban commons are intrinsically linked and often reinforce one another.

To date, theorisation of the urban commons has largely been gender neutral. However, autonomist Marxist feminism provides a conceptual framework for a gendered understanding of the commons. Emerging from the international women's movements of the 1970s, and influenced by Italian autonomist Marxism, writers such as Mariosa Dalla Costa and Selma James argued that women's unpaid housework, such as childcare, was essential to the reproduction of labour power, and therefore to the creation of surplus value under capitalism. This line of argument drew attention to the importance of the sphere of social reproduction for Marxist analyses of capitalism (Dalla and James, 1975). Where neither state nor market can guarantee the reproduction of human beings, Barbagallo and Federici (2012) argue, commons form the basis of more autonomous and collective forms of reproduction. Since women have historically and contemporaneously been responsible for the majority of socially reproductive labour, it follows that they are more dependent than men on common resources, such as communal kitchens in Latin America and urban farms in Africa (Federici, 2012). As such, due to their reliance on the commons, as well as their key role in their production, women have also typically been at the forefront of efforts to defend them from enclosure (Federici, 2012).

Richard Pithouse (2014) explores the gender dimension of urban commoning in his discussion of the threatened Motola Heights informal settlement in Durban, where eviction resistance was based on solidarities between people of Indian and African descent. These solidarities, he argues, were strengthened by the collective experience of washing clothes together in the river (Pithouse, 2014). Despite this notable example, however, there is a lack of scholarship that builds on the autonomist Marxist feminist canon to develop a gendered theorisation of the urban commons. This article seeks to address this by exploring the importance of gendered socially reproductive labour for understanding the political significance of urban commoning in the context of austerity urbanism. It does so by considering the example of an occupation of two social housing units in the East London Borough of Newham.

Urban occupations have emerged as a key resistive act since the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent imposition of austerity policies. In 2011, temporary protest camps proliferated in cities across the world under the banner of the 'Occupy' movement. Although primarily a means of protesting against the extreme inequalities of 21st-century capitalism, an emerging literature explores how these urban occupations create spaces for the production of new social relations, enabling the materialisation of non-capitalist imaginaries of urban life (Halvorsen, 2015a, 2015b; Stavrides, 2016; Vasudevan, 2015). Reflecting on the problems encountered by the Occupy movement, this literature raises two important questions about the emancipatory potential of urban occupations. First, the dominance of a macho activist culture at some protest camps raises the question of whether the collectivisation of socially reproductive activities tends to be marginalised from what is considered 'politics' proper (Halvorsen, 2015a). Second, the short-lived character of the Occupy movement raises the question as to what extent the new social relations created within these temporary spaces can be sustained and scaled up to enable long-term movement building (Halvorsen, 2015b; Srnicek and Williams, 2015). This article explores these questions through the case study of the Carpenters Estate occupation, paying particular attention to the importance of reproductive labour and the lasting legacy of the action.

Methods

Our involvement in the Carpenters Estate occupation and campaign preceded any intention to write about it. Gillespie heard about Focus E15 through a local tenants' organisation and Hardy by attending the street stall with members of Feminist Fightback, an anti-capitalist feminist collective based in East London. She helped co-organise an open campaign meeting at the Common House social centre in Bethnal Green, East London, which was attended by Gillespie and many others (see below). Both Gillespie and Hardy engaged in practical support for the Carpenters Estate occupation by collecting furniture and other resources for the flats, preparing the family fun day and setting up and maintaining up the campaign website (focuse15.org), writing press releases, calling journalists and knocking on doors on the estate. Prior to the occupation, Watt had met some of the Focus E15 campaigners as part of previous research projects undertaken in Newham. He attended the occupation on several occasions, as well as the post-occupation meeting held at the Docklands Community Centre on the estate (Watt, 2016). All three authors have subsequently remained involved in the Focus E15 campaign in various ways, by attending the regular weekly street stall, demonstrations, open meetings and social events, as well as through a campaign-led action research project examining the experiences of homeless Newham residents (Hardy and Gillespie, 2016). Essentially, we have been guided by Taylor's (2015) notion of 'being useful' by practicing reciprocity in terms of providing forms of labour or information needed by the campaign and also by producing research of interest and utility to the movement.

The three authors met each other through their involvement in the campaign and research questions emerged retrospectively through thinking about the significance of the occupation in dialogue with other campaign members. We were thus inspired to reflect on this action through our own direct experience as part of the campaign. Activist-scholar research has a long-standing place in geography (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Fox-Piven, 2010), enabling authors to explore and develop methods for bridging the artificial gap between the academy and activism. The auto-ethnographic technique used here was developed in the tradition of feminist research (Farrow et al., 1995). Auto-ethnography is a retrospective research practice and is often incidental to research, rather than pre-planned as 'the author does not live through these experiences solely to make them part of a published document; rather, these experiences are assembled using hindsight' (Ellis et al., 2011). As we have done here, this is often combined with further textual sources including photographs and qualitative interviews. In many ways, the recorded interviews were part of ongoing conversations, rather than standalone products of the research process. As such, our analysis is definitively shaped by our relational ties to the event itself and, importantly, to the other members of the occupation. In what follows we hope to have produced 'meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience' (Ellis et al., 2011), both our own and that of other occupiers.

Housing, homelessness and social cleansing in post-Olympics east London

The UK's nation-wide housing crisis has its intensive epicentre in London (Edwards, 2016; Watt and Minton, 2016). The underlying causes of London's housing crisis are well-rehearsed. They include a complex convergence of housing policies which have facilitated the treatment of homes as exchange, rather than use values. This has combined the 'Right-to-Buy' council housing, the reduction of funds for new building new social housing (Edwards, 2016) alongside the Coalition Government's (2011–2015) welfare and housing

'reforms' – the housing benefit cap, the 'bedroom tax', changes to housing allocations (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013) and cuts to local housing allowance (LHA) (Powell, 2015). The result is compounded unaffordability in all rental tenures. Given the worsening shortages of social rental housing, London councils are increasingly turning to the private rental sector (PRS) to provide temporary accommodation for their homeless populations (Rugg, 2016). Simultaneously, private landlords in London are increasingly unwilling to house individuals and families dependent on LHA as it no longer covers the escalating rental prices in the PRS (Powell, 2015; Rugg, 2016). The result is the expulsion of homeless families by councils to temporary accommodation in cheaper areas either within or increasingly *outside* London (Hardy and Gillespie, 2016; Powell, 2015; Watt, 2017).

These displacement flows form part of wider processes of what housing campaigners have dubbed 'social cleansing', whereby London councils remove the 'undeserving poor' from their areas (Watt and Minton, 2016). Such social cleansing processes are well underway in East London (Watt, 2017; Watt and Bernstock, 2017). The overarching *raison d'être* for the 2012 Olympic Games was to 'regenerate' East London and to establish 'Olympic Legacies' in the city. These 'legacies' have been subject to fierce debate, particularly regarding the effects on low-income East Londoners (Cohen and Watt, 2017; Kennelly, 2016; LLDC, 2016). The housing 'legacy' – which included providing 'homes for all' (Host Boroughs Unit, 2009) – has come in for particular criticism given that problems such as homelessness and overcrowding have worsened while the supply of social housing has not markedly expanded in the six Olympics' 'Host Boroughs' (Bernstock, 2014; Thompson et al., 2017; Watt and Bernstock, 2017). Furthermore, this worsening housing legacy contains a gendered dimension via its negative impacts on female-headed lone parent households (Watt, 2017).

The Carpenters Estate is located in Stratford in Newham, the Host Borough where 60% of the 2012 Games facilities were located. Central government cuts are particularly impacting upon deprived East London boroughs, with Newham experiencing the largest (26%) reduction in per capita local government spending power in London from 2010/11 to 2013/14 (Fitzgerald and Lupton, 2015). However, austerity urbanism must be understood not simply by the extent of overall funding cuts, but also from an examination of the actions of local state agents. Newham Council has had a long-standing antipathy towards social housing estates as creating 'ghettos of worklessness' (LBN, 2012: 1) and high levels of 'benefit dependency'. This has manifested itself in a reluctance to maximise social housing provision as part of new development schemes (Bernstock, 2014) and greater housing-related insecurity than the rest of the city in terms of mortgage and landlord evictions (Shelter, 2014), as well as high levels of temporary accommodation and housing waiting lists (Bernstock, 2014; Watt and Bernstock, 2017). By any measure of housing need, housing is in crisis in Newham in the post-2012 period (Thompson et al., 2017), despite the spin that is all too frequently put on a 'successful' Games legacy (LLDC, 2016).

The Focus E15 campaign

In September 2013, 29 young mothers living in the Focus E15 hostel in Stratford, Newham, received eviction letters from their housing association informing them that they would have to leave due to government cuts (Butler, 2013). Focus was a 'foyer' designed to provide housing and social support for young homeless people, including women with children. When the women approached Newham Council for help, they were advised that, due to cuts to housing benefit and the lack of affordable housing in London, they might have to accept private rented accommodation as far away as Manchester if they wanted to be rehoused (Butler, 2013). A comprehensive overview of the history of the Focus E15

campaign has already been presented elsewhere (Watt, 2016). As such, here we offer only a brief history to orientate the reader before focusing more closely on the occupation of the Carpenters Estate.

Following a chance encounter between two of the Focus E15 residents and the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), who ran a street stall in Stratford, the mothers asked if the group would help them design a petition to take to the Council. Over the following year, this relationship developed into a campaign which saw the women seek help from the Mayor of Newham, Robin Wales, only to be told: 'if you can't afford to live in Newham, you can't afford to live in Newham' (Jasmin).¹ Sensing that the campaign needed to become more combative, the tactics changed to include picketing the Mayor's Show, marching to Newham Town Hall, and temporary occupations of the Council's housing office and the housing association's showroom. This article explores in detail one specific temporary occupation of space – that of empty social housing units on the Carpenters Estate in September 2014.

The Carpenters Estate

The Carpenters Estate is located in Stratford, Newham, adjacent to the Olympic Park. It is a 1960s-built council housing estate, consisting of three high-rise tower blocks, low-rise blocks of flats and houses. At its peak, it had over 700 homes, but since 2005 many of these have been emptied – 'decanted' – as a result of an inconclusive and seemingly never-ending 'regeneration' programme (Watt, 2013). The estate is currently around two-thirds empty, despite the profound set of housing problems in the borough. As such it has come to symbolise one of the key contradictions of the housing crisis: hundreds of homes lie empty while homeless people are being threatened with expulsion from the city. Through their occupation, Focus E15 captured this contradiction with the twin banners they displayed outside the occupied flats: 'These People Need Homes' and 'These Homes Need People'.

Carpenters' residents have their own long history of campaigning, first via the Tower Block Action Group to pressurise Newham Council into properly maintaining the estate, and latterly via Carpenters Against Regeneration Plans (CARP!) and Carpenters Residents' Steering Group, who opposed the wholesale demolition of the estate and its sale to University College London (Watt, 2013). The estate also became a focus for the Focus E15 campaign during its first year. As with the Occupy camps in the City of London and Wall Street in 2011 (Vasudevan, 2015), the location of the Carpenters Estate was highly symbolic. Jasmin, one of the original Focus mothers, explained that 'it was important it was the Carpenters Estate rather than anywhere else' because 'in the background you see the Olympic stadium... you can see the brand new luxury apartments that have gone up. And you see all the council homes'.

In early summer 2014, artists became involved in the campaign, performing a visual stunt by pasting blown-up photographs of displaced residents from the hostel onto the boarded up windows of the flats, stating 'We could live here'.² While putting up the posters, Fred, a resident of the estate, arrived and asked what they were doing. They explained that they wanted to draw attention to the injustice and irrationality of empty social homes alongside growing numbers of homeless people. The activists were worried that he might criticise the action. Instead, he said: 'Great idea, but if you don't get them up onto the first floor windows they'll just come down tomorrow' (Laura, Focus E15 campaign member). When the campaigners told Fred that they were unable to reach the windows, 'he went away and about 20 minutes later came back with this massive ladder' (Laura).

Cooperating with the Carpenters Estate residents was central to Focus E15's strategy. Support from the local community was to become instrumental – although not

uncomplicatedly so – to the success of the occupation. In the run up to the occupation, Focus E15 worked closely with the residents, who ‘all expressed the fact that they were really upset to see the estate empty and quiet and not having any neighbours’ (Jasmin). According to campaign member and communist Andrew, ‘the idea of this was to get people from the local estate involved, so there was postering, there were door knocks’. He explicitly contrasts this with his experience of some other occupations:

... They haven’t done the work locally sometimes. So they’re like intruders on someone else’s estate. And they don’t reach out to the estate, whereas this followed a year of conversations with people on the estate. We knew many people on the estate [or] who’d been cleansed out. And they were happy to support it.

In addition to building relationships with the residents on the estate, Focus E15 began to meet up and network with communists, socialists, feminists, squatters and housing activists from across the city. Open meetings were organised at the Common House centre in Bethnal Green and participants began to discuss possible responses to the deepening housing crisis. A decision was made to try and occupy one of the empty flats. At the time this seemed ambitious: squatting is not a mainstream response to housing problems in the UK. Squatting has become increasingly difficult in Europe since the 1980s – and in the UK particularly following the introduction of Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act, 2012 which made it a criminal offence to trespass in residential properties with the intention of living there. Nevertheless, Vasudevan (2015: 326) has pointed to ‘other occupation-based practices’ which remain popular as a means to ‘imagine new possibilities for a renewed right to the city’.

The occupation

On 21 September 2014, a ‘family fun day’ with music and games was held in the square on the estate to celebrate the 1st birthday of the campaign. The event was advertised on social media, including a statement that the Fun Day would be ‘followed by [a] secret housing action at a secret location’. This was a tactic inspired by anti-austerity campaign UK Uncut, who would announce that an action would take place without providing details, enabling them to evade police interception. On a warm autumn afternoon, the campaign group decorated the square, not knowing if anyone would turn up or whether it would be possible to occupy the two flats. Before too long, people began to arrive and the square came to life as children played fair-ground games and had their faces painted by campaign members. Meanwhile, only a small group of people involved in the campaign knew about intention to occupy. After a few hours, when around a hundred people had gathered, a samba band began to play. Then,

as the party reached its crescendo to the sound of live samba drumming, the metal security grating was removed from one of the windows of an empty block of flats to reveal several of the mothers inside. As the crowd below cheered, a banner was hung from the window that read: ‘Social Housing not Social Cleansing. (Gillespie, 2014)

The scene was extraordinarily emotional. Amongst the cheering crowds, tears gathered in the eyes of many closest to the campaign. A joyful affect swept through the square. Laura reflected that it was:

one of the most phenomenal memorable moments of my entire life... It brought complete tears to my eyes, and nearly does when I even say it, because ... There they are, two ... young vulnerable women with nowhere, no future, nowhere to live, about to be sent out of London, and suddenly ... there they were waving majestically at the window to the crowd below.

Attendees were then invited into the 'Open House'. To their surprise they found the flats in pristine condition. One flat had a brand new (seemingly unused) bathroom and kitchen. This flat became the occupied building's 'Show Home', and a sign was erected outside announcing 'Council Flats Available: Enquire Here'.

Once the block of flats was open, those present sat down and began discussing how the occupied space would be managed. The building was to be transformed into a social centre, open all day for two weeks. A press release had been prepared in advance and occupiers were given tasks such as answering phone enquiries from the media and using social media to request visitors and donations of essentials. The response was overwhelming, with huge numbers of people from all over London and beyond visiting to take part in the occupation. So many well-wishers donated food, books and clothes that a free shop and food bank were established. A busy timetable of activities emerged, including various workshops and skill-shares, discussions about the housing crisis, film screenings, 'open mic' nights and a free gig by comedian Josie Long.

Despite having already established connections on the estate, campaigners continued to do outreach with local residents, doing 'door knocking and just invit[ing] people down to barbecues' (Emer). Residents from the estate very quickly joined the occupation and contributed their skills and labour to carry out repairs and decorate the flats. In addition, former residents who had been evicted from the estate returned to participate, including homeless people who showered and ate at the occupation each day. As a result of careful planning and outreach by the campaign, Emer explained, the residents were supportive and said that 'the estate felt alive again'. This assessment was reiterated by Molly, a Carpenters resident who had lived on the estate since it was first built: 'It was lovely to see the flats open! Windows open, nets up'. She continued,

they were very good, they weren't rowdy... [you] could have joined in if you wanted. It was like part of the community really [and], they would come round here and have a cup of tea and a cake.

Newham Council went to various lengths to make the occupiers leave, including divide-and-rule tactics between those in the flats and the other residents on the estate; destroying water pipes into the building; and delivering an eviction notice by stealth. Two weeks after the occupation started, the occupiers came to an out-of-court settlement: having always intended the occupation to be temporary, Focus E15 agreed to leave. Despite the best efforts of Newham Council to paint the occupiers in a negative light in the local press (Newham Recorder, 2014), the occupation was generally well received by the public. As a result of mounting public pressure, the Mayor issued a statement apologising for the way the mothers had been treated and Newham agreed to house 40 individuals and families on the estate on a temporary basis (Wales, 2014).

'Repopulate the carpenters estate': *Defending* the gendered urban commons

Hodkinson (2012a) argues that public housing built in Britain during the post-war period can be understood as an urban commons. He acknowledges that the 'top-down,

paternalistic and bureaucratic treatment of tenants by municipal landlords' has historically undermined the commons character of public housing (Hodkinson, 2012a: 512). However, he argues that it is a commons in the sense that it partially decommodifies shelter and offers an alternative to exploitative private landlords by offering below-market rents and secure tenancies (Hodkinson, 2012a). As such, public housing is an example of a contradictory 'actually existing commons' (Eizenberg, 2012). It follows, therefore, that the privatisation of public housing, including the 'regeneration' of estates such as the Carpenters, is a form of enclosure that dispossesses city dwellers of this commons. As such, whereas the post-war British state played an important role in creating urban commons, 'enclosure is the modus operandi' of the neoliberal state (Hodkinson, 2012a: 505). In this context, the occupation of the Carpenters Estate can first be understood as an attempt to *defend* a public housing commons from enclosure.

The enclosure of the public housing commons disproportionately affects women and mothers (Hardy and Gillespie, 2016). Since social housing provides a form of income to those who perform unpaid reproductive labour, cuts to this 'social wage' fall particularly heavily on women (Barbagallo and Beuret, 2012; Vickery, 2012). If we understand London's housing crisis in terms of a crisis of social reproduction, therefore, it is not surprising that a campaign led by women chose to occupy a council estate in order to defend this public housing commons from enclosure. Women have also played a leading role in other housing campaigns, such as the successful defence of Hackney's New Era estate from privatisation (BBC News, 2014). According to Jasmin, 'the people that seem to be... most militant about it are definitely mothers of children. Because obviously they've got to fight for their children as well as for themselves'. The demand of the occupation to 'Repopulate the Carpenters Estate' should therefore be understood as a demand for the redistribution of the means of social reproduction by those dispossessed of the social wage.

The stigmatised figure of the white working-class single mother has historically and contemporaneously been associated with council housing in the anti-welfare imaginary. Yet despite their vulnerability to pathologised representations, the occupiers received very little negative press. Emer argues that mothers fronting the campaign helped to win public support for the occupation:

[As] mothers having children, who just want to have a roof over their head for their child to be secure, that is something that people can understand. It's something that gets people.

Jasmin argues that the 'Mums' visible leadership disrupted increasingly prevalent stereotypical preconceptions about single mothers:

Before the occupation we had a lot of people... saying things about us being on benefits, taking from the system, things like that. But I think the occupation showed that we were really dedicated... and it's not about us, it's about everybody (Jasmin).

This leadership contested popular representations of single mothers as passive recipients of welfare. As Emer states 'it just offered a totally different narrative to what we're fed every-day about who people are who occupy council estates or hostels'. However, the demand for 'Social Housing not Social Cleansing' is not merely a demand to meet the shelter needs of the mothers evicted from the Focus E15 hostel. Rather, beginning from the particular experience of the mothers, it has shifted register to become a broadened out demand to provide social housing for all who need it, making the mothers champions of social justice

far beyond their own specific interests. This is evident in the occupiers' simple demand that Newham Council 'Repopulate the Carpenters Estate'.

To what extent was the occupation successful in defending a public housing commons from enclosure? As discussed above, a small number of homes on the estate were re-opened as a result of the occupation. However, this turned out to be a somewhat pyrrhic victory. First, the temporary nature of the tenancies means that 'it's not re-populating the Carpenters Estate in any way because they can get them out in a second' (Laura). Second, Melissa, an ex-resident of Carpenter's (whose mother still lives on the estate) told us that the council had placed vulnerable people and particularly those with mental health problems on the estate. She stated that:

some of them are causing a lot of problems, so the estate looks very rough. . . [Newham Council want to] make it look like what they believe estates are like, make it look run down and then [Newham Council] have got a good excuse to pull it down.

Melissa and other residents have interpreted this as an attempt to 'territorially stigmatise' the estate (Kallin and Slater, 2014) in order to justify further decanting and ultimately demolishing it. As such, the occupation achieved only limited success in its attempt to defend this public housing commons from enclosure. As will be discussed below, however, the occupation had a broader significance beyond simply defending an existing urban commons.

'A lot of love and joy and looking after each other': Creating a new urban commons

Vasudevan (2015) argues that urban occupations are not simply acts of protest but are prefigurative of an alternative urban reality. Beyond *defending* an existing public housing commons, the further significance of the Carpenters Estate occupation can be found in the creation of a new, temporary urban commons. This new temporary commons was characterised by 'diverse singularities' (Hardt and Negri, 2009) encountering each other and cooperating to create a joyful and celebratory space in which socially reproductive activities became collectivised.

Although the occupation was carefully planned by a small group of campaigners, it was impossible to know who would turn up and what would happen within the space. Emer, a theatre practitioner as well as a campaigner, described the occupation as a 'live, collective creative experience' and compared it to improvised theatre:

You don't go in somewhere and say 'this is what needs to happen'. . . You get a space to explore artistically, creatively, politically. . . It allows you to play out different political possibilities for the real world.

According to Jasmin, 'the best thing about it was [that]. . . anybody of any age, of any position of life, doing anything, was welcome to come along and get involved'. As such, when people from outside the core campaign group participated and took ownership of the space it became a collective improvised creative process. In this sense, unpredictable encounters between diverse singularities enabled the production of the common.

An example of how the occupation brought people together through acts of cooperation and creation can be found in the collective response to the Council cutting off the

water supply to the house on September 26th, damaging the water pipe in the process. Within a few hours, numerous supporters had brought gallons of bottled water to the occupation. Echoing research on ‘people as infrastructure’ in African cities, this episode demonstrates how the continuation of the occupation was enabled through people collaborating to replace the vital reproductive infrastructure that was vandalised by the local state (Simone, 2004).

Chatterton (2006) argues that spaces of direct action are often premised on an ‘activist’ identity that is set apart from the rest of society. In order to overcome this, he calls for encounters that blur activist-public identities. Those involved in planning the Carpenters Estate occupation were aware of the danger of reproducing this activist-public divide and consciously spent time building relationships with and involving residents on the estate. The boundary between occupiers and residents began to blur almost immediately when the latter brought a kettle and vacuum cleaner to help make the occupied flats more homely. Emer recounts how residents became involved and invested in repairing and decorating the flats. Robert, an estate resident, suggested renovating the downstairs flats which were in a significantly worse state of repair:

he took time off work, he just came and like worked really hard, as did other residents. . . that came along to kind of do up these places. . . people really wanted to make it the best it could be.

Through careful planning, relationship building and listening to the perspectives of residents, therefore, the occupation created what Stavrides (2016) calls a ‘threshold space’ with porous boundaries rather than an activist enclave. This threshold space enabled the blurring and reconfiguring of identities. As a result, some individuals who became involved during the occupation have since become key members of the campaign.

The occupation was notable for the central role that socially reproductive activities, particularly childcare, were afforded in the space. The role of social reproduction in temporary occupations is a key issue raised by the literature on the Occupy movement. Halvorsen (2015a) argues that, due to masculinist activist culture, social reproduction and care was under-valued by London’s Occupy movement. Reproductive activity became marginalised and separated from activity considered ‘political’, with this binary materialising in the emergence of two separate camps. By contrast, Jaleel (2012) argues that Occupy camps in the US ‘fitfully enabled’ the commoning of socially reproductive labour as they provided food, books and entertainment and became ‘in the words of many, home’.

Watt (2016: 313) has noted that Focus E15’s weekly street stall differs from the events of many housing campaigns as ‘a space where children have a prominent presence, not only the mothers’ children but also those of supporters and visitors’. Children had a similarly prominent presence at the occupation. The Fun Day that launched the occupation was explicitly aimed at families and once the occupation began, a whole room became a dedicated children’s playroom. Due to the high level of media interest, the mothers spent up to seven hours a day conducting interviews. As a result, occupiers took it in turns to look after and play with the children. This collectivisation of childcare resonated with residents’ historical memory of life on the estate:

[Residents] talked about bringing up their children, letting them run around that square, looking after each other’s kids. The sort of life that existed on Carpenters that was brought back to it for a short period of time (Laura).

In addition to childcare, reproductive activities such as cooking became collectivised. Cooking meals for everybody at the occupation became an important part of the daily routine and visitors were often invited to participate in food preparation. Emer claims that these roles were an important mechanism for inclusion, simply because ‘people like to be useful’. As such, the collectivisation of reproductive activities, usually confined to the private sphere of the nuclear family home, enabled the occupation to function as a porous space in which the distinction between activists and the public was blurred (Stavrides, 2016).

This collectivisation of social reproduction was also fundamental to the affective atmosphere of the occupation. Emer describes the tone of the occupation as ‘celebratory’ and argues that the Focus E15 campaign is characterised by ‘a lot of love and joy and looking after each other’, with children playing a central role in setting this tone. Andrew reflects on the political importance of creating alternative spaces for reproduction and for fun in a context of austerity urbanism:

We can resist a hundred evictions. . . but we’re not creating a culture alongside it where people can feel included. . . we’re just sweeping up all the mess that the government’s causing. . . [it is important to have a space for] culture. . . music, theatre. . . all the things that we’re not supposed to be doing because they don’t produce surplus value. We need to reclaim that, we need to produce *surplus that’s for enjoyment*. . .

An anonymous account of an Occupy camp in an unspecified UK city argued that the camp was characterised by problems with drugs and alcohol leading to poor relations with the public. In addition, the female author reported that male occupiers were dismissive of women’s safety concerns (Anonymous, 2012). Andrew recounted his experience of other occupations that were not inclusive or family-friendly, as there had been a lot of ‘speed doing the rounds’ and ‘squatter men who are really misogynistic’. Citing an occupation at another London council estate, he explained that an unsafe environment with ‘bits of wiring loose, and. . . debris everywhere’ made the space inaccessible to disabled or older people.

By contrast, Emer explains how the centrality of children and childcare created a fun, playful and relaxed atmosphere at the Carpenters Estate, but also that the materiality of ‘children need[ing] to be fed, and entertained, and played with. . . [stopped] things getting displaced from reality and [overly] ideological’.

Building on Vasudevan’s (2015) conceptualisation of urban occupations, therefore, the Carpenters Estate occupation cannot be understood simply as a *defensive* act of protest grounded in making demands of the state. Rather, it was also a prefigurative exercise in *creating* new social relations. Diverse singularities encountered one another and cooperated to create an urban commons characterised by the collectivisation of social reproduction and the production of ‘surplus for enjoyment’.

Olympic-counter legacies: Urban commoning as the basis of new waves of struggle

Urban occupations create spaces for unexpected encounters and the production of new social relations (Stavrides, 2016; Vasudevan, 2015). However, the temporary nature of many occupations means that these relations may be ephemeral and difficult to sustain beyond the duration of the action (Halvorsen, 2015b). Hardt and Negri (2009: 254–255) warn that spontaneous encounters in the metropolis are not, in themselves, sufficient to ‘create social bodies with ever greater capacities’, but instead the city ‘must be a site not only

of encounter but also of organization and politics'. To what extent, then, can a temporary occupation form the basis of enduring relationships and sustained movement building in the city? Over three years have passed since the occupation of the Carpenters Estate at time of writing, enabling a tentative response to this question.

The extensive coverage of the occupation in the mainstream press helped raise the public profile of the campaign, attracting the attention of other established and nascent housing movements. For the duration of the occupation, the Carpenters Estate 'became a hub for people concerned with London's housing crisis from all over the city' (Watt, 2016: 311). On Saturday 27th September, a public meeting was held in the front garden of the occupied building, in which people discussed their personal experiences of, and possible solutions to, the housing crisis. Campaigners commented on how the occupation inspired a subsequent wave of action across the city, including a series of occupations at the Guinness Trust Estate in Brixton, the Sweets Way estate in Barnet, and the Aylesbury Estate in Southwark. Jasmin explained that:

A lot of people came along and they were inspired by the occupation and the campaign and went back to their areas and their groups and wanted to do something similar.

Emer makes a similar argument about how the Carpenters Estate 'sparked off' a new wave of activism, inspiring people from across the city to take action:

I remember people talking about the housing crisis before, but not on the same scale... I think this did really set something off for people... people living on housing estates themselves [had] dreamt of it, but they were like 'you're actually doing it! Let's open them all up'

Another legacy of the occupation has been the increased involvement of Focus E15 in networked activism at the city scale. This increased cooperation was facilitated by the establishment of the Radical Housing Network (RHN) in early 2014. RHN is a horizontal network that links together groups campaigning for housing justice across tenure types in London, enabling housing campaigns to support each other and coordinate actions at the neighbourhood, borough and city scales (Wills, 2016). Although it was established before the Carpenters Estate occupation, Emer, herself an active member of RHN, argued that the occupation energised and gave momentum to the nascent network.

Following the Carpenters Estate occupation, members of the Focus E15 campaign have played an active role in supporting other occupations, such as at the Sweets Way estate in Barnet, north London in 2015. In addition, in 2016, a group of women and non-binary people called Sisters Uncut occupied an empty council home in the London Borough of Hackney. Their action was a protest against the gendered effects of social housing shortages, which they argue trap women within abusive relationships. Members of Sisters Uncut were involved in the Carpenters Estate occupation and the influence is clear: the occupied flat hosted family-friendly events including art, writing and puppetry workshops and collectivised social reproduction by providing free breakfasts for local children.

As such, the lasting 'legacy' of the Carpenters Estate occupation has been the forging of new relationships and affinities, the strengthening of networked housing activism and the circulation of tactics between campaign groups at the city scale. As RHN activist Jacob Wills (2016) argues, therefore, actions to defend communities from dispossession and displacement lead to the creation of new communities through co-operation and shared experience of struggle. In the context of austerity London, we conceptualise the deepening of a city-wide community of struggle following the occupation as an 'Olympic counter-legacy' that has emerged in opposition to the processes of dispossession and displacement that are

the real legacy of the 2012 Games for all too many working-class inhabitants (Kennelly, 2016; Watt, 2017; Watt and Bernstock, 2017).

Beyond the city scale, an important legacy of the Carpenters Estate occupation has been to raise the national and international profile of the Focus E15 campaign. Campaigners are regularly invited to talk at events across the UK and continental Europe. Following an appearance by Focus E15 and RHN campaigners at a public event in Manchester in October 2015, local activists established a network called Greater Manchester Housing Action in order to coordinate campaigning at the city scale. In addition, the international non-governmental organisation Oxfam has sought advice from Focus E15 on how to get more people involved in grassroots campaigning. The occupation has also inspired artwork, with two plays 'E15' and 'Land of the Three Towers' staged around the UK. It is evident that the occupation has resonance beyond the particular context of London.

Unsurprisingly none of this is to say that the Carpenters' occupation or the campaign as a whole has not experienced problems and even setbacks, for example via the rehousing of vulnerable people on the estate as discussed above. There is also a sense amongst campaign members that the occupation occurred at just 'the right time when people [were] looking for answers about the London housing crisis and looking for examples, and there it all was [...]. [Since then] there's been occupations and it's not new anymore' (Eileen). The campaign has also been subject to police and council intimidation, including arresting members and harassing them during the action research project.

Focus members are themselves only too well aware of how building a sustainable campaign is far from easy. This is highlighted in the dozens of people who Focus have assisted with their housing problems through advocacy and protest, who have not – with some exceptions – stayed engaged once their own individual circumstances have been resolved:

What we want is people who have been helped by collective action to stay around and help others. But a lot of people are struggling [and] not everyone wants to be... on the street... petitioning and leafleting (Laura).

Nevertheless, Focus E15's weekly street stall has now entered its fourth year of operation, a testimony to the campaigners' dedication. The campaign has also received funding to establish an office and social hub in Stratford called 'Sylvia's Corner', whose name 'is a nod to Sylvia Pankhurst who was a suffragette and socialist organiser in the East End of London' (Focus E15 website), the sister-ancestor in struggle of the women of Focus E15.

Conclusion

London's housing crisis is perhaps the most visible manifestation of the crisis of social reproduction in austerity Britain. The Carpenter's Estate occupation lays bare the gendered nature of this crisis, as well as the gendered nature of the urban commons and the struggles to defend them. Since urban commons are feminised, occupation can be considered a key strategy for women's resistance to austerity and enclosure. If capitalism's inherent tendency is to dispossess people of resources and annihilate public space, occupation can be seen as a counter-movement to re-create it 'in common'. Such acts embody both symbolic *and* physical interruptions to processes of accumulation by dispossession in the austerity city.

There are also significant wider implications. The visibility of white working-class single mothers at the forefront of this struggle should be understood as a symbolic fracture in the aggressive anti-welfarism of which these subjects have become constituted as a key signifier. Far from the mediated abject figure represented in mass media and political discourses, the

women of Focus E15 have become figures of hope and resistance against austerity. The very subjects who have faced the most hostility re-emerge as the lead protagonists in fracturing the hegemonic anti-welfare common sense and generating alternative narratives around housing, austerity and the welfare state.

The Carpenters Estate occupation demonstrates how the creation of a temporary urban commons can have an enduring legacy in terms of the forging and deepening of relationships and the circulation of ideas and tactics. Urban commons, however temporary, are grounded in particular places within which people can encounter one another, cooperate and create together. This enables city dwellers to go beyond 'abstract solidarity' to create concrete networks of solidarity, grounded in specific places (Federici, 2012: 144). As such, urban commoning is fundamental to the process of movement building in the city. The Carpenters Estate was not simply a symbolic backdrop. Rather, the materiality and specificity of the site was foundational for building a wider housing movement across London.

In the process of defending a public housing commons, the occupation simultaneously created a new commons characterised by the collectivisation of social reproduction. This process of commoning provided the basis for the forging of enduring relationships, the strengthening of existing networks and the circulation of ideas and tactics. As such, the temporary urban commons created on the Carpenters Estate has enabled the reproduction and expansion of struggles for the right to the city on a more ongoing basis. We conceptualise this as an Olympic 'counter-legacy' that exists in opposition to the legacy of the 2012 Games, which has in reality meant dispossession and displacement for many local working-class residents. The counter-legacy produced by Focus E15 is, instead, one of renewed power and agency amongst low-income inhabitants of austerity London. This counter-legacy breaks through the negative mediated representations of their lives and offers alternative visions for life in the city.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Focus E15 campaign for the inspiration, all of our interviewees, and the four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Some names of interviewees have been anonymised while others have been retained, in line with the wishes of the campaigners and residents.
2. This was inspired by the 'I am here' photographic project by Fugitive Images (2010) at the now-demolished Haggerston Estate in Hackney.

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