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– **NECROTECTURE: Lifeless Dwellings and London's Super-Rich**

ROWLAND ATKINSON

Abstract

This article problematizes the relationship between the global super-rich and processes of property development that have generated large volumes of underused residential space. Evidence is presented to show that much of London's new skyline is underused or lies entirely empty, so that one interpretation of this new landscape of super-prime residential development is that it is a kind of dead residential space or necrotecture. These relatively lifeless spaces can be interpreted as the particularly wasteful result of continuing rounds of international capital investment in the built environment and the overconsumption of housing and other resources by the super-rich. Necrotectural forms, seen in new towers and spectacular homes, appear to index a massive misdirection of development capacity, even as the city experiences a massive social crisis that continues to be played out in the wider housing market.

Introduction

In the past decade the London skyline, long noted for its relative modesty when compared with other global urban centres, has been bolstered by new building technologies and massive injections of overseas capital. These changes come at a time of great transition and uncertainty for the city, but the structural features of London's housing, economy and built environment remain more or less intact (Marcuse and Madden, 2016). The city has seen capital mobilized to provide for significant numbers of wealthy overseas buyers, even as it suffers an enduring housing crisis for the bulk of its population (Minton, 2017). Rounds of purchasing by cash-rich buyers attracted to a city that continues to court capital and the wealthy (Atkinson *et al.*, 2017) have been evident for some years. Despite emerging signs of declining prices at the apex of the super-prime property market, this has done little to staunch continuing flows of international investment capital and those ranks of the super-rich already in the city (Atkinson *et al.*, 2016). The city hosts the highest numbers of super-rich individuals per capita of any city globally—around 3,100 ultra-high net worth individuals (UHNWIs, those with assets, not including property, of £20 million/US \$30 million or more) and a further 6,100 UHNWIs with second homes in the city (Wealth-X, 2017), while the 2018 *Sunday Times* rich list suggests the presence of 92 billionaires in the city.

London is one of only a handful of globally pre-eminent locations in which the rich choose to live or invest (Forrest *et al.*, 2017). This concentration of the rich themselves and the activities of investors from overseas in the city's property market has had notable effects. While many choose the city for its cultural attractions, architecture and schools (Paris, 2017), it is also clear that other fractions of the wealthy, offshore investment vehicles and wealth funds have redirected property development capacity towards the luxury end of the market (Transparency International, 2016; Minton, 2017). The result has been the movement of more of the wealthy into the inner west, north and south-west super-prime property markets of the city and the creation of notable developments including the Shard, One Hyde Park, St George's Wharf (an imposing tower near Battersea power station) and the areas around the new American embassy. A string of luxury developments, including The Lancasters, the Mansion House (Marylebone),

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375 Kensington High Street and the large redevelopment of the Chelsea Barracks site as a luxury enclave, among many other sites, bring our attention to the massive wealth still arriving in London and the kinds of conspicuous luxury at a time of economic ambiguity regarding the city's immediate future as Brexit looms. Many of these developments are underpinned by the actions of foreign buyers. Others have been financed by sovereign wealth funds, notably those of Malaysia (Nine Elms) and Qatar (Shard, One Hyde Park, among numerous others), in which capital investment in international real estate projects has been deployed as an important long-term investment strategy. Most such projects involve the almost exclusive production of homes designated for the super-prime market and have no affordable or social housing component. A city running hot on investment capital has thereby generated an intensifying social politics that is focused on questions of the distribution of housing resources and wealth (Gillespie *et al.*, 2018) while appearing to subvert the public mission of some social housing providers (Morrison, 2017), with massive international investors seeking to enter the affordable housing market. In this general context the relationship between the very wealthy and the wider city is emerging as a significant concern.

One feature of the massive changes in London's property market, particularly since the completion of the Shard in 2012 (the tallest building in the European Union), has been the transition of London into a more emphatically vertical city (Graham, 2016), the consumption of which has primarily been by wealthy (though by no means always 'super-rich') off-shore investors. The scale of this development, and that to come, is significant. A recent survey has shown that more than 510 high-rise developments are now in progress or have received planning permission (New London Architecture, 2018). Yet almost none of the apartments in these towers will be affordable and close to zero public housing is reserved for those on no or low incomes. London's massive social inequalities and housing problems emphasize the problematic position of these new residences as they bring into sharp relief the city's social extremes and the inability of state or market to meet social need (Dorling, 2014). These contrasts have also been marked by a sense of social conflict generated by the inequity of empty homes worth many millions (Neate, 2018) in a city of massive waiting lists and competition for residential space. A more generalized sense of anger at empty property more generally (Booth and Bengtsson, 2016; Neate, 2017) has become palpable. The city's government and investors have effectively earmarked development sites as the new residences of a global elite. The result has been the production of a built environment that is almost solely in service of capital investment, rather than the creation of homes and social value in any meaningful sense (Fernandez *et al.*, 2016).

Flows of international capital have incentivized developers to target an international market of the wealthy and investors (Atkinson *et al.*, 2017). A distinctive feature of this market is that in many cases units are sold primarily as investments, often 'off-plan', for the purpose of realizing future capital gains, occasional sojourns in the city or, in the case of much illicit investment, the concealment and recycling of funds via off-shore investment funds. Another market, for international middle-class investors, operates with a related but distinct rhythm from the non-usage evident among many of the super-rich. This particular market segment is driven by a desire for reasonable gains in revenue and capital appreciation (Ho and Atkinson, 2017). The effect of the aggregate demand for central London apartments has been to drive enormous amounts of speculative construction activity in search of buyers from among the ranks of the world's wealthy.

The luxury and scale of new tower blocks and flagship developments highlights the way in which housing production capacity has been 'misdirected' towards socially non-useful ends (Aalbers, 2016). The emphasis on luxury markets by many developers has become part of a wider story of urban social alienation. This stems from the built environment (including the dominating high-rise skyline emerging in the city), from social relations strained by imposed austerity measures and from the housing system

itself, generated by the result of incentives that drive it to build for profit while ignoring social need (Madden and Marcuse, 2017).

The opulence and scale of the architectural landscape now being produced for the wealthy must also of course be linked to the ideological substrate of the city of which it is a part. The celebration of wealth, courting of the rich themselves and the influence on city politics of an urban economy dominated by finance and real estate interests is notable (Engelen *et al.*, 2017; Atkinson *et al.*, 2017). Spencer's (2016) work on neoliberal architecture is also useful in helping us to think through the relationship between value commitments to market approaches, the celebration of unfettered social subjectivities and the eschewing of interest in social benefit. For Spencer, the built environment is important to how we might understand the influence and play of neoliberal values and its deeper influence over subjects and subjectivities in the city. The ongoing production of this built environment, even while hugely underutilized and out of the reach of most citizens, continues to avoid addressing the pronounced and deepening social needs of those in the wider city. These processes generate a socially selective sorting of people and places that leads to the physical dislocation of the urban poor and triumph of narratives that suggest that the urban poor are unwilling to engage in the economy (Minton, 2017). Amidst rapid social and physical change, the city displays a continued underlying and machinic commitment to the needs of capital. This is the setting of this article which asks how might we begin to understand this residential landscape and its excesses.

Dead space

The net result of investment by the super-rich being courted by city administrations has been the creation of a significant landscape of empty residential units. This has generated intense social anger and resentment in light of prevailing welfare austerity measures, poor track record on house building, attacks on public housing and what many see as nothing less than a war on the urban poor (Watt, 2016). Analysis of London's dramatically evolving skylines shows that this is largely an exclusive landscape, off limits to those distressed and upended by the property market across the city (Atkinson *et al.*, 2016). It is also, as we shall see, one implicated in illicit flows of laundered money (Platt, 2015), poor planning decisions and largely absent owners who do little for the city's wider economy (Fernandez *et al.*, 2016). Changes to many of the core 'alpha' cities of the global North have been particularly significant over the past decade. As analysts like Graham (2016) have argued, the global story of vertical living has been invigorated by enormous flows of international capital in search of new and secure investment opportunities. In cities like London, New York, Singapore and Tokyo, high-rise and other luxury development highlights the presence and expansion of the monied ranks of the super-rich (Forrest *et al.*, 2017).

Though the built environment is often assumed to have a near endless lifespan, it is clear that buildings sometimes must, or indeed should, 'die' (Cairns and Jacobs, 2014) via demolition and reconstruction, for example. What is notable about the super-prime property market, however, in cities like London and New York, is that even new construction is, in many cases, itself a kind of socially dead space in which human habitation and social attachment are almost absent even after sale. This distinctive form of housing situation is described here as necrotecture.

One effect of the search for inward capital investment and the rich themselves has been the further stigmatization of urban poverty in the city, and the delegitimation of public services and institutions underwriting their daily existence. Popular, dense and well used spaces of public housing have been perversely designated as being underutilized compared with the 'highest and best uses' that might be derived were market logics to be applied (Raco and Kesten, 2018). Here decisions regarding the future and potential remaking of estates have been influenced by the prospect of capital investment and financialization of public housing models. These orientations stem in large part from

the expectations generated by a broader move towards super-prime investment as the rationality from which the future of the city should be judged and planned (Watt, 2016). In this context, a report regarding demolition, densification and street building generated by a coalition of state planners and estate agencies appears as an important example of such imperatives (Savills, 2016) and drew significant criticism. Here the 'best' use of such space was interpreted in terms of the destruction and demolition of public housing in the name of producing more market-rate housing (Lees, 2014; Minton, 2017). More than 50 London public housing estates have been 'remodelled' in this way with proposals continuing for the redevelopment of other public housing estates (Evans, 2016).

Processes of social and physical change operating under this urban regime of intensifying wealth accumulation and dispossession have fuelled debate about questions of security of tenure, housing quality and the right to remain in the city for those in more desperate circumstances. Despite this, continuing physical destruction of homes and social displacement have generated large numbers of private sector evictions and net losses of affordable homes. These processes can be read as new rounds of social banishment and expulsion (Sassen, 2014), often enacted by cash-strapped local governments attracted by the promise of private investment in a context in which the central state has increasingly absented itself. Austerity has left public planning agencies unable or unwilling to challenge the scale and intent of these changes (Webber and Burrows, 2016). In other cases such agencies have become tacitly co-opted in an agenda directed at achieving city success while paying scant attention to the place of the city's politically weaker and materially poorer communities.

London's position as a shining beacon for the globe's super wealthy has not appeared to be good news for the wider population of the city. Even when the good times were rolling, the city was already being marked by an aggressive expansion of gentrification, tenant evictions, the demolition of dozens of public estates, welfare reforms and displacement. While some suggest that these forms of investment and destruction are related (Watt, 2016) the advent of Brexit deliberations and the potentially negative role of international investment has tended to be glossed over by the city's elite in favour of continuing to seek international capital investment at a time of uncertainty. In this context, the rich and their signature buildings appear more as signs of the slow death of the city than of social vitality.

Necrotecture

The perceived threats and social concerns generated by relatively tall buildings are not new, finding echoes in the London of the early twentieth century (Dennis, 2008). Dennis' work highlights that concerns about height, property values and who lives in such dwellings, even in the more affluent parts of the city, have been a recurring feature of the city's life. It is therefore important to consider the kinds of space and occupancy of new rounds of high-rise and luxury construction in the city. Nevertheless, for some, the city's new architecture indicates that the city is moving in the right direction. Here the notorious assessment of the director of Zaha Hadid architects, Patrick Schumacher, can be seen as a frank disclosure of the values circulating among some practices. Schumacher argued for the paving over of the city's parks, the removal of public housing and the unleashing of markets more broadly as the means by which allocation of housing should operate in all cases. Surely, he suggested, everyone knows we benefit from dinner parties in the homes of the rich? Even while misjudging the views of the wider audience for these comments (the Mayor, Sadiq Khan, for one, slammed his ideas), such ideas nevertheless remain dominant among those who believe that the market should dictate what is built, where and with no concern for wider public value or contribution.

Much of the architecture springing from the ground in London, designed for investment, offers broadly similar appeals to judgments in good taste, luxury and the savvy playing of housing markets to generate capital appreciation. Our understanding

of home as a place of use value is more or less upended by the dramatic expansion in the number of such residences and their rare occupation by their buyers. The hundreds of blocks under construction and those completed to date are predicated on massive surpluses in capital accumulation by wealthy individuals and by wealth funds looking for longer-term investment opportunities as well as, by no means insignificant, criminal capital being laundered in the built environment itself. The towers themselves are often built to the greatest heights allowable under planning laws and have involved significant debate about the retention of the protected views of the city. The projections of the developments to come seem to signal the loss of the relatively low-rise European capital and the rise, in its place, of something altogether less recognizable.

As we see (Figure 1), the extent of emptiness in this new residential skyline is significant, highlighting the negligible contribution of such construction to the social needs of the city's residents. The growing public recognition of these developments as homes for capital rather than people is now significant. How might we situate and understand the apparent waste and emptiness generated by investors and developers? One approach would be to utilize ideas developed by Fromm (1973) regarding the kinds of infatuation with death and destruction in the post-war, materialist cultures of the global West. Fromm became interested in the way that these cultures valued things and objects over people as one of the main methods by which feelings of satisfaction and social achievement were signalled. These ideas also relate to his work on the nature of the life course more broadly and what he identified as orientations based on acquisition, rather than being and common humanity (Fromm, 1976). In *The anatomy of human destructiveness* (1973), Fromm identified social forms of attraction to dead things and mechanical forms of interest that evaded notions of the social or human connection and reciprocity as a key feature of such societies. Obsessive materialism, Fromm reasoned, could be seen as a kind of rejection of the social in favour of material and lifeless goods. Possession and repeated rounds of endless consumption formed a wider process by which a denial of the limits of the human lifespan could be achieved. In societies that experienced not only rising living standards and disposable income but also increasing inequality and rising numbers of the very wealthy, the stage was set for new rounds of hyper consumption that have come about as wealth has been enlarged to historically unprecedented levels among a cohort of the super-rich at the global scale.

Fromm's ideas appear useful in offering some kind of general framing of the place of materialities and status trappings of society today, but are also particularly apposite in terms of helping us to consider forms of excess ownership. The empty, dead homes of the super-rich in cities like London and New York appear to remain lifeless even in terms of their role as home-like spaces. Such lifeless forms can be described then as a kind of necrotecture in which the architectural forms of the luxury housing market can be understood as dead residential space resulting from the confluence of circuits of international capital and desires for prestigious and showpiece homes that are more or less unused by the wealthy. The wider implication of necrotectural forms is significant since, given earlier discussion of the rounds of social and physical destruction taking place in the city, the production of these built environments is promoted by the city's prevailing political regime. In addition, the place of the homes of the city's poor have been declared themselves as a form of dead space—seen as underused by poorer groups. In this sense, the city's residential landscape is being defined by competing power groups and interests with varying powers to designate or name what the problem is and how it should be resolved. For those with pure market orientations and the interests of the wealthy at heart, the problem is the unnecessary footprint of housing estates; for those affected by a lack of affordable housing, the empty shells of so many skyscrapers appear as illogical and aggravating. Meanwhile the rise of necrotectural forms associated with the wealthy and the relative absence of their owners may also be generating a threat to the social vitality of the wider city. This comes as a result of avoiding contributions to

affordable housing and its role in generating a physical symbolic sense of the city being of and for capital and the wealthy (Atkinson *et al.*, 2017).

Marketing materials for many of the new developments offer images of empty chrome interiors looking over the city into which prospective buyers are thereby able to project their presence as the city's triumphant captains, without seeing signs of community life or troublesome social difference or poverty below. Property advertising for these spaces frequently depicts residential boundaries, such as panoramic glass windows and infinity pools as modern day dividing lines, between a risky city kept at bay and enclosed interiors which are often positioned high above street level. One developer extended these tropes further by adopting aesthetics derived from the film *American Psycho*, using a 'winner-takes all' overdub on advertising for one of its flagship developments, as its male figure stood looking over the city saying 'I did this'. The use of these aesthetics feeds the sense that the outlook being targeted is one that relates to forms of social triumph and personal success that are divorced from, or potentially in opposition to, the social life of the wider city or to ideas of social reciprocity. Perhaps more importantly the place of a personal residence is read in such advertising as a space that is defined by its ability to insulate buyers from forms of social connection, while inhabiting myths of personal success driven by ambition, luck or hard work. As Tuan (1977: 38) once suggested, city building has long allowed the rich and powerful to command more visual space: 'from their residences the rich are reassured of their position in life each time they look out the window and see the world at their feet' (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 The Shard from the 'Walkie Talkie' (photo by the author, January 2018)

In cities like London it appears that both developers and buyers have sought to demonstrate social standing and ambition via the opulence and architecture of many of the new developments. One way of reading these developments is to consider the way in which deeper psychosocial needs for approval, prestige and ambition are signified in edifices which speak of the desires of their builders, designers and residents (Sudjic, 2005). Thus we can begin to think of how the construction of towers and luxury developments (see Figure 2) form models of the kind of infinity project mapped out by Becker (1973) in his analysis of how the human condition relates to its own existential terrors. For Becker, forms of consumption were to be interpreted as culturally embedded



FIGURE 2 Luxury apartments on the Thames under construction (photo by the author, March 2017)

methods through which the reality of death could be denied. The lifeless space found in many of the tower blocks and homes of the super-rich in London appear to offer a glimpse into these anxieties, of death, status and acquisition, in an extreme form. Their presence displays a kind of material hyperconsumption that brings attention to a wider malaise within a culture and political economy devoted to apparently useless production.

The extent of dead residential space in London

In 1951 the population of Greater London was 8.1 million people. Like many other British cities, the mid-century census had recorded what was to be, for another 60 years, its peak. It now seems difficult to remember that London, and other British inner cities, were places of economic stagnation, social decline and persistent outmigration. The term ‘inner city’ was used to invoke a social imaginary marked by these features as much as any sense of real geographical place. By 1981, the nascent Thatcher government occupied a London the population of which had fallen to 6.6 million. The most recent survey of the city’s population in 2011 showed an all-time high of 8.2 million. Yet this apparent demographic health belies massive shifts in the structure of the city’s economy and new rounds of casualties in housing markets (Minton, 2017). Alongside changes in the city economy which saw it become a nodal point in the world financial global economy, massive changes have reworked many neighbourhoods that would have been thought untouchable as potential sites of gentrification.

To understand the effect of capital of accumulation in creating a landscape of residential emptiness, one might choose to observe One Hyde Park, the many empty mansions lining The Bishops Avenue in North London, or along the river Thames at Nine Elms, part of the redevelopment of the major site of the decades-long empty shell of Battersea power station, where one can see numerous new towers lining the river’s corridor. At One Hyde Park the aesthetic is remarkably restrained, glass atria offer subtle external divisions between the public space of the Knightsbridge streetscape and access to the lifts to the residences inside. It has become almost banal for journalists to observe the lack of lights being on in the evening, alongside exposés of the offshore purchasing of many of its residences (Shaxson, 2013). In many ways this residence, like many others, offers only a partial foothold in the city for its part-time occupants. Access by car is to an underground car park that allows seamless access to the interior. Residents can easily move between multiple residences using combinations of private jets or first-class travel, private cars or taxis and the safety of these bunker-like spaces (Atkinson, 2016).

Despite the obvious obstacles in the way of gaining information posed by developers and owners, it is possible to estimate the scale of absence associated with these necrotectural forms and to offer some enumeration of the city’s dead residential space. One way of approaching the issue is to look at proxy measures of underuse, such as that uncovered by examining utility records to locate homes with abnormally low electricity use. Analysis of these data has revealed that there are around 21,000 homes in the city that are long-term empty (Transparency International, 2017). In fact, around 5% of homes in Central and Western London lie empty according to the government’s statistics agency using similar data sources (Gask and Williams, 2015). Perhaps some of the best estimates of the scale of necrotecture can be gleaned from combining an analysis of recently commissioned reports on the scale of under occupancy in the new-build market in the city, most of which is centrally located and takes the form of apartments.

Nearly all new builds in London are apartments (89%) (Wallace *et al.*, 2017) and between 2014 and 2016 around one in six (13%) of these was sold to overseas buyers. This figure rises to more than a third of buyers (36%) if we look at the ‘prime’ market areas of central London. Most overseas sales are to buyer investors, often looking to rent, sometimes to simply hold the asset for capital growth (see, for example, Ho and Atkinson, 2017). In this important study vacancy was measured using transactional data, which

highlight residences for which there is little or no financial, retail or administrative paper trail. Using this measure, empty dwellings comprise half (49.5%) of all prime residences in new builds and 19.4% of dwellings in the inner London boroughs more generally. Notably these figures rise alongside the value of homes—39% of homes worth £1–5 million are underused and 64% of homes worth over £5 million. The figure for homes owned by those overseas was 42.3%. Work by another team of researchers has showed that half of all sales in central London between 2014 and 2016 were to overseas buyers (Scanlon *et al.*, 2017) and that Londoners were effectively excluded as tenants or buyers from 6% of sales.

In 2011, the most recent census period which captures all residents and homes, vacant housing comprised around 3.5% for London as a whole (homes where it was recorded that no one was usually resident). For the City of London the figure was a quarter, in Westminster 19% and Kensington and Chelsea 14%. Despite much anxiety from property professionals, the sale of high-value homes persists, even after concerns over Brexit and both the national and city economy's futures, as shown in Table 1. Sales of prime and super-prime homes remain buoyant according to these data. London planning authorities have also permitted the construction of a further 26,000 prime market apartments, roughly the equivalent of one year's gross housing supply in the city. The general picture generated by these findings is of a market very much alive in its own terms, yet productive of a landscape of dwellings remarkably uninhabited by its apparent owners.

TABLE 1 Total numbers of sales of prime and super-prime dwellings

	£1 m - £4.99 m	£5 m - £9.99 m (prime)	£10 m + (super-prime)	Total
2015	10,989	569	397	11,955
2016	10,272	543	401	11,216
2017	10,587	569	435	11,591

SOURCE: Land Registry

Other troublesome questions attach themselves to the city's market in dead residential space. Non-partisan groups (Transparency International, 2017) have highlighted significant flows of criminal capital and the anonymous purchase of thousands of homes. The head of the National Crime Agency has also suggested that criminal money in this property market has driven up property prices and that hundreds of millions of pounds worth of property is the subject of criminal investigation as suspected proceeds of corruption. Yet these figures may only represent a fraction of the total amount. In 2015, Transparency International had already revealed that around 10% of properties in Kensington and Chelsea were owned through a 'secrecy jurisdiction' and tied to around £122 billion of offshore money.

One of the reasons for the rise of necrotecture is the use of the built environment as a store for laundered monies with no need for human residence as such; these dwellings are often sold at a later stage or provide a potential retreat if needed. In 2016 the National Crime Agency (NCA) estimated that around £170 billion of UK real estate is held by more than 30,000 tax haven companies. Key developments stick out. For example, The Tower at St George Wharf in Vauxhall has a quarter of its flats held through offshore companies and a greater number at One Hyde Park (Shaxson, 2013). The point here of course is that not all of this money is criminal, but such vehicles are strongly associated with efforts at tax avoidance and laundering. Despite growing public anger at these problems, only 1 in 300 property purchases by overseas cash buyers triggers 'red flags', which raise suspicions with the NCA about the sources of such money (National Crime Agency, 2017). There is frequent talk about tackling corruption and illicit flows of capital

but action remains undelivered. This market is also moving into new waters, with some premium developments being advertised for sale in Bitcoins with the risk that untraceable movements of criminal capital may flow more easily as a result.

One of the most glaring injustices is that while essential workers and even those on higher incomes struggle to access decent housing, the city is producing tens of thousands of apartments annually for people who either never use them or significantly underuse them. The question often raised is who benefits from homes left unused by its buyers? The image generated is of a planning system that is generally ineffective and often leaves unchallenged the construction of blocks of apartments in which the idea of a handful of affordable homes is seen as a threat to market viability (Crosby and Wyatt, 2016). Mounting evidence shows that developers and planning consultants work hard to circumvent their duty to offer either affordable housing or cash contributions to the local authority (Atkinson and Tait, 2017). Criticism of this system has been growing for some years now, but the rising intensity of anger is palpable.

At the same time as many of these blocks are rarely or almost never occupied, around a third of those deemed to be homeless are exported outside their boroughs or to other cities and regions, and a quarter of a million households languish on waiting lists for public housing in the city (DCLG, 2016). Alongside the erosion of support for those working and on low or no incomes has also come a massive expansion of residential space via extensions downwards to create even more space. While existing space standards for new-build homes have contracted in the general market, homes for the most affluent have been expanded through basement construction. A recent report using planning applications data has shown that 4,650 mega basements with facilities for private cinemas (456), staff quarters, swimming pools (376) and gyms (996), among other facilities that even include private nightclub spaces, cigar rooms and a private beach, have been constructed or are being built in seven of London's central boroughs (Baldwin *et al.*, 2018). The contrast between this intense luxury and the social conditions of the wider city could hardly be starker.

Conclusion

Deyan Sudjic's (2005) idea of an edifice complex referred to the ways in which building projects have often been used to validate the egos of the rich and powerful. But today perhaps instead of looking to the projects of Hitler, Hussein or Ceaucescu, we might turn to the cold steel and glass of the Shard, the Candy Brother's grand absentia of One Hyde Park or the rarely occupied tower at St George's Wharf, among many others. London's necrotecture coexists alongside a pronounced need for human shelter by many of the capital's other residents. The city's empty flats raise difficult and important political questions within a city in which residents of some London boroughs face a 50-year wait for public housing. The imprint of wealth and the impact of money run deeply in the daily rhythms of the city as a political and economic machine, much to the detriment of its role as a social space (Atkinson *et al.*, 2017).

Empty homes owned by the city's wealthiest, left unoccupied for investment purposes or as the mere trappings of status, speak of an apparent love of dead objects. This dead residential space, or necrotecture, brings attention to the level of waste and overconsumption by the rich in increasing contrast to the divided city below. The ideas of 'ghost neighbourhoods' and 'lights-out London' similarly resonate with notions of death and the deadening effect of necrotecture on the social vitality of the wider city. These residential spaces are 'dead' at a number of levels. First, they are more or less dead spaces in their own right, either unused or barely used for large periods of time. As shown here, this absence is increasingly well documented. Second, necrotecture appears to threaten the public life of the city and the livelihood of its working citizens. This effect operates particularly as capital helps to divert productive capacity towards redundant usage in the form of building apartment blocks for the wealthy, second homes

and the ‘buy to leave’ market more broadly. Third, in the architecture of the rich we see an attempt at defying mortality through projects that represent diverting forms of hyperconsumption and monolithic edifices intended to last beyond human lifespans. Finally, in the taint of corruption, money laundering and organized criminal investment in real estate, we see associations with death and violence as the city and property markets are enrolled in the needs of criminal investment activity (Platt, 2015).

The lifeless interiors of the architecture that has emerged from a confluence of capital investment and status seeking speaks of a kind of endpoint of urbanism that finds echoes in the analysis of Davis (2002). At a more prosaic level, the rise of necrotecture signifies the inability of the city and its political leadership to corral investment and economic activity in such a way that citizens are offered stronger assurances—of livelihood and home (Engelen *et al.*, 2017). The housing crisis itself is produced by a system in which money rather than people is the primary index of success (Jacobs and Manzi, forthcoming). Political and economic forces have been cemented in places in ways that have facilitated the production of lifeless spaces that are dynamically linked to increasing social inequality, global chaos and low-intensity warfare, as well as globalized criminality elsewhere. Upon these unstable factors it seems that London’s economy now depends.

The literal meaning of a plutocracy is the idea of a political system controlled or shaped by the rich. But such power is more extensive and perhaps more worrisome than the idea of simply a rigged political system. London is a plutocratic city (Atkinson *et al.*, 2017); it is ‘bought’ by and for the rich, by, with and for their capital. Money influences planning decisions as surveyors argue that non-market housing may taint the market prospects of internationally marketed apartment blocks. Big money is involved in, and accepted by, corrupt or negligent real-estate agents and solicitors who do not alert the regulators as part of their due diligence. Of course the money of the monied also influences the politics of the city and the acceptable range of decisions that can be made about who the city is for and how its economy is run. Mayors in New York and London have told the world that they are open for business or that they wish for as many rich people to move there as possible. The result of this political economic context is that a new residential skyline has emerged with few, if any, people inhabiting it at a time of pronounced social need generated by austerity policies and an economic reverse that has touched the lives of many others in the city.

The wider impact of flows of global capital is evidenced in the hundreds of residences under construction and which are targeted at the ranks of the wealthy. The cultural, political and economic context driving these built forms is notable and appears as a mark of a late capitalist urbanism and its assumptions that social need, ecological limits and political resistance can be denied with impunity and in seeming perpetuity. Yet the impact of these choices and the lack of social investment seem likely to haunt the city for many years to come. While many see towers and luxury residences as a mark of economic vitality, this apparent energy belies the social absences of these spaces and it is this feature that is generative of an intensifying and increasingly political anger in the city. The sense of these spaces and developments as dead further emphasizes their role, not as homes, but as tradeable assets and as signifiers of the kind of urban and housing alienation that now pervades the capital.

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