# Against neoliberal domicide
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During the early hours of 14 June 2017, a devastating fire engulfed Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey block of flats built for public rented housing in London. It was the deadliest residential fire in peacetime Britain for 800 years, killing 72 people and rendering 201 households instantly homeless. The dead and displaced were in one sense victims of a ruthless public-private partnership between a cost-cutting local authority and profiteering commercial contractors who oversaw a botched and unlawful refurbishment scheme – trampling over residents' safety concerns along the way – that fatally undermined the building's original ability to resist the spread of fire and toxic smoke and protect its inhabitants. Of critical significance was the infamous aluminium 'cladding' and foam insulation behind it – fitted to reduce heat loss and 'beautify' the brutalist grey concrete tower regarded by the local property machine as blighting the area's land values – that would provide a fuel load equivalent of 32,000 litres of petrol. The fire's rapid spread was facilitated by so many defective structures and systems that the fire-fighters had no chance of being able to control the blaze. And yet, many more residents could still have survived if they had not been told to 'stay put' inside their flats while the fire raged in the mistaken belief that the building's design would protect those inside. As the ongoing public inquiry has revealed, the disaster's causality extends way beyond the immediate public and private bodies implicated in the fire, to the very heart of the neoliberal state.

*Safe as Houses* is not directly about the Grenfell Disaster, but Grenfell was its motivation and connecting point throughout. The book focuses on the home and life-destroying consequences of four decades of neoliberal policies in the UK – and specifically England – whose fingerprints were all over the Grenfell crime scene. By rolling back state provision and social protections through privatisation, outsourcing and deregulation, successive governments have conspired to recommodify the provision and consumption of housing, transforming shelter into an increasingly financialised asset produced in largely self-regulating environment irrespective of tenure. Assembling evidence from other public housing regeneration schemes in England, the book set out to prove beyond doubt that Grenfell was neither an accident nor a one-off event but instead an extreme outcome of a much wider production of *neoliberal domicide*. I would like to thank Mara Ferreri, Joe Penny, and Ryan Powell for their generous reviews that perceptively identify some important cross-cutting themes as well as problematizing aspects of the book's argument that have greatly stimulated my own thinking across four themes: activist scholarship and accountability from below; new enclosures; power asymmetries, violence and chronic urban trauma; and reimagining alternatives beyond the state.

## Activist scholarship and accountability from below
As Penny notes, *Safe as Houses* is less an academic book and more a political intervention that stems from over a decade of Participatory Action Research (PAR). During this time, I worked *with* residential communities in their everyday practices of "accountability from below" (see Ferreri 2020) to co-produce empowering knowledge about housing regeneration schemes and residents' lived experiences. In taking this activist scholarship stance, I owe an enormous intellectual debt to those geographers who have created space for radical academic praxis, especially the late and desperately missed British academic, Duncan Fuller (1972-2008) who encouraged, inspired, and resourced countless academics like me to "transform, in emancipatory and empowering terms, social relations" (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004: 6). The book deliberately does not seek out academic debates mainly because this felt irrelevant after Grenfell. That is not an anti-intellectual statement – my analysis would have been lost without

theoretical scholarship – but my primary motivation was to deliver evidence in a way that would resonate with, inform, and legitimise those fighting for justice after Grenfell. This was also a deeply personal book as Rydon, the principal private contractor at Grenfell, had not only left a similar trail of dangerous work and residential alienation in the regeneration schemes I had researched, but had tried to unsuccessfully to get my research censored.

**New enclosures**

A second theme that emerges from these commentaries is the unstated yet obvious relevance of theories of new enclosures (Midnight Notes Collective, 1990) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003) to the book's empirical evidence. As I have argued elsewhere, so-called 'regeneration' schemes have often functioned as land grabbing property machines, demolishing public housing and unleashing the forces of gentrification and speculative corporate investment that displace low-income populations to the urban periphery (see Hodkinson, 2012). Powell correctly notes that what remains of public and social housing has also been enclosed within financialising logics from the withdrawal of state finance, impelling rent inflation, evictions, and the shift in business models towards the development of homes for sale that further widens the gap between housing need and supply. In highlighting the "multiple immaterial enclosures" resulting from systematic outsourcing, Ferreri perceptively suggests that privatisation is becoming conceptually redundant in the face of a new model of "extractivism" forged by "a dynamic, parasitic relationship" between public and private spheres.

This new frontier of urban dispossession is also a new accumulation circuit of disaster capitalism (see Preston, 2019) and the human consequences of these new enclosures are stark. Since Grenfell, nearly 100,000 blocks of flats that are home to over 3 million people in England have been identified as having potentially serious fire safety and other structural defects in need of remediation works that will cost tens of billions of pounds. Yet, because of historic deregulation policies that protect developers from liability and a legal system designed to enrich landowners that the government refuses to change, the majority of residents are legally liable to fund the repairs and any temporary safety measures, which threatens them with bankruptcy while unable to sell their homes or raise new mortgages to help pay the enormous bills. In a further twist, due to the dominance of the building industry by relatively few commercial actors, the remediation works – some of which are supported by government grants - are often contracted out to the very same companies responsible for the defective work.

**Power asymmetries, violence and chronic urban trauma**

At the risk of overwhelming despair, the book focuses throughout on the destruction of lives by regulation, policy decisions and business models, linking the many individual and collective traumas experienced by residents to the violent power asymmetries at the heart of regeneration. This was very deliberate as such lived experiences of domicide are too often dismissed as merely 'anecdotal' by the powerful, while frequently ignored in urban studies despite their centrality to value creation and capture in the built environment (see Nowicki 2014). I am grateful to Penny for highlighting here the work of feminist geographer, Rachel Pain (2019), in conceptualising how chronic urban trauma is produced through the slow and fast violence of housing dispossession enacted on those deemed disposable. Slow violence embodies the often invisible or intangible yet traumatising long-term processes of disinvestment, neglect and gradual stigmatisation that precede the sudden onset of a fast and violent regeneration in which homes and communities are invaded and reconfigured without care or consultation by an army of aggressive contractors operating with state-backed impunity. For residents "trapped in place" (ibid. p.393) yet forcibly embroiled in a conflictual relationship with those actors, regeneration becomes primarily experienced as a form of "psychological violence" normally associated with domestic or child abuse that constantly

retraumatises, generating the same "feelings of dehumanisation, altered identity, anger, depression, self-hatred and suicidality" (ibid. p.388). Speaking to residents from across different regeneration schemes after the Grenfell disaster revealed just how deeply the fire had retraumatised them by not only evoking their own experiences but also presenting a chilling prophecy of what could wait them. This collective trauma carries on as Grenfell survivors, bereaved and residents living in dangerous buildings endure the shocking and sickening daily revelations from the Grenfell public inquiry with no sign of either the required regulatory reforms or any prosecutions being brought against those involved in the tower's deadly refurbishment (see Hodkinson and Murphy, 2020).

## Reimagining alternatives beyond the state

Finally, the commentaries insightfully problematize the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, the book's critique of central and local state structures, and on the other, its concluding call for re-regulation and a reinvented public housing model in which the state remains centre stage. Powell is correct to argue that ensuring Grenfell is a never again moment requires "a systematic reappraisal of the relationship between housing, the state, private finance, and tenants". I suggest in the book that this new settlement rests on pushing back rentier capitalism from our homes through the *decommodification* of housing where we once again think of it as a "social service" for the common good and no longer as a financial asset or private commodity.

How do we put those principles into practice? Firstly, we have to stop the privatisation or further commercialisation of what remains of public or social housing which has brought damaging speculation, rent inflation and gentrification everywhere - no more individual sales to tenants or stock sell-offs and giveaways to private landlords or investors. Secondly, we need to harness the power of the state to underpin a new programme of public house building led by local municipal authorities, supported by land nationalisation at below market value, alongside local state requisition of inadequate private sector housing and far greater regulation of rents, tenancies and conditions in the private rental sector. Expanding the non-market supply of homes is crucial to prioritising affordability and reducing neoliberalism's planned scarcity that feeds rentier capitalism.

Inevitably, rolling back neoliberalism and rolling out a new era of public housing face enormous practical challenges, as well as entrenched resistance from a conservative political establishment, finance capital, and the real estate lobby. Penny is right that the prospects for such a radical - or even modestly progressive - municipalism in the UK are especially bleak given the highly centralised and centrally controlled local state with its hardwired neoliberal structures, corporate dependencies, and corrupted democratic cultures (see Davies et al 2018). So why, to paraphrase Ferreri, does the book's imagined alternative seek to displace the housing question, once again, to "the territory of state politics", rather than build on "already existing practices of commoning" at the grassroots level? That certainly was not the intention, although, in my defence, whilst completing the book I was undoubtedly pushed in a more progressive statist direction by the prospect - or illusion as it transpired - of a moderately radical Labour government committed to much of the agenda described above. Ferreri is right: the book should have engaged more with the vital strategic questions being posed by the new global wave of radical municipalism (see Thompson 2020) of how we build autonomous grassroots movements, how we generate and reclaim public/private spaces as commons, and how we relate to, and use, the state, party politics and electoralism to these ends. Just as we cannot ignore the state and the need to both resist its enclosures and win concessions, nor can we win without a movement that seeks to collectivise the housing question at every fight, opportunity and scale.

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