The Returned: experiences of un-homing on a “regenerating” London housing estate

**Abstract**

Amid a globalised crisis in secure housing provision, this article zooms in on the specific experiences of older working-class people coping with public housing demolition and forced neighbourhood transition in London. London’s new-build mixed tenure housing developments provide varying proportions of social rental housing, some of it made available to tenants of the council estate it replaced. This article examines the experiences of older people who have taken up the ‘opportunity’ of ‘return’ and explores the multi-faceted work they are forced to undertake as they move into unfamiliar and capricious social, physical and political landscapes superimposed on the collapsed infrastructure of their old estate. The article brings themes of ‘un-homing’, ageing in place and everyday ‘repair’ work into encounter and calls for greater qualitative understanding of the ‘return’ experience as a dimension of forced relocation by housing restructuring and tenurial mixing projects.

**Keywords**

Public housing, un-homing, displacement, ageing, council estates, London

**Introduction**

In recent decades, nation states across the Global North have gradually withdrawn from the provision of social rental housing and implemented programmes of public housing demolition in the name of 'new urban renewal', poverty 'deconcentration' and the promotion of homeownership (Goetz 2013; Hochstenbach 2017; Hyra 2008; Watt 2017). In the UK – one of several European societies to pursue a mass council (public) housing programme in the early to mid-twentieth century (Watt 2017) – this came to manifest in a sustained ideological attack on council housing and council estates (Slater 2018), widespread disinvestment and privatisation of council housing stock (Malpass 2005; Hodkinson 2019) and sporadic estate regeneration / demolition schemes (Boughton 2016; Watt 2020). London is reported to have around 3500 council-built estates of varying sizes (Adonis and Davies 2015). These typically serve an ethnically highly diverse working class (Perera 2019) but, owing to the 'right to buy'[1] and 'remodelling' projects, are rarely the mono-tenure social rental estates they might once have been (Watt 2020). Nevertheless, dozens of post-war estates are currently being partially or fully demolished and replaced by mixed tenure developments across London's thirty-two boroughs (Elmer and Denning 2016; LAHC 2015; Lees and White 2019). Municipalities have sparked much activist resistance over the last decade (Watt and Minton 2016) as they have scrambled to sell estate land to offset brutal post-2008 fiscal austerity (see Beswick and Penny 2018) and access the tide of investment capital that has flooded into the 'safe deposit box' that is London's residential real estate market (Fernandez et al 2016).

The spatial displacement effects of all this are becoming clear. Lees and White (2019) suggest around 130,000 households have been or will be displaced by the recent estate regeneration surge whilst Berry (2018) notes the net loss of social rental housing provision across regenerated estates. Hamnett (2014) and Lees and White (2019) note the role of welfare restructuring and precarious work in reducing incomes, driving evictions and subjecting council estate residents to forms of 'accumulative dispossession' (Lees and White 2019) whilst Elmer and Dening (2016) have declared that 'the London

Clearances' have arrived. Qualitative studies exploring the precise lived effects of this displacement are only just emerging (see Lees and White (2019), Minton (2017) and Watt (2018; 2020)) – perhaps owing to the well-known challenges of researching post-relocation displacees (Elliot-Cooper et al 2019; Wang 2020).

The reality of life on the new-build mixed developments rising in the place of estates is less clear. We know that some developments have more generous social housing provision than others depending on the land economics at specific sites and how these feed into local planning agreements between municipalities and developers (Flynn 2016; Watt 2020). This determines what proportion of estate residents can 'return' to the new development under what conditions (in more egregious cases we know this can mean the existence of 'poor doors' separating 'social' and 'private' access points or even segregated children's playgrounds (Grant 2019; Wall and Osborne 2018)). We know very little about the extent to which 'social' residents experience 'return' as a form of displacement (although see Glucksberg 2017; Watt 2020 on London schemes and Shamshuddin and Vale 2017; Joseph and Chaskin 2010 on US urban renewal) in line with trends in regeneration research which tend to fixate on what Atkinson (2015) calls 'the spatial dislocation and movement of people' out of neighbourhoods (p376). According to Shamshuddin and Vale (2017), overlooking those that stay or return retards our ability to properly evaluate urban renewal schemes, including, contend Kleinhans and Kearns (2013), the possibility that residents might perceive the process as one of personal 'betterment'. For Wang (2020) this narrow focus needs expanding geographically and conceptually to improve our understanding of the variegated human impacts of global urban development.

This article responds to Wang's call with several original contributions to the geography and sociology of displacement. Firstly, it zooms in explicitly on the under-studied experience of residents who have lost homes but 'returned' to a redeveloped estate, contributing new evidence of the multi-dimensions of contemporary urban dislocation. Secondly, it fleshes out the theory of 'un-homing' as a frame for

analysing this experience. Elliot-Cooper et al (2019) drawing on Atkinson (2015) and Davidson (2009) have recently called for the adoption of a phenomenological lens on home and dwelling in order to more fully grasp the 'severances' wrought by urban restructuring processes which are never 'purely spatial events' (Davidson 2009; p223). Raw physical distance from previous homes and neighbourhoods is of little concern to my sample but they have been thrust into an environment built and unfolding not on their terms, but on those of a public-private sector developer coalition which, as we will see, elicits not only a sense of symbolic displacement (see Atkinson 2015) but myriad tensions as returnees are forced to try and regain emotional and political ground. The article enriches the theoretical architecture of un-homing firstly by foregrounding the experience of older people (here defined as 60+ years old) living with estate regeneration, an under-researched area of social gerontology (see Phillipson 2010). I adopt a relational approach to understand the co-constitutive relationship between ageing and place (see Lager et al 2013) and take as a starting point that neighbourhoods are important sites of security and belonging for some older people, especially those on low incomes (see Lager et al 2013). Secondly, I examine the agency of older people post-development and document how their un-homing means immersion in different forms of everyday psychological, interpersonal and political struggle and work. I name these as: 'adjusting', 'navigating', 'repairing' and 'building'. Here we find some of what Lees et al (2018) call tactics of 'survivability' in line with findings of other studies of older people living through significant neighbourhood change (see Buffel and Phillipson 2019; Morris 2015, 2019) as well as more 'mundane' forms of sense-making, confronting, sharing and coping. This mode of analysis works with Jane Will's (2016) contention that sociologists should be 'starting with community and working from there' (p653) and bears some traces of those strands of postcolonial, feminist, queer and non-representational scholarship which share a focus on everyday 'cityness' (Simone 2010) in the face of unequal, dispossessive and capricious urban infrastructures (eg Graham and Thrift 2007; Lancione 2019; Till 2012; Wakefield 2018).[2]

**Becoming and researching Parkside**

Parkside is situated 9 kilometres from central London in the London borough of Lewisham (LBL) (see figure 1).

**Figure one about here**

Location of Lewisham within London. Map used with permission from London Councils.

It lies in a dense residential area traversed by congested arterial roads. Streets of social housing predominate to the immediate west of Parkside whilst brief walks towards the districts of Greenwich and Blackheath offer leafier, wealthier scenes. One kilometre to the south lies Lewisham town centre, transformed in recent years by the 'Lewisham Gateway' regeneration scheme, just one of the 'growth-chasing projects' (Mayer 2017) seeking to turn LBL into a 'place of value' (Paton 2018). Here, the daily street market, workaday pubs and cafés and 1970s shopping centre remain busy but swathes of new-build residential apartments have attracted financial services workers (the banking centre of Canary Wharf is accessible by train in a matter of minutes) and other young professionals priced out of south London's more coveted suburbs. In line with wider London trends LBL has shed more than half its social rental housing stock since the mid-1990s (MHCLG 2019a), the borough social housing waiting list remains extensive (MHCLG 2019b) and rates of homelessness and households living in temporary accommodation have both risen recently (LBL 2015).

Parkside is the new brand name. The land on which it sits was previously home to the Heathside and Lethbridge estate (HL) built between 1950s and 1970s on the site of an old chalk quarry and comprising 16 low rise housing blocks. Prompted by the Labour Government's Decent Homes Strategy, over 80% of HL' s homes were deemed 'non-decent' in 2001 and subsequent regeneration feasibility studies proposed substantial 'remodelling' of the estate to improve quality, density and security and claimed 60% of those HL residents surveyed supported demolition (LBL 2014). At this point, HL was home for a

high proportion of poor households, had been allowed to physically dilapidate but remained well connected to local urban centres by bus and train. A six-phase regeneration programme was agreed in 2004 (LBL 2019) and is due to be completed by 2022 (see figure 2). Peabody (a housing association (HA)) is the 'development partner' and landlord.[3] HL had 565 homes but Parkside will have, on completion on the same site, approximately 1225 homes, one third of which will be available for Social Rent or London Affordable Rent with the rest for private rent, sale or shared ownership.[4] There will be around 30 separate housing blocks ranging from 4 to 17 storeys high. All will be managed by Peabody aside from two which were sold to a private real estate company.

**Figure 2 about here**

New private condos on the left, vacant Lethbridge blocks awaiting demolition at the rear and on the right. Note the dense woodland that banks the south of the site. Photo taken by the author during the final phase of the regeneration.

This article draws on a programme of interviewing and participant-observation undertaken on Parkside between 2014-2019. My entry into the field was gradual beginning with attending estate meetings and events convened by the Parkside Residents' Association (PRA), HA community workers or the developers working on site and I was soon on chatting terms with some regular attendees at meetings. I also took regular photographs and recorded some film around the site to capture its gradual metamorphosis from HL to Parkside. In 2018 I was invited by one PRA attendee (an ex-HL social tenant) to a weekly 'cuppa club' she helped organise for older residents. I visited on six occasions for 1-2 hours per visit. Typically, there would be 8-12, mostly black and minority ethnic women there and one man. Most though not all had lived on HL. I listened to the ladies talk, argue and organise trips and answered any questions they had. On two separate occasions, women invited me to visit their home after the club and they talked to me privately about the changes to the estate, about their life and about other club members. The cuppa

club recalled the findings of Buffel and Phillipson 2019 and Gosling 2008 (and as Gosling reminds us, Campbell (1993)) on the entwining of gender, age (and in this case, race) and informalized mutual aid within working class communities.

This work helped inform my topic guides and opened access to twelve residents for semi-structured interviews. The aim was to explore how older people living in social housing were negotiating life on Parkside. The sample was achieved through snowballing. Four participants were male, eight female and all were between sixty and eighty years old. Eight participants were White British or Irish, one White European, two Black British and one Asian British. Around half had been involved intermittently with the PRA over the years. They had all lived on HL since at least the early 1990s with one lady moving there in the 1960s. Two participants were 'right to buy' leaseholders on HL now living in shared ownership properties on Parkside and ten were social rental tenants. Most had raised children on HL and several had experienced significant personal difficulties at some point including homelessness, serious ill health and disability. Nine lived alone but most undertook care work for ageing parents, partners or grandchildren. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and took place in the participant's home, my home or in the estate café. All but one of the interviews was digitally recorded. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data: interviews were transcribed by the author and read several times for familiarisation and to note and refine coding themes.

**Adjusting to Parkside**

At least one third of social tenants and most leaseholders from HL did not 'return' to Parkside. Understanding why is beyond the remit of this paper but a combination of 'choice', inadequate compensation (for leaseholders), new lettings policies and unease at the prospect of moving to Parkside were mentioned by my participants as factors. In any event, one consequence of this displacement was

that my participants were a select group who had 'survived' forced relocation *to some degree*. Their motivation to move back onto Parkside tended to relate to a stated preference for staying in the neighbourhood and retaining proximity with friends and neighbours, unsurprising perhaps for residents of an advanced age. However, their 'survival' was usually narrated in ambiguous terms as they reflected on coming to terms with their relative 'luck' in remaining in a transformed neighbourhood. On the one hand was an individualised sense of relief or pride at living in a brand-new home with four people giving me 'the grand tour' to show me around. Bob (social tenant) was one and he notably contrasted it with living with a sense of dilapidation and chaos on HL. He mentioned the lack of noise in his new flat several times and linked this with a sense of peace and security amid new and unfamiliar neighbours (see Lewis 2019 on the contested entanglement of sound and community).

*'My kitchen is a bit small, but… I'm very proud of my flat. Sound insulation is great; no noise whatsoever. I like my balcony… I thought (HL) was rough…we had cockroaches, vandals, some prostitution and I found caches of marijuana and money'* (Bob, social tenant).

Similarly, Jeanette described life on HL as: '*intense and horrible, people knowing it all…I like my own company*' although she admitted that *'I did meet ****** (her best friend) living there so something good came of it. She'll be round soon. Everyday! (Laughs)'*

It was clear that all my participants had retained friendships of varying strengths from their time on HL and that these provided vital sources of gossip and support for 'ageing in place', supporting the findings of Gardner (2011) and Buffel and Phillipson (2019) albeit maintaining these relationships had been complicated by the new social and physical environment of Parkside. Here some sense of liberation from HL was balanced with narratives of community decline. Social tenant Grant was also *"obviously delighted"* with his flat but was less enamoured with the new social environment. He told me he felt that *"on a deeper level it used to be a community but not now… the place is dead. It's all flat."* Nostalgia

for a 'golden age' can be common feeling for estate residents living through significant change and uncertainty (Lewis 2017; Ravetz 2001), particularly older people (Phillipson 2010) but interestingly for Grant he attributed this to the ongoing technocracy of the regeneration and the swirl of unfamiliar forces – new landlords, contractors, managers into his life and that of the estate, rather than a loss of social bonds per se (see Watt 2006). A lively if imperfect place had become a lifeless one, he implied, one that returnees no longer felt was somehow 'theirs': *'…there ain't the care no more. It's a place they've (Peabody) created, not us'* seeming to echo Atkinson's (2015) findings of psychic dislocation in response to changing physical social environments.

Leaseholder Mary told me that the demolition *'broke up the community, absolutely'* but stressed that she did feel any sense of empowerment from the move: *'I didn't want to move because my flat was just as I wanted it. I also wanted to move on, on my own terms not when they (LBL / Peabody) wanted it.'* Social tenant Graham was agnostic about his new home and talked about the disrupted social rhythms of HL: *'What's happened is, where we were all together on Lethbridge and Heathside, a stone's throw away but now… people are scattered. They are not a million miles away but they're scattered. It's no longer a case of opening your front door and 'how are you' and all this.'*

Mary also referred to what Graham called the 'scattering' of HL friends and neighbours. She knew many were still present, but they had become more distant now as they occupied new corners and blocks of Parkside and made new neighbours. She echoed Morris's (2019) participants when she reminisced how it *'used to take an hour'* to walk to the corner shop: *'you would be stopped every two minutes… but it's not like that now, there are so many more people, three times as many, but you don't know most of them.'*

Beyond complicated social ties, Graham was the only participant to talk about losing HL in a more memorial or symbolic sense, bringing to mind Porteus' (1988) notion of 'topocide'. He spoke movingly

about how living through regeneration was also an exercise in forgetting, something that he felt was difficult with council estates:

*"…somebody came up with 'Parkside' which is fine, but it will always be Lethbridge. I came out Lewisham station last week and somebody was getting a cab and I know the person and he said to the cab driver: 'Lethbridge close please' 'no problem'… It's like the Pepys estate in Deptford will always be 'Pepys', they will never change it. The big Kidbrooke estate, that was known as the Ferrier and will always be known as the Ferrier… you can't get it out of your system. Eventually I suppose we will say Parkside."*

He was also visibly energised when talking about recovering what he felt were two important symbols of life on the old estate. He spoke proudly about the collective meaning of a memorial garden planted by residents to commemorate a young HL resident who lost his life and passionately about restoring access to the thickets of natural green space at the rear of the estate (captured in figure two), temporarily fenced off during the regeneration. For Graham these were important legacies of HL that he will continue to lobby Peabody about to ensure they make good on their commitments to older residents.

**Navigating others old and new**

For my participants, coping with the disruption to personal relations and domestic spaces was further complicated by the new age, class and tenurial profile of Parkside. Whilst they did not express any great frustration regarding levels of personal (non) interaction or explicit 'mixing' with younger or new 'private' residents (echoing the findings of Jupp 1999), there were some emerging anxieties about the wider meaning and impact of new social cleavages. Whilst Parkside does not have 'poor doors', there are distinct blocks given over to 'social' and 'private' residents, something Mary felt was a form of 'apartheid'. Referring to the two blocks not owned and managed by Peabody, she observed:

*'It feels like they have been hived off into their own little island. They've got a separate concierge. It doesn't feel right; it's not the right feel for the place. It isn't what we were promised here and it feels underhand. We weren't consulted.'*

This chimed with the findings of Lager et al (2013) whose sample of older people felt new 'enclaves' signified a problematic future for the estate and those of Atkinson (2015) who found that regeneration signalled for established residents a new economic imperative that had little place for them or their attachments (p383). For Peter this was linked to a sense that new hierarchies were being encouraged:

*'Leaseholders look down on social tenants. They might not be so well dressed, they might be a bit worn out and old…there's a bit of social discrimination…then there is resentment (from tenants) that their (leaseholders) cleaning gets prioritised and their repairs get done quicker. I think…50% of leaseholders are reasonable people and understand why people are social tenants and why people don't have their own house.'*

My tenant participants displayed some insecurity about the prevalence of 'private' residents on Parkside. Peter made his droll remark about a 'reasonable' 50% whilst Teresa, like Mary, bemoaned what she felt was a restructuring of the estate along class lines: *"they built all these flats for the rich; they didn't think about the poor people"*. Susan went further, dismissing the decision of those buying flats on Parkside: *"the place was built cheap and will deteriorate quickly. Why pay all that money?"* Conversely, she was saddened by private residents' presumed detachment from the estate, feeling that the younger professionals who pour in and out of the estate around the 9-5 commuter rhythm (and the Airbnb visitors trundling trolley cases) see Parkside as merely *"a place to lay your head down. It used to be a community, people actually lived and breathed on this estate."* For Bob, the failure of new residents to 'live and breathe' Parkside had political ramifications: *'People aren't interested in mixing shall we say. If we have a PRA meeting, so few private people turn up and it's always the same people.'* Peter was

mindful of this and was keen to unite against Peabody: *'there are lots of clever and useful people who live here. If we can tap into them maybe they (Peabody) will stop treating us like children.'* He also spoke passionately about protecting the reputation of Parkside by addressing and resolving any segregations and tensions through the PRA and through managing media interest, something he linked explicitly to the stigma of living on HL:

*'Every time I hear about it (a negative story that could interest the media) I kill it. We don't want to go back (to the stigma of HL). Even though the council was in charge they had a fair amount of drugs here and some prostitution; a few shootings and things like that. You don't want to go back to those days. If you give a place notoriety that's where you are going to end up.'*

The issue of drugs on Parkside (selling and taking) was mentioned by most of my participants and was mentioned frequently during PRA meetings. This issue was often expressed in moralising terms that described 'bad families' and 'feckless parents' and seeped into intergenerational anxieties about unruly teenagers and unfamiliar or threatening nocturnal noise (see also Lewis 2019). Culprits were typically held to be new social tenants (although drugs were an issue in *"all the blocks, not just social"* according to Mary) and in two cases these complaints were inflected with a racist reading of social and moral decline (cf Watt 2006). Jeanette, for example, argued that: *"the black people on here are not like they were. In the old days they were good families but now you get all sorts."* For Graham, the issue was less with new social tenants but the same 'problem' tenants who had returned from HL, one he hoped the move to Parkside could resolve. Implicit in his reflection was a reading of Parkside as providing something of a clean moral slate:

*'There are a few people living here who got flats that shouldn't have got flats because they were trouble on Lethbridge. Not big stuff but you don't want people bringing it to a new estate if you want to class it as a new estate. There's drugs involved and stuff like that but I will give credit to Peabody…they are*

*slowly dealing with it…2 or 3 families have gone already and there's another person about to go shortly.'* (Graham, social tenant)

The Peabody neighbourhood manager visited one PRA meeting to verify rumours of these evictions. To approving nods around the room, she aligned herself with the moralising mood she correctly detected in the air (cf Shamshuddin and Vale, 2017) and stated unnervingly: *'perpetrators of drugs offences are being dealt with. Living here is a privilege.'*

**Repairing infrastructures**

Understanding social dynamics and tensions and managing what they saw as the fragile upward mobility of Parkside were areas that my participants were all confronting as they witnessed the new estate emerge around them. However, these forms of social negotiation were conjoined with something rather more literal. As a new and extensive construction, Parkside had been riven with infrastructural problems and poor 'customer service' from the beginning. My participants were all worn down by its everyday structural failures:

*'We call our lift the tin can because it is American crap... Our lift has broken over 200 times in the last 3 years. If they break at weekends they won't get fixed until Monday morning. Three times we had to get the fire brigade out to get people out… ****** (name of block) broke down… You are talking 16 floors (storeys high).' (brackets added)*

Mechanical uncertainties such as these (loss of hot water, over-heating of communal areas, broken front doors were also mentioned) created anxieties around simple forms of mobility and dwelling on Parkside. This was compounded by a perceived slowness and inefficiency in response from Peabody and their sub-contractors. Participants described calling in faults through a central 'customer care' call centre which

provoked further anxiety about the cost of telephone calls and the facelessness of the process. For some returnees this contrasted with a (perhaps mythologised) efficient and humane repair procedure on HL, run by Lewisham Homes, where repair personnel were known to residents and there was a well-known caretaker who could act as a conduit to housing management. Peabody introduced seven caretakers to Parkside but these had no remit for conducting repairs. For Graham, the solution was simple: rather than Peabody rationalising their maintenance department across multiple estates and managing demand through their call centre, *'we (each estate) should all have our own handyman (sic), someone who knows us and the place inside out and can get things sorted, quick'.* This was a regular plea during PRA meetings with Peabody officers which seemed borne of both a need for greater control over a capricious infrastructure that lacked obvious and effective oversight and a more personalised connection with an unfamiliar estate.

The continual breakdown of Parkside (and the difficulty in getting it efficiently repaired) came to act as a conduit for a deeper power struggle between some residents and Peabody. This landlord-tenant / leaseholder relationship was still in its relative infancy but not only was it deemed to be failing to provide a satisfactory level of service, according to Grant it was also failing to make good on its duty of care to residents: *'Peabody… are children and they're only learning. They have a linear, limited view: 'we finished your flat, your flat is good, any complaint it's not our fault' when we should be their lifeblood.'* This combination seemed to make some of my residents such as Peter feel almost humiliated; a finding akin to the disempowerment effect of poorly managed social change identified by Buffel and Phillipson (2013). He told me: *'it is embarrassing. They needed us to get this (the regeneration) through and now they don't give a ****.'*

For Susan, it drove her to the conclusion that they had no choice but to persevere in trying to hold Peabody to account as individuals and through the PRA and meetings with councillors despite the gruelling nature of this aspect of life on Parkside:

*'You got to keep on and on. It gets a bit boring but you got to otherwise they'll run away with you. They'll do what they like and won't do the repairs or anything like that which is hard enough even with our pressure…people should get more involved*'.

It was notable that few 'private' leaseholders attended PRA meetings. My respondents mentioned this several times and reasons were no doubt multi-faceted but I had a telling conversation with one who told me, in an impromptu conversation, that he had attended one PRA meeting when he moved in but felt it was *'…just old social tenants moaning about their new heating'*. He obviously felt able to step away from this process or had the resources to individually manage the inconvenience of system breakdowns. Returnees did not feel they had the same privilege or felt they needed to hold Peabody to account for the promises they had made to HL residents or perhaps were clinging to the PRA as a source of solidaristic continuity from the old estate (cf Lager et al 2013 on the importance of 'remnants' for older public housing residents) but in any event, the calling of Peabody and its contractors to account was being led from the front by returnees.

**Building socials**

If my participants were part of a cohort of residents shouldering the bulk of the struggle to manage and repair the infrastructural breakdown of Parkside, it was they who were also at the forefront of scrutinising how it was evolving as a social space. One important feature of mixed tenure regeneration schemes is that they bring people onto estates who have no experience of estate living. Further, private renters and leaseholders are encouraged, as Susan noted, to conceive of Parkside as a commuter base or as an investment or first 'rung' on the property 'ladder', not necessarily as a space of community or one where they have a long-term future (during one early visit I overheard an estate agent reassuring his client over the phone that the estate, despite being located in LBL, had secured a 'Royal' Borough of

Greenwich postcode which would enhance its sell on value). This contrasts with social tenants, particularly the older people in this case who had long and rich attachment to estate life. Having raised families on HL and feeling keen to live out their retirement in a safe and well-designed local community, my participants were keenly aware of the nuances of a well-calibrated (or otherwise) environmental and social space.

Against this backdrop, there was widespread disquiet about the housing density of Parkside. In a time of housing crisis, the repercussions of densification through new-build housing development has become a media narrative (eg Noor 2019). Similarly, on Parkside, my sample complained about air and noise pollution and the way in which housing units had been built so close to busy roads. Graham, for example, told me: *'People in ***** and *****, I think they regretted moving there. Come down the A2 (road) and you will see a few windows open but that's it. I went there once and the staircase was black. All from the cars, 24/7.'* Susan also pointed out that the density threatened people's quality of aspect not to mention privacy: *'you got no outlook anywhere. As I say you look out the balcony and you're looking at someone else's balcony or someone else's window. You look that way or this way, it's the same. You got a nice balcony, but you got nowhere to look.'*

Participants also drew attention to living on a live construction site, one many felt was inadequately managed (constant heavy vehicle and machinery noise, spreading dust, inadequate sprinklers, weekend works). Susan moved in phase one and lived with the building of Parkside and brought to attention how 'opening the window' became a negotiation of risks and vulnerabilities for those forced to live with polluted noise and air (cf Lewis 2019; Hirsch and Smith 2018):

*'It was a nightmare living with building work.... It was mostly dust and noise and it was 6 days a week. It was hassle and stressful to live with continuously. They started 8am and couldn't open your windows, which in the summer was a nightmare.'*

This poor environmental condition has been exacerbated on Parkside by the inadequate provision and poor maintenance of the minimal green space provided to date. This was noticed by Doreen who echoed the findings of Bhatti (2006) when she stressed the importance of gardens as a site of embodied home-making for older people in the so-called Third Age (55-75 years old), especially those living in apartments:

*'the trees and so-called gardens seem like an afterthought. They are not looked after, the grass has turned to mud. There are people here who would love to garden, to take care, why not let them?'*

These problems with densification, pollution and lack of care and attention to landscaping filtered through in complaints that Parkside was a sanitised, moribund place socially speaking – *"flat"* as Grant put it. There was a feeling that a focus on densification had squeezed out social space where relations of belonging could be forged and developed. Formal spaces of 'social' provision on the estate – a café and a community centre – are not widely used by residents. As Susan noted: *"I never go there, no one goes there. Not sure why but why spend money on a sandwich when you live over the road?"* The community centre is in the same building and provides space for clubs and events. For some, like Grant, it was perceived as a glorified Peabody office *("it's just all them in there")* although it has provided space for the 'cuppa club'. The community centre opened eventually after years of wrangling over ownership. Graham was of the view that it should be community-owned and managed:

*'the centre should be ours to decide what to do with, the community's, not Peabody's…People in the community should feel able to rent out rooms, run classes, do creative things without having to go through the Peabody hoops.'*

This lack of space for community creativity was sometimes interpreted as not only an issue for older people but for children and young people (cf Lager et al 2013). Parkside has no play space to date for the growing number of families with young children and will offer only a minimal amount by 2022. This was

a live concern for all of my group as cases of antisocial behaviour and nuisance were thought to be accumulating on Parkside. For Peter this was not only creating anxiety for older people and conflicts between the generations, but it represented a threat to the future social order of the estate by signalling to young people that they are somehow out of place.

*'do we want to be a ghetto? Do we want to say to kids you're not really welcome here, you have no life here? Well that's what they (Peabody) are saying if they don't provide adequate playspace. This storing up problems. The kids, who aren't monsters, will find their own fun… opportunities are missing here: games, sport, music and so on and people are labelling them as bad people.'*

In response, the PRA was pushing vigorously for more play space, even as a temporary measure, and pledging to use its meagre budget to support music classes for young people.

**Conclusion**

The acceleration of council estate regeneration in London is pulling apart old and assembling new housing environments across the city. Residents are being displaced in myriad ways by this process, including a substantial (if currently unknown) number of returnees who are being launched into 'defamiliarized' (Atkinson 2009) physical, political and social landscapes constructed in the ruins of their demolished homes. To adequately integrate these experiences within a nuanced 'geography of wounding' (Philo 2005) there are several possible research directions, including understanding 'private' housing incomers' perceptions and relations with returnees or longitudinal work which might establish, for example, whether tensions settle over time (Kleinhans and Kearns 2013) or whether social housing is 'converted' to a less affordable tenure once returning tenants pass away.

In this article I have worked with the notion of un-homing to try and capture the psycho-social disturbance that comes with re-locating to a defamiliarized environment. The older people in my sample were not only forced to relocate but were *forced to react* in ways that better resourced private residents with no stake or understanding of the regeneration context were not. Just as weak housing rights can generate ongoing and unending mobilities (Watt 2018), so the process of return to badly designed and managed estates engenders a perpetual flux of coping, vigilance, digging, resolving and resisting. Rather than being beaten down by this, we find a cohort of older people trying to make life liveable for themselves and others amid profound and rapid neighbourhood change, supporting the findings of Buffel and Phillipson (2019). Lager et al (2013) and Morris (2015; 2019).

This is not to over-state the agency of returnees or the social stability of the old estate. There is a sense in which the insecurities of Parkside should be seen almost in continuity with living on a downgraded post-war council estate, not as some sudden 'root shock' per se (Fullilove 2004). For some, this was just another moment in a deeply precaritised working class life punctuated by housing injustice. As Pain (2019) notes, for the urban poor "violence and trauma wind on as material, embedded, everyday realities" (p390). Nor it is to question those who seem absent from community (or research) spaces. As Walkerdine (2017) notes, when it comes to working class communities, we could choose to assume that 'what appears as non-compliance, apathy or lack of interest may be understood as an attempt to create safe spaces of appearance, free from interference' (p706). It is unclear whether the same reasoning can be applied to the 'private' tenants and owners on Parkside who are also notably absent on the whole from the spaces and projects of agitation and repair. There is certainly enough evidence of their absence here to trouble the advocates of 'social mixing' (see Lees, Butler and Bridge 2012). Indeed, if there are 'role models' to be glimpsed on the early days of Parkside it is some of the older returnees. This is not to somehow exaggerate their virtue. Some showed an appetite to police new hierarchies of 'legitimate' belonging in a charged, socially differentiated 'throwntogether' new place (Massey 2005), for example.

Not that this is surprising. We know that council estates are deeply intricate spaces of home and belonging where social divisions can also manifest (Gidley 2013; Hanley 2007; Leaney 2019; Lewis 2017; McKenzie 2015; Watt 2006). When such delicate affective landscapes are disrupted, repairing, rebuilding and assembling life again will be deeply fraught. Perceived threats to the re-stabilising of life are likely to be magnified and felt keenly by returnees. Such threats are not just social-relational but, as we have seen, can be detected in the unwieldy and dysfunctional nature of the infrastructural project, in unfulfilled regeneration promises and in a capricious landlord. Each introduces new power dynamics and risks that participants in my study, on the periphery of London's over-heated cores of housing injustice, are continually processing and managing.

The provisions of national welfare states across the Global North were enabled by and riven with classed-raced hierarchies, exclusions and violences (see Bhambra and Holmwood 2017; Boughton 2016; Thorburn 2018). It is also true that the accelerating demolition of post-war public housing programmes is compounding spatialised class and racial injustice within capitalist urban cores (Perera 2019). It is tempting here to reflect on the fall of public housing as another of the decaying infrastructures and 'broken-down' worlds said to be accumulating in the Anthropocene (see Wakefield 2018). Indeed, there is an abundance of scholarly and activist discussion about how an expanding urban disenfranchised might (or is) respond(ing) to the neoliberal wreckage (see Mayer 2017). This article shows some of the fine gradations of dispossession, un-homing and coping within this general trend and how working-class people, as ever, must deal with dislocation and contempt in myriad ways. Securing 'rights to return' for public housing residents facing demolition should remain one priority for urban activism but as this article demonstrates, the struggle does not end there.

**Notes**

[1] ‘Right to Buy’ was the flagship Thatcherite housing policy that enabled sitting tenants to ‘buy’ their council homes at a heavy discount and become ‘leaseholders’.

[2] Albeit I am somewhat aware here of being a white male scholar drawing on an epistemological ‘outside’ (see Oswin 2018) to analyse a comparatively privileged urban environment in the Global North.

[3] HAs are ostensibly non-profit housing providers which have grown to become major housing developers. Peabody is a London-based HA manages tens of thousands of homes across south-east England.

[4] ‘Social rent’ is the most affordable form of rent for social housing tenants available in England. ‘London Affordable Rent’ is less affordable but is set considerably below ‘market’ rate. Shared ownership properties are classed as affordable ‘intermediate’ leaseholder homes in England. The household ‘owns’ a portion of the lease via a mortgage and also pays rent and service charges to a landlord.

**Acknowledgements**

This article was sharpened significantly by various conversations with Paul Watt and from the reviewers’ helpful comments.

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