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Rental Rooms: Spaces of Migrant Housing, Overcrowding, and Social Reproduction in the Rentier City

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ABSTRACT

When analysing housing precarity and politics, urban theory tends to focus on a few typical scales—the urban region, the neighbourhood, the house. This paper argues that the room/rooms need to be foregrounded as a scale, site and unit for understanding migrant housing geographies, overcrowded practices of social reproduction and the politics of urban inhabitation. In considering the case of migrants renting from a private landlord or intermediary in London as a rentier city that structurally produces spatial scarcity for precarious residents, the rooms addressed include rooms converted into shared worker dormitories, small rooms rented to single migrants, and single bedrooms in larger shared houses and single-bedroom flats rented to families. The paper demonstrates how migrant rental rooms unsettle and reformat social reproduction and home-making across multiple scales—transnational, urban, house—and politicise access to decent, affordable living space in the rentier city.

1 | Introduction

London has emerged as a 'rentier city', in which the mismatch between incomes and rents has seen renters compromise on space and rentiers profit by subdividing space into smaller units and charging higher overall rent (Potts 2020; Wilde 2019). Overcrowding more than doubled among private renters from under 6% in 1996 to around 13% in 2019, while the most recent population census in 2021 showed that 380,000 households in London had fewer bedrooms than required according to the bedroom occupancy standard (Cosh and Gleeson 2020, 81; ONS 2023). Not enough social housing has been built for decades and waiting lists are long, leaving many people facing the choice between continuing to rent in overcrowded conditions, commuting longer distances or leaving the city altogether. Moreover, not enough larger social housing units have been built for low-income families with children needing separate bedrooms. Between 2012 and 2022, of the 35,821 'low-cost rented homes' built in London, 13,824 had three or more bedrooms, and only 2465 had four or more bedrooms (LTF 2023).

In the rentier city, running parallel to speculative 'Build To Rent' developments built by corporate landlords is an informal yet extractive economy of rental accommodation catering to low-income residents, advertised on Facebook and WhatsApp groups and in adverts in newsagent windows, often targeted towards specific ethnic, national and linguistic migrant communities. Among migrants who had arrived in the UK in the last 5 years in 2021, 75% were living in private rental accommodation, compared to 13% who had been in the UK for over 20 years, while overcrowding is significantly higher among migrants and racialised and minoritised groups (Coulter 2025; The Migration Observatory 2024). Compromises on space are commonplace, and housing is often rented out at the scale of a room or a sub-room space, including 'studios' (single-room units), rooms in shared houses and bed spaces in shared rooms. The informal

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room economy provides the housing context for many migrant workers upon whom the city is dependent for the provision of low-paid labour in sectors such as hospitality, construction, cleaning and security (Wills et al. 2009).

Overcrowding has been understood by urban geographers and political economists as an effect of unaffordability and precarity in contexts where land and housing are central to capital accumulation and there is a significant low-income 'reserve army' of labour (Davis 2006; Potts 2020). As a relation of occupancy and density, overcrowding refers to more people occupying spaces designed for particular functions like housing or transport than the capacities that they were intended for or are considered reasonable. However, relatively little work has addressed the spatialities of overcrowding when analysing the political economy, affects and geographies of housing precarity, including rooms (Chen and McFarlane 2025; Reber 2021). This paper addresses a key facet of inhabiting spatial scarcity and overcrowded housing, namely rooms as a scale, volume, unit and site of housing precarity. In this respect, rooms are a neglected yet critical spatiality for housing, urban and geographical scholarship, which tend to return to and affirm the primacy of certain scales—global, national, regional, urban, neighbourhood, house, body. Rooms are critical to understanding housing precarity in relation to these other scales, in migrant geographies of home-making that span multiple territories, the embodied, spatial organisation of social reproduction in overcrowded housing and the neighbourhood and the politics of urban inhabitation.

Rooms are an important scale and site for understanding housing in general. If rooms are understood to be some form of physically enclosed space, with upper, lower, and horizontal limits (ceiling, floor, walls) and ways for things or people to enter and leave (doors, windows), within built, adapted or naturally occurring structures, then rooms may be understood to be a feature of almost all forms of housing that one could imagine. However, rooms are different in floor areas, height and functionality, while the occupation and use of rooms also express inequalities in access to space. In the UK, the average number of rooms per person was recorded to have increased over a century from under 1 per person in the 1911 Census to almost 2.5 per person in 2011. Yet over a similar period, room-based inequalities, having fallen consistently from the best-off decile having around 4 times as many rooms per person as the worst-off decile to 3 times as many between the 1921 and 1981 censuses, rose in recent decades, to 5 times as many by the 2011 Census (Dorling 2014). Rooms are therefore the site of uneven, unequal processes and patterns of social reproduction. As a primary unit of housing, rooms are crucial for understanding the housing practices of specific marginalised groups, as the single room becomes the fundamental scale and site in which domesticity is formally bounded (Reber 2021). In this respect, the room is the strategic site for precarious, low-income migrants trying to secure accommodation in London and for landlords and rentier intermediaries seeking to profit from their predicament. In the UK, rooms are also strategic sites for rehousing groups including homeless families, single adults and asylum seekers, in which a range of rentier actors profit, while it is common for private renters in general to rent single rooms in shared houses or single-room flats. This paper offers a lens for understanding these diverse experiences, while attending to specific forces that push migrant workers and families towards rental rooms and sub-room spaces, as well as what this means for the organisation, government and politics of social reproduction in the rentier city.

Living in one room for a family or sharers or in a small room in a flat without a separate living room raises a different set of challenges concerning ordinary domestic activities compared to when living in an entire house or flat or with a separate kitchen and living room. Rooms are often not designed in ways that can easily accommodate fundamental needs and practices of social reproduction such as cooking, sleeping, washing, maintaining hygiene, privacy, relaxing and play alongside one another. A focus on rooms therefore complements existing health and social scientific research on overcrowding in examining the spatial dimension of housing for economically precarious populations and how this is constituted in relation to wider geographies of labour, migration, housing and social reproduction (Barry Born 2021; Chen and McFarlane 2025; Coulter 2025; Reber 2021). The political economy, spatiality and materiality of room accommodation reconfigure social reproduction for migrant workers and families. Moreover, room practices, embodiments and affects filter into how migrants feel about and act upon their place in the city, unsettling geographies of social reproduction and home-making that extend across multiple territories in the architectures of precarious housing as well as the use, meaning and politics of urban space (Simone et al. 2025; Torino 2023).

The next section of the paper anchors attention to rooms as a scale and unit of housing in relation to critical scholarship on volumetric space, crises of social reproduction and migrant geographies. There is then a methodological overview of the research before the paper turns empirically to the unsettlement of social reproduction and home in overcrowded migrant rental rooms. This unsettling occurs at multiple scales, through compromises made in transnational migrant geographies of labour, remittances and home, the spatial reconfiguration of everyday activities within rooms and houses of which they are part, and irregularity resulting from informally let rooms not having a formal address. Finally, the paper examines how rooms are central to migrant struggles for spatial justice when encountering local state logics of austerity and gatekeeping space.

2 | Rooms as Spaces of Migrant Housing Precarity

2.1 | Rooms as Housing Volumes

Given their role in the spatial organisation of social reproduction and the affective as well as political economic composition of housing, rooms are a relatively neglected analytical scale, site and unit of housing by geographers. Geographers have engaged with how home is materialised, made and unmade through, in, and against the spatial layout of rooms, while housing-oriented research has formulated informal housing typologies spanning additional rooms, room conversions and room-sharing and conceptualised home-making/unmaking in shared and converted rooms (Blunt and Dowling 2022; Gurran et al. 2021; Naik 2015; Nasreen and Ruming 2021; van Lanen 2022; Wegmann 2015). However, by and large, critical geographical research on

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housing typically references or interrogates certain principal scales—global, national, local, urban, neighbourhood, house—while often neglecting the architectural materiality of physical dwelling spaces as sites and infrastructures of housing, social reproduction, everyday life and politics.

Yet geographical scholarship does have significant resources for understanding architectural practices, materialities and affects, as well as relationships between architecture, social relations and power structures shaped by the urbanisation of capital (Goss 1988; Jacobs and Merriman 2011). More recently, scholarship on volumetric geographies has highlighted three-dimensional spaces and vertical as well as horizontal relations that constitute urban spaces and territories, pointing to spatial forms such as high-rises and luxury basements that extend above and below the earth's surface, while also bringing into focus the spatial capacity of buildings, implying questions about room heights, size, design, thresholds, limits, densities and calculable metrics (Graham 2016; McNeill 2020; Peters and Turner 2018).

Metrics including space standards as well as statistical and legal definitions of overcrowding, of which there are four in the UK, designate rooms as capacities, 'in practical terms, the number of human bodies that can be fitted within a defined space', incorporating concerns around health, safety and comfort (McNeill 2020, 820). These metrics are crucial to the politics of housing space in which rooms are prominent objects and sites of government and contestation. Statutory overcrowding, measured using a 'room standard' and 'space standard' under the Housing Act 1985, establishes legal responsibilities and enforcement duties and is used in London by activists and lawyers to advocate for residents lacking space (London Assembly Housing Committee 2018). As such, while volumes and volumetrics are, respectively, the objects and tools of architects, planners and speculators, for instance in vertical 'space grabs' by developers, the 'everyday voluminous experiences' and volumetric practices of tenants, squatters, residents, activists and advocates are equally crucial to the production of space, navigation and contestation of precarity and constitution of home (Harris 2015; Liong et al. 2020; McFarlane 2016).

2.2 | Rooms and Social Reproduction

Rooms as volumetric site and unit of housing precarity reanimate Marxist feminist concerns about capitalist crises of social reproduction through which caring capacities and infrastructures are depleted and desocialised (Bhattacharyya 2018; Fraser 2016; Katz 2001; Rai et al. 2014). A focus on social reproduction requires theorising 'the relationship between the physical body in all its acts (such as "eating, drinking and procreating") and the social relationships of capital that such a body finds itself in' (Bhattacharya 2017, 11). Rooms as sites of capital accumulation and precarity direct attention to a key physical spatiality of embodied practices of domesticity and social reproduction. Feminist analysis has shown how 'the relative size and position of rooms' including the kitchen, dining room, living room, larder, scullery, toilet, bathroom and bedrooms have been shaped by patriarchal ideals of the domestic division of labour and classed ideals about sufficient, appropriate space allocated for the reproduction of working-class family life (Hayden 1980; Matrix 2022, 55). 19th century reformists concerned with social depravity associated with overcrowded working-class housing designed in different bedrooms for parents, boys and girls, and a separate living room and scullery (a room for washing dishes and laundry) to increase privacy and control the spread of diseases (Matrix 2022, 63).

Yet design does not guarantee how rooms are used in practice, which reflect classed and racial inequalities, dynamics of capital accumulation and crises of social reproduction. In wealthier households, some rooms may rarely be used. Conversely, rooms can also be subdivided by speculative rentier actors to accommodate more people with less space per person, often for higher overall rents, a phenomenon associated with the spatial concentration of production and expansion of the reserve army of labour in 19th century industrial cities and more recent urbanisation (Davis 2006; Marx 1976). Increased rentier extraction from room units also intersects with racial and citizenship-based inequalities, as when US landlords in the interwar period subdivided houses into smaller single-room 'kitchenette' apartments marketed to black families (Shabazz 2015, 34). In London today, rooms and places in shared rooms play a crucial role in the cash-in-hand, informal rental economy catering to people on low incomes or with precarious legal status as well as in newly built corporate landlord developments (White 2024).

Lacking access to space is crucial to temporal and spatial disruption and emotional and embodied depletion as processes associated with the shaping and intensification of crises of social reproduction by the contemporary housing system (Madden 2025a). Living in overcrowded conditions disrupts ordinary activities associated with social reproduction, for instance needing privacy and having time to rest and relax properly before returning to work or school (Reber 2021). Lacking space also has a cumulative effect as the capacity for basic tasks associated with social reproduction can be depleted over time through worsening physical and mental health. Rooms are a key spatiality of disruption and depletion. Lacking rooms with distinct functions can often necessitate cooking, eating, sleeping, washing and playing all in the same space, requiring specific formats, practices, infrastructures and routines such as furniture that can be folded and packed away, phased use and waiting turns. Meanwhile, adjacent crowded, cramped rooms separated by thin walls provide the stage for disturbance, conflict and heightened precarity premised on sensorial relationalities between physically proximate but spatially bounded others (Chen and McFarlane 2025).

However, while room-based housing can function as a disciplinary, oppressive architecture for occupants, it can simultaneously form a site of subjectivities, socialities and practices of refusal and resistance (Madden 2025a; Shabazz 2015). In addition, the physical quantity (size, dimensions), quality (design, functionality) and juxtaposition to outdoor space of indoor rooms shape the possibilities of how housing as home is constituted, reconfigured and reimagined by dwellers (Blunt and Dowling 2022). Having a room as one's primary unit of accommodation may shift the meaning, use-value and political significance of different kinds of urban space and, in turn, re-politicise social reproduction (Lancione 2020; Madden 2025a; Simone 2022).

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2.3 | Rooms in Migrant Housing Geographies

Rooms as the primary unit of housing tend to be associated with precarity structured by class, gender and race, including through the 'differential inclusion' of migrants across borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Migrants have historically formed a 'reserve army of labour' central to the urban extraction of surplus value by capital, making do with limited space as rentier actors profit on the basis of their precarity (Davis 2006; Marx 1976; Wills et al. 2009). The conversion, addition and densification of rooms and sleeping arrangements within rooms is common for recently arrived, precarious migrants across the Global North and Global South, making their way to the city from rural areas, on worker visas or while seeking refuge (Meeus et al. 2018). Scholarship has explored shared room sleeping and cooking arrangements in multi-storey and 'courtyard'-style buildings in Gurgaon, 'horizontal densification' in Los Angeles including partitioning single-family houses into separate living spaces, converting rooms into dormitories, adding rooms in backyard structures, parking caravans, converting garages and adding extensions, the moral economy of Kyrgyz migrant rental dormitory management in Moscow and emotions and socialities of temporary visa workers from the Global South accommodated in cramped and overcrowded shared rooms in Dubai (Naik 2015; Reber 2021; Reeves 2016; Wegmann 2015).

London's migrant housing geographies are highly varied, encompassing the housing of wealthy speculators with properties spanning multiple territories and of low-income visa-based workers and refugees. Recently arrived low-income workers and families, who are not eligible for social housing and are unlikely to be in a position to buy property, tend to rent houses, apartments, rooms and sub-room spaces, often relying on informal arrangements that can cost less per person but may involve worse conditions, less protection from eviction and harassment and limits on capacity to prove residency through use of address. Precarious migrant housing practices are shaped by the manufactured scarcity of space in the rentier city. Modifying existing housing volumes (bedrooms, living rooms, gardens, kitchens, hallways, lofts) offers opportunities for rentier accumulation through providing accommodation for low-income residents, including though not limited to migrant workers. Housing built to address industrial-era overcrowding—terraces, semi-detached houses and council estates—has been repurposed and 'squeezed' to extract rental income, including in historically lower-density suburban areas (Barry Born 2021; Millington 2011; Potts 2020).

At the same time, the significance of rental rooms to low-income migrants plays out through heterogeneous, indeterminate itineraries and in relation to processes and practices of social reproduction that extend across national territories, borders and cities (Ferguson and McNally 2014; Katz 2001; Simone 2020). Living in a room unsettles migrant practices of social reproduction and home-making through disruption and depletion both within and beyond the room. Families balance resources including living space across multiple territories, with migrants squatting or renting a room unit 'here' while sending remittances to construct a house or pay off a mortgage 'there', all while plans may change over time in relation to geographically extensive moral, affective and political economies of family obligations, indebtedness, remittances, precarity and home-making (Begum 2023; Boccagni 2014). Over time, financial and spatial resources may be reallocated, as when depletion and disruption 'here' enters into migrants' calculations, aspirations and plans about whether to stay in their current accommodation, leave for home 'there' or try to find a more comfortable home 'here' (Simone 2020). In this way, inhabiting overcrowded rental rooms entails an 'unsettling that disrupts clear designations of points of departure and arrival, of movement and settlement, of centre and periphery, of time and space' (Simone et al. 2025; Torino 2023).

3 | Researching Overcrowding and Pluralising Migrant Rental Rooms in London

The research behind this paper took place between 2017 and 21, including participant-observation and numerous conversations across a range of urban (housing, rooms, marketplaces, streets, workplaces), state (inspections, offices, forums), organisational (advocacy, trade union, night shelter) and activist (meetings, protests) settings and 63 recorded interviews (migrants, intermediaries, officials, residents, advocates, activists) to understand the experiential, spatial and political resonance of overcrowding across the city. Throughout the main period of fieldwork, I was active in London Renters Union, a local tenant union, volunteered for 6 months in a weekly advocacy clinic of a Latin American migrant NGO and ran housing rights workshops for migrant groups, all of which shaped my research process, positioning and analysis. The interviews with migrants, which form a major basis of this article, addressed experiences of housing, wider migration contexts and engagement with the state, housing advocacy and activism. I met interviewees through organising, volunteering, chance conversations, posting requests online and snowballing. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

The majority of the 29 migrants interviewed were either from European Union or Latin American countries (often with dual EU citizenship) originally, with a smaller number from Asian and African countries, and a small minority who had been living undocumented in the UK at some point. They and other migrants I spoke to had varied experiences of overcrowding and rental rooms. Some were living or had lived in rooms on their own, some with people whom they hadn't known previously, some with friends or family. Many had moved between different kinds of room-based accommodation as circumstances had changed, some having moved into more spacious accommodation by the time of the interview. They also had different experiences of migration and entanglements of social reproduction beyond the UK. Some had moved to the UK on their own before family members joined them, others had moved with family members, while others still had remained on their own, met partners or had children in the UK.

The remainder of this article foregrounds examples selected to pluralise an understanding of the forms and place of rental rooms within migrant geographies of social reproduction and home-making and to offer a volumetric spatial reading of housing precarity in the rentier city. These examples further illustrate how migrant room dwellers are not passive actors and how rooms are not incidental to their plans and decisions. Rather, experiences of rental rooms are central to how migrants establish

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livelihoods in London, form part of everyday life, become central to changing plans and have been central to demands for spatial justice.

4 | Unsettling Social Reproduction and Home in Rental Rooms

4.1 | Remittance Rooms

> [Y]ou feel a bit embarrassed that the room is a bit too small, if your friends come over you can't even turn around … [I]t affects your personality … I think having a healthy living space, it brings so much joy to someone.
>
> (Alina)

> The guy show us our room. It was like a box. I think it was three [metres] by two [metres], yeah? Big. And we were three guys in that room. The bunk bed and one of them boxes that is a bed, they put four boxes, and … I had like a square metre to move there, and that guy was asking for £275 a month. So that box room was like £1,000 a month, yeah? Imagine how much money that guy was making, with all the people living in the house.
>
> (Florian)

The embodied experience of inhabiting cramped and crowded rental rooms reveals the entanglement of crises of social reproduction connecting everyday life in the rentier city to geographies of migrant labour, debt and home-making spanning multiple territories. Alina arrived in London from Romania as a 19-year-old au pair, looking after a baby for 3 years before moving on. She tried to live cheaply in order to send money to her mum who was bringing up Alina's younger siblings in Romania. She worked multiple waitress jobs, for up to around 17 to 18 h each day. Her housing was precarious, often secured on an informal basis. Having slept on a friend's sofa and spent a night in a hostel and another on a bus, she shared a room with a woman she knew from Romania that she was offered through a man who was a customer at a restaurant where she waitressed. After discovering that her roommate was stealing from her and feeling unsafe, she moved into a single-occupancy room closer to her work in central London, paying £165 per week to save money and time on transport. She could tell that the space was part of a bigger room that had been partitioned as the walls were very thin. She had her own key and never met her neighbours, despite hearing them and being able to recognise their voices. The room had a small sink and tiny wardrobe, and she could not extend her arms across its width.

Alina's participation in the room economy was tied to money pressures, holding down several jobs and studying while continuing to send remittances. When we met, she was working three part-time jobs while studying at university two days a week. When she started the course, she left her old jobs and moved again, paying £300 per month for a room previously used for storage. Alina made sense of her lack of a comfortable home in London in relation to the daily rhythms of working hard and saving for remittances. She thought at the time 'it was ok, because as everyone else in London you are home only probably eight hours a day maximum, considering that you're probably sleeping six and one just having a shower and you know … you just need a space to put all your stuff, because you go again from the beginning the next day'. But she felt embarrassed to invite friends over and struggled to form close relationships. She could not have her family to stay, 'because where do you seat your family? On a single bed?' The rooms she slept in provided her a place to sleep but disrupted ordinary practices of care and sociality, leaving her feeling isolated, unsettled and depleted.

Alina introduced me to Florian, whom she met in London where they had become partners. A key motivation of Florian moving to London from Bucharest in the mid-2010s in his 20s had been to send money back to Romania while working construction jobs, specifically to pay off the interest on a family mortgage. Obligations to remit, as 'mortgaged lives' extend through geographies of financialised debt in which migrant labour is enmeshed, were central to his journey through crowded, shared rooms in London (García-Lamarca and Kaika 2016). 'The people back home', Florian reflected, 'they're thinking we're living the life in London, you know? They don't know how we live here so we can make some money and go back home'. On arriving, he was picked up by a friend and taken to a two-bedroom house where seven people lived, paying £400 per month to stay on a sofa on the living room while his friend took a small room.

He then moved through a series of houses where rent was paid weekly in cash, in which living rooms and kitchens were repurposed as additional sleeping spaces, and if you did not pay you would be evicted there and then. A head tenant would be in charge, providing some food and often continuing to recruit further subtenants regardless of how many people were already living there. Some tenants worked night shifts, with Florian never seeing them. Florian recalled almost diagrammatically the relationship between the capacity afforded by the volumes that constituted each of these houses and the actual density of inhabitation (McFarlane 2016; Peters and Turner 2018). Bunk beds and mattresses populated each room of the first house, with people sleeping in the kitchen and corridors, around 25 in total.

While paying £70 per week to share rooms, Florian was paying £400 per month on his family's mortgage interest. Florian was reflexive about the room economy, connecting 'how much money' was being made in rentier profits to disruption to everyday needs such as hygiene and rest and emotional, embodied depletion stemming from lacking space and privacy (Madden 2025a). He expressed a sense of unfreedom stemming not from coercion but from compulsion to work, pay off debt and live in these conditions, conveyed through an image of carceral space encompassing the multi-sensorial experience and domestic rhythms of overcrowded masculinities (Chen and McFarlane 2025). 'Imagine, oh that guy didn't wash, you need to stay with him in the room, you know? It's like a prison more'. With '20 people in the house and one toilet, imagine in the morning when there, all of us going to work, knocking on the door. Come on bruv, come on, come on'.

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For years, Florian and Alina each balanced the toll of lacking space with care and obligation that extended elsewhere. The rooms and sub-room spaces they rented fitted for a time with earning money to send to family and to pay off debts, revealing how value extraction in the rentier city, through informal subdivisions of space at the room scale, is entangled with migrant geographies of social reproduction. Yet these arrangements were not sustained over time. Rather, there was an unsettling of the relations that had underpinned each of their moves in the first place, with life in the rentier city necessitating a different kind of relation to the possibility of home somewhere (Simone 2020; Simone et al. 2025). Loneliness and depletion led both Alina and Florian to change tack. Together, they rented a two-bedroom flat with a friend, sharing a room as a couple with the friend taking the other bedroom. More money went on rent with less to send to family, but they had more space and greater stability. Their experience of rental rooms formed part of their reappraisal, recalculation and adjustment of the balance between 'there' and 'here', not merely as an infrastructure of arrival but as a reckoning with their sense of home within and beyond the rentier city.

4.2 | Fold-Out Social Reproduction

Alina and Florian's experiences attest to the unsettling of daily life and home in relation to the architecture of the rooms they were living in. Daily activities like storing and preparing food, eating, cleaning, getting changed, doing work- or school-related activities, and sleeping often have to take place in the same space, in which finding provisional ways of negotiating the spatial volume of the room becomes critical. A key problem for renters becomes what must be brought together logistically to make this work.

Maurice, originally from west Africa, moved from southern Europe to London in the late 2010s initially without his wife and daughter and found himself in a similar predicament of needing to find a relatively affordable place to rent. He found a small room with a single bed to rent through a friend. The house had two larger rooms lived in by around seven other people and no separate living room (lounge). Maurice's room was 2.5 m by 1.8 m in floor space, he recalled, for £320 per month cash-in-hand, under the legal minimum size for an adult at 6.51 m^2. Like Florian, Maurice conveyed an affective sense of carcerality tied to the compulsion to use his limited earnings for spatially constrained lodgings, exploited by an uncaring landlord while separated from his wife and daughter: 'It was a volume I'd never lived in in my life ... I said to myself, it's a prison. I live in a prison where I pay rent every month'.

By the time that we met, Maurice had been reunited with his wife and daughter. The family were living in an upstairs room of a two-storey terraced house. Maurice had moved into this room, initially by himself, once he found better work and could afford more, moving into another house owned by the same landlord. When I visited one day, we sat at a fold-out table in the family's room next to a fridge and a fold-out bed propped up next to us, which Maurice's daughter would sleep on next to her parents' double bed. Maurice took oranges and cut them up into a bowl, placing this on the small table between us. Tucked away next to my feet were bottles of water. Opening one, he used the water in a plastic bowl by the fridge to clean some glasses for us to drink from. We sat and chatted for a while before his wife and daughter came home with a pack of ice creams for us all to tuck into. In this manner, routines and rhythms of social reproduction are reworked within rental rooms and the larger houses of which they form a part.

For the landlord, turning each room into a shared lodging with a separate lock extended the limits of rentability through unit densification (Madden 2025b). The terraced house was occupied by around 10 other tenants, including families with children and single adults. Maurice paid £500 per month to rent the room on his own and £600 per month when his wife and daughter arrived. The house was poorly maintained, and the landlord showed little willingness to spend money to make it more comfortable. Yet for Maurice's family, the state of the house mattered. Although they did not feel close to the other tenants, they wanted to improve conditions and had pinned a collective cleaning rota on the bathroom door.

The family's experience of lacking space and poor conditions was central to how they hoped and took action for something better. Maurice and his daughter showed me a model house they had made from cardboard with two separate rooms for the family. Maurice had received support from London Renters Union members to demand changes to the house, including clearing the garden. While significant and empowering, the improvements were partial, with much including the washing machine and windows remaining broken, and did not stem the feeling that they could be better off elsewhere. The landlord, meanwhile, contended that other people would still be happy to take the room if the family left. We talked on the phone as Maurice looked for bigger flats in more affordable areas to make sure that he was not being taken advantage of by letting agents. Eventually, the family moved to a flat of their own with a formal tenancy contract and separate bedrooms.

4.3 | Off-Grid Room Residency

Conditions of manufactured spatial scarcity push renters like Maurice's family into informal room rental units within larger properties, as these tend to be a relatively affordable option. However, while some houses are formally subdivided into separately registered single-room occupancy or studio flats with their own address, informal units may have their own door lock but remain unregistered and therefore lacking a separate address. In these cases, while subdividing and renting out separate rooms of a house can increase rental income, preventing a visible paper or digital trail can limit visibility of additional tenants, which may otherwise draw attention and breach local planning, building and safety regulations, space standards and licensing requirements given the number, size, type and capacity of rooms. Cash payments hide rental income while a lack of traceable documentation carrying additional tenants' names, through verbal agreements and bills included in the rent, weakens subtenants' legal recourse, leaving them more vulnerable to harassment and illegal eviction.

While the broader problem from the landlord's perspective is how to conceal overcrowding in general, this operates at least in

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part through the room economy and presents particular difficulties for families renting a room for the sake of having a minimal level of privacy and safety. For those renting a room for their family or sub-room space without access to an address, there can be adverse consequences for access to employment, finance, state support and educational institutions due to the geocoding function of addresses in making residency legible at a given location (Rose-Redwood 2012; Scott 1998). Living in these rooms can therefore unsettle the relationship between occupation and formal residency, with significant disruption to social reproduction at the scale of regularising residency in the city. The Indo-American Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO) supports Latin American families to access key services. IRMO reported in 2016 that among the 24 children it had helped to get a school place in local schools in the previous year, they had missed an average of 18.5 weeks of school (for a school year of 39 weeks) due to delays in the application process. Not being able to provide proof of address was one of the key issues delaying school access, with a survey showing 46% of families IRMO were working with did not have a tenancy contract (IRMO 2016). Isabella, an IRMO service user, rented a room for her family where she was not allowed to use the address. For months, she was not able to open a bank account and had to make a bank transfer to a family member in London, who would withdraw the money from a bank machine so Isabella could pay rent.

Their residency rendered illegible to the state, renters of informal room units and sub-room spaces utilise various means to make themselves legible, including paying to use other people's addresses, renting access to a mailbox from local businesses, or using the address of a local homeless centre. The landlord eventually allowed Isabella to put a bill in her name after several months of not being able to prove residency. Given the additional precarity, some opt for a formal tenancy if they can afford it, even if this means paying significantly more rent for an equally overcrowded space.

5 | Politicising Space in the Rentier City

> As he [the male adult] could not have afforded any more spacious accommodation, either in Southwark or in any other central London borough, the only 'choice' available to him was to continue living in the one room in Gordon Road or to leave his job and move his family elsewhere, to seek other employment and accommodation, either within the United Kingdom or abroad.
>
> (Fitzpatrick 2020)

> Queremos casas de consejo, con tres, quatro, cinco camas. Gracias. (We want council houses, with three, four, five bedrooms. Thank you.)
>
> (HASL 2020)

Rooms have become a key locus and site of struggle in the rentier city. Local state bureaucracies are deeply entangled with forms of rentierism that produce spatial scarcity and hence conditions in which rooms have become the primary unit of much rental housing. An element of this concerns responses to overcrowding, through the lack of development and maintenance of adequately sized affordable units and the reliance on private landlords to provide rehousing alternatives at expensive rates, often outside the local area and in poor condition. The number, type and size of rooms are a key terrain of struggle for migrants encountering state bureaucracies responsible for rehousing people who have been living in overcrowded housing and for managing and allocating the social housing stock.

If a household is deemed to meet the threshold of statutory overcrowding the local authority has a duty to find them more suitable accommodation. Two standards are used to measure statutory overcrowding under the Housing Act 1985. In both cases, any room other than toilets, bathrooms, small kitchens, utility rooms and rooms with a floor area of less than 4.65 m^2 can in theory be counted as a bedroom. The 'room standard' states that there is overcrowding if at least two people age 10 or older of a different sex who are not a cohabiting couple share a room. The 'space standard' judges overcrowding according to two separate rules concerning the number of adults and children in relation to the number of rooms and the size of rooms, respectively.[1] In addition, some local authorities use a separate 'bedroom standard' in their social housing allocations policy, which stipulates that a household should be considered overcrowded and therefore placed in a higher priority band in the local social housing register if there is not a separate bedroom for any couple, single person age 21 or older, two young people age 10 to 20 of the same sex or two children under age 10 of any sex (Shelter England 2026). While these technical measures abstract from experiences of overcrowding, they nevertheless constitute the legal terrain on which overcrowding is evaluated by the state, and hence, for people seeking an improvement in their housing conditions and advocates, lawyers and activists supporting them.

Yet in practice migrant families have often found that even when it has been possible to demonstrate overcrowding officials often do not offer support that meets their needs. 'Gatekeeping' is used by housing activists to refer to state practices of withholding support to those who need it (Wilde 2022). Gatekeeping is not simply the result of individual choices by officials but results structurally from austerity, class-based, racial, gendered and citizenship-based inequalities, and ideas about who is deserving and undeserving of support (Jensen and Tyler 2015). Gatekeeping includes ignoring, refusing or deflecting claims, not providing sufficient or accurate information on the consequences of taking certain actions and holding families morally or legally responsible for living in overcrowded conditions. The local state plays a key role in gatekeeping who can access local flats with adequate space and rooms.

Activists from Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth (HASL), a group based in south London, have shown how gatekeeping impacts migrant families living in overcrowded rental housing. Through campaigns, advocacy, mutual care and material forms of solidarity, HASL members validate experiences of overcrowding and gatekeeping and build confidence to challenge their treatment as undeserving of a decent home with sufficient space and rooms in the area that they have put down roots. Bilen, a HASL member, slept in a room with her husband

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and two children in a one-bedroom flat for 5 years. She made an application to the housing register with Southwark Council, but was not put in a priority band. After several years, she accessed support through HASL. Southwark Council sent round an officer to the flat to determine whether the family met the conditions for statutory overcrowding based on the number and size of rooms. The officer told them that they would be moved to the highest priority band, but they waited 6 months before being told that they were being kept in a lower priority band. Bilen told the council 'we are overcrowded' and with the support of a lawyer challenged the decision. The family were finally moved into the highest priority band and eventually moved into a three-bedroom house.

Gatekeeping also takes the form of denying support on the basis of treating overcrowding as a 'choice' made by families rather than resulting structurally from migrant precarity and rentierism. In 2019, HASL brought a legal challenge with Public Interest Law Centre (PILC) to decisions not to support families that stipulated overcrowding as a 'choice', 'intentional act' and a case of families 'deliberately worsening their circumstances'. Favio, Elba and their two children moved from a room in a shared house to a one-bedroom flat as they were unable to afford a local two-bedroom flat. Around 2 years later in 2016, as the elder of the two children turned 10 years old, Favio's family met the conditions for statutory overcrowding. In 2019, the family applied for social housing and asked to be placed in the highest priority band. However, the council rejected the request for prioritisation based on statutory overcrowding, stating that this was a 'deliberate act'. The decision implied that the family had chosen their circumstances, living in a one-bedroom flat, so that they could more easily access social housing, rather than compromising when trying to find housing in the precarious position of being low-income migrants with children, claiming benefits and not speaking English as a first language in a city geared towards rent extraction. The case eventually went to the Court of Appeal, which overturned the original decision. Favio's lawyer argued that their only 'choice' in 2014 had been either to rent the one-bedroom flat or for Favio to give up his job and move further out of London or leave the UK (Fitzpatrick 2020; HASL and PILC 2020).

HASL's campaigning links the expulsion of migrant families to the propping up of an extractive regime of rentierism and financialised speculation on housing. In other cases, families have been relocated outside of the local authority's administrative boundaries, which can result in their removal from the local housing register altogether once they no longer meet local residency criteria (HASL 2018). Meanwhile, in recent years, local authorities have sold land to private developers while demolishing older council housing estates built in the 20th century. The majority of the new housing developed is too expensive for low-income families and only has one or two bedrooms, aimed at a more affluent professional class with less or no children than most HASL members, who need lower rent houses of three or more bedrooms. HASL members share their experiences of bidding for social housing in meetings. There are rarely enough adequately sized flats or houses with three or more bedrooms available to apply for. As well as previously campaigning against the 'bedroom tax', a punitive policy towards social housing residents deemed to have a spare bedroom, HASL have been critical of local authorities for not increasing the stock of social housing with more bedrooms for low-income families. The number of bedrooms available for local and displaced migrant families has become central to HASL campaign demands that centre struggles around social reproduction in the rentier city. In one of HASL's YouTube 'lockdown diaries', three children make a demand from their flat: 'Queremos casas de consejo, con tres, quatro, cinco camas. Gracias' (We want council houses, with three, four, five bedrooms. Thank you) (HASL 2020).

6 | Migrant Room Geographies and Space for Social Reproduction

This paper has argued that rooms, as an architectural volume of dwelling, are a key scale, site and unit of migrant geographies of social reproduction and housing precarity. The experiences of Alina, Florian, Maurice, Isabella, Bilen, Favio and Elba and their respective families illustrate many well-established aspects of the practices, dynamics and geographies of work and social reproduction of migrants in the global city—low pay, working long hours and multiple jobs, remittances to family elsewhere, and precarious rental, often crowded, cramped accommodation (Wills et al. 2009). However, their stories also highlight an overlooked scale, volumetric unit and site that anchors and binds these geographies, namely rental rooms.

In addition, through the prism of everyday life while working, paying off debt, bringing up children, accessing services and seeking support for less cramped, crowded housing, the paper has furthermore demonstrated a number of ways in which the significance of rental rooms is borne out in practice. First, rooms are a crucial site of embodied precarity and emotional depletion in more extensive geographies of social reproduction and homemaking and are an important interface between an urban political economy of rentier extraction and a global political economy of migrant labour precarity and indebtedness. Second, having a room as the primary unit of accommodation necessitates the overlaying of a range of everyday practices of social reproduction in one space. The unsettling of social reproduction and homemaking at the macro scale of transnational flows of labour, money and care and the micro scale of everyday domesticities furthermore reworks inclinations, plans and calculations about the balance between 'here' and 'there', or whether to resettle in a part of London where rents are lower and a formal tenancy and some extra space might be possible. The volumetric limits of room capacity mean that bunk beds, foldable furniture and lacking space to host friends or for privacy become material and social features of more extensive migrant geographies. Third, while the combination of low pay, high rents and precarity push migrant workers and families into rooms that are often rented out as semi-independent units with their own locks, not all of these will have their own addresses and occupants end up having problems regularising their residency as a result. Migrant room housing practices therefore unsettle social reproduction as part of uncertain itineraries charted through new urban territories (Madden 2025a; Simone 2020).

Finally, rooms are a crucial site of contestation and struggle in migrant encounters with local state housing bureaucracies. Legislation governing overcrowding that concerns the number,

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size, and type of rooms is an important site of struggle between local state bureaucracies shaped by logics of austerity and rentier political economy and migrant families trying to access more space without being pushed out of the neighbourhoods they have begun to see as a home in the city. The repoliticisation of social reproduction corresponds to rooms as a scale and unit of housing, as migrant parents have politicised their position within a city that is dependent upon them for their labour yet refuses them adequate space for privacy and dignity, a predicament facing low-income residents in general. HASL members demonstrate through their activism how the spatialisation of precarity is structured by manufactured scarcity in which both private rentier actors and state gatekeeping practices reproduce classed, racialised and anti-migrant forms of marginalisation and exclusion, while making concrete demands for flats and houses with more rooms appropriate to the size of their families.

Crucially, rooms are a scale, site and space in which we can recognise the place of migrant workers, families and precarious residents within broader urban, national and transnational economies and flows, and the need for collective responses that tackle rentierism and extraction rather than stigmatise and gatekeep access to space. Rooms are therefore not only an important scale and unit of housing for critical geographical and housing analysis in respect of their design, rentierisation and use, but a crucial scale and site for the charting of more equitable, just urban futures.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

[1] The first rule counts the number of rooms that could be used as bedrooms and the number of people (with children under 10 counted as half and babies under 1 not counted) and allows a certain number of persons for the given number of rooms, for Instance 2 people in a house with 1 bedroom or 10 people in a house with 5 bedrooms. The second rule specifies the minimum floor space for each room for a given number of people, for instance at least 6.5 m^2 for a single adult or two children under 10 or 10.22 m^2 for two adults. If either of these rules is broken, then the household is overcrowded according to the 'space standard'.

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