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Vacancy at the Edges of the Precarious City

Introduction

In December 2015, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets approved plans to refurbish the Balfon Tower, a council housing estate and brutalist landmark in east London. Containing 146 flats and maisonettes, the 26-storey high-rise had originally been built between 1965-7 as part of the first phase of work on the Greater London Council's (GLC) Brownfield Estate in Poplar (Roberts, 2017: 123). Designed by Hungarian-born architect, Ernő Goldfinger, the Grade-II listed building was widely heralded as a masterpiece not to mention a monument to the architectural possibilities of social housing offering, in the words, of architecture critic Owen Hatherley, "a better, more egalitarian and more fearless kind of city than the ones we actually live in" (2013). For many, however, the building had become a symbol of long discredited ideologies and a widely stigmatised site of decay and criminality. For Simon Jenkins, the tower, was a "no-go area for humanity." Others described it as "the ugliest building in London" with "junkies in the stairwells" and "constant low-level crime" (quoted in Roberts, 2017: 126, 125).

If the mainstream media recycled an increasingly crude architectural determinism, local residents were more concerned with endemic neglect and mismanagement (see Boughton, 2018). By 2007, the estate had been transferred by Tower Hamlets Borough Council to Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association (Poplar HARCA), as part of a borough-wide urban regeneration scheme that accompanied preparations for the 2012 Olympic Games. Properties were refurbished to Decent Home standards while new private homes were

constructed as part of a ‘mixed-communities’ scheme.¹ In the case of the Balfon Tower, roughly half of the building’s 146 units were to be sold to cross-subsidise the refurbishment of the complex to exacting heritage standards. Costs soon escalated in the wake of the global financial crisis and, in 2010, the housing association informed the remaining socially rented households that it was “possible but not probable” that they would have a right of return to their homes (Roberts, 2017: 135). As residents were ‘decanted’ out of the estate, their flats became temporary homes to artists and later property guardians, through live-in ‘licences’, negotiated with the housing association.

As temporary guardians occupied the Balfon Tower, plans for refurbishment accelerated. Poplar HARCA signed a joint venture partnership with property developers Londonewcastle and Telford Homes as well as architects and designers Studio Egret West and Ab Rogers with a mandate to transform the “character and tenure of Balfon Tower” (Roberts, 2017: 141). What had therefore begun as a refurbishment project had not only precipitated a major decant of the Balfon but a transformation of the building into a commodity. At stake here, following David Madden and Peter Marcuse, was the “subordination of the social use of housing to its economic value” (2016: 17). Despite long-term negative depictions in the media, by this point in time the building had become iconic, as one commentator concluded, “for all the wrong reasons: an example of council housing judged too good for the poorer citizens for whom it was originally built” (Boughton, 2018: 234).

The precarious inhabitation of the made-vacant Balfon Tower is not only representative of the increasingly fragile conditions facing many low-income tenants in London. The displacement of its social tenants – the emptying out of the building itself - is also symptomatic of a wider process of commodification in housing and planning that has radically transformed the city of London in recent years. More specifically, the example anatomises a set of relations between precarity, property and vacancy that have assumed new significance (and urgency) in post-crisis

¹ Decent Homes standard is the basic minimum standard set by the UK government that all council and housing association homes must meet.

urban landscapes. While there has been a revitalisation of critical interest in the study of vacant spaces in cities, much of this work has focused on vacancy as an *effect* of urban crisis rather than as a key feature in the *making* of the precarious city. The role of urban vacancy – how it is governed, maintained and protected – has remained largely muted. In particular, there has been insufficient attention paid to how capitalist urbanisation produces (and often depends on) vacant buildings and other vacant spaces (Starecheski, 2017: 47). Neil Smith’s ‘rent-gap thesis’ (1979, 1987) remains an important touchstone, in this respect, though, we insist that further conceptual work is needed to clarify the place that vacancy plays within a wider project to recommodify and financialise housing in London.

In this paper, we respond to recent calls to ‘re-centre’ housing within critical urban studies (Aalbers and Christophers, 2014). While the ‘housing question’ is, admittedly, not new, the 2008 financial crisis has been responsible, we argue, for the emergence of a new constellation of practices and techniques that have only intensified housing insecurity in cities across the global North especially London which is “experiencing an acute, pervasive and socially explosive housing crisis so severe and polarising that it has become the city’s number one political issue” (Beswick et al., 2016: 321; see Beswick and Penny, 2018; Minton, 2017; Watt and Minton, 2016). London’s housing crisis is not, in other words, an epiphenomenal or naturalised by-product of the urbanisation of capital. *It has been actively produced*. The task of the critical urbanist is to therefore shine a light on the various components of this process and their broader conceptual and empirical significance for how we theorise the city as a site of intensifying precarity.

This paper offers one such reading. It examines the rise of Property Guardianship (hereafter PG) companies and their role in the management of publicly-owned vacant property in London. PG companies can be best understood as intermediary agencies that provide low-cost or cost-free property security by installing live-in ‘guardians’ on temporary licenses. They first emerged in the early 1990s in the Netherlands to manage vacant buildings and are currently present in

several European countries. Guardians usually pay less than they would in the private rented sector though they have far fewer legal rights than tenants. There are over thirty-three companies now registered in the United Kingdom, of which at least twenty-two have been founded since the global financial crisis of 2008 (Author). It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that there remains, limited scholarship on PG and its relationship to exacerbated conditions of urban precarity. Much of it focuses on legal frameworks (Hunter and Meers, 2018) and on the modes of subjectification and the techniques of self-precarisation adopted by guardians – often university-educated individuals with high social and cultural capital – as they negotiate one of the most precarious forms of residential tenure in the UK (Author, Author).

In this paper, we build on this work to develop a parallel and adjacent analytic that focuses on the vacant properties and spaces ‘protected’ by guardians. Our main aim is to explore the extent to which a conceptual framework that seeks to connect recent geographical scholarship on precarity with the production of vacant urban landscapes can help us to understand the politics of inhabitation at the urban edge. While the concept of precarity has been generally understood in terms of new conditions of heightened economic and political insecurity, we wish to shift attention to the materialisation of precarity in vacant spaces (Author, Author). Vacancy, in this urban context, is best understood as a spatial *process* that not only produces a varied geography of insecurity and temporariness but, as such, places us in “positions of relative security and vulnerability” (Blomley, n.d.). Here, and more speculatively, we believe that an optic is needed that offers an historical lens on shifting configurations of vacancy and precarity and their role in the financialisation of housing. We therefore combine an analysis of contemporary experiences of guardianship living ‘on the city’s edge’, with an historical look back at the little-known practice of ‘short-life co-operative housing’ to explore the interconnection between precarious forms of inhabitation and wider dynamics of large scale urban transformation in London. Taking a longitudinal view on the management of vacant buildings through temporary living arrangements across the last forty years enables us to examine old *and* new geographies of

housing precarity and the role of non-profit institutional landlords, third sector housing and local governments, in managing vacant and temporarily inhabited housing.

Vacancy, Austerity and Disposability

The commodification of housing in London and other major cities in the Global North and South has, as many have recently argued, become a defining feature of an intensifying housing crisis (see Aalbers, 2015; Fernandez and Aalbers, 2016; Harvey, 2012; Rolnik, 2013; Minton, 2017). A growing body of scholarship has, in this context, stressed the importance of conceptualising housing as “a socially embedded feature of financial capitalism” (Soederberg, 2018: 114; see also Aalbers, 2011, Fields and Uffer, 2014; Fields, 2017; Garcia Lamarca and Kaika, 2016). Particular attention has been paid to the relationship between financialisation and housing insecurity with a focus on the reconfiguration of housing markets in the wake of the global financial crisis and the re-emergence of older practices of expropriation and exploitation in new emboldened forms (Akers and Seymour, 2018: 127; see Desmond, 2016; Roy, 2017, Sassen, 2014).

As a number of critical urbanists have demonstrated, the terrain of financialisation has become a key site in the perpetuation and extension of existing logics of displacement and dispossession. Recent research has highlighted an array of predatory techniques that have emerged in housing markets across the US and the EU and the decisive role that they have played in exacerbating and extending longstanding patterns of foreclosure and eviction (Andreucci et al., 2017; Author; Beswick et al., 2016; Beswick and Penny, 2018; Desmond, 2016; Fields, 2018; Peck and Whiteside, 2016). At the same time, this is work that has begun to also examine the link between the destabilisation of housing tenure and the emergence of new precarious forms of city living (Author; Petrova, 2017; Watt, 2018). Terms such as ‘precarity’, ‘precariousness; and ‘precarisation’ have, in this context, become placeholders for marking the experience of the post-2008 financial crisis and the austerity regimes that emerged in its wake (Author). While

geographical scholarship on precarity has tended to focus on the rise of insecure forms of work and the exploitation of migrant workers across the global North (see Lewis et al, 2015), others have zoomed in on the ‘housing question’ and the emerging conditions of precarity that many city-dwellers have come to face (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). These developments have prompted some scholars to revisit the relationship between housing and the predations of capitalist urbanisation. Many have also examined the role of the state in producing an austerity urbanism that facilitates exploitation, profit-making and speculation while marginalising efforts to support and sustain affordable housing in low-income communities who are, in turn, framed as sites of increasing dependency and disposability, stigmatisation and vulnerability (Akers, 2013; Paton and Cooper, 2016; Peck, 2012; Watt, 2009, 2018).

Over the last decade, urban vacancy has emerged within the same literature as an important site of contested meanings and claims. Scholars have drawn attention to the relationship between vacancy and property. The presence of vacant properties and land has become, as many have recently argued, a significant element in urban landscapes, particularly in countries most strongly affected by the global financial crisis, such as Ireland (O’Callaghan et al., 2018) and Spain, where the occupation of vacant buildings have become sites of intense political organising (De Feliciano, 2017; Gonick, 2016). Drawing on Blomley’s argument for a ‘territorial view’ of property (Blomley, 2016), O’Callaghan et al. argue that by making “visible the contradictory nature of private property rights” (2018: 874), vacancy has become a key site of antagonism for post-crisis forms of urbanisation not to mention a target for new modes of governance. And yet, in debates about the nature of vacancy and its uses, the prior ownership and function of vacant buildings or land is often reduced to mere contextual information at the expense of a more critical understanding of the role of vacancy in processes of (capitalist) urbanisation (Andres, 2013; Németh and Langhorst, 2014).

This question acquires particular significance when focusing on the vacancy produced, in contemporary cities, by processes of urban development and regeneration that require the

demolition or change of use of buildings whose previous function was pre-eminently social and public, such as education and health facilities, or municipal housing (see Boughton, 2018). In this sense, this paper is not concerned with all vacancy, but rather with the vacancy produced from the privatisation and/or destruction of properties whose prior use contributed to the social reproduction of the city, rather than its reproduction as a site of capital accumulation and investment. At stake here, is a critical materialist approach to vacant property that builds on multiple and interconnected economic, political and social dynamics that *produce* urban vacancy. According to this interpretative framework, vacant spaces are essential to the production of an urban landscape that is always affected by the dynamic tension between investment and disinvestment since the commodification of space and the construction of its exchange value *demand* and produce enforced urban scarcity. This is, of course, the case in the classical interpretation of gentrifying processes through the ‘rent gap’ theory, where the decay and abandonment of properties and entire neighbourhoods is seen as the necessary enabling precondition for high returns on re-investment in the area (see Smith, 1979; 1987, 1996).

In a context of advanced urban development in the global North, the presence of vacant spaces can be the result of demographic decline, deindustrialisation and market cycles, as much as of specific planning policies. While large scale redevelopment is not a recent phenomenon, as we discuss later in the paper, state support for constant redevelopment as a form of weaponised creative destruction became in the 1990s symptomatic of what Smith called the new global urban strategy of neoliberal urbanism, as “real-estate development becomes a centrepiece of the city’s productive economy” (Smith, 2002: 443). In the UK, this shift in urban logic is often associated with the orthodoxy of urban regeneration discourse leading to the publication of the Urban Task Force Report in 1999, considered the key blueprint for regeneration (Imrie et al., 2009). One of the implications of the report was its stress on the redevelopment of so-called ‘brownfield’ areas, in other words urban land that had already been subjected to one or more cycles of development. Naming land and property as ‘brownfield’ implied a redefinition of the notion of urban decay, and an acceleration of the temporalities according to which residential

and commercial properties are perceived and described as in need of redevelopment. Since the mid-1990s, urban vacancy in growing global cities, more often than not signalled a frontier of urban redevelopment, with a greater involvement of local and national governments in designating land and properties as ‘brownfield sites’ while often promoting the partial or total privatisation of publicly owned properties. While the production of vacancy through urban regeneration schemes encompassed cities and towns across the UK, in London the relationship between vacancy and development must “be set, and understood, within the broadcloth of international relations and transnational processes relating to the capital’s position as a global city and as a pre-eminent player in the global economy” (Imrie et al., 2009: 4).

The 2008 financial crisis and the austerity policies implemented in the United Kingdom since 2010 have expanded and further exacerbated the depth of urban transformation through redevelopment. New modes of urban entrepreneurialism have emerged as a response to austerity-imposed fiscal constraints, and one of the manifestations of ‘austerity localism’ (Featherstone et al., 2012) has been the ‘realization of asset’ by local authorities: the disposal of public assets such as education and health facilities (Whitfield 2010, 2012) and, in particular, social housing (see Boughton, 2018; Minton, 2017; Watt and Minton 2016). In London, councils have turned, for example, to the “state-executed financialisation of public housing” as a means of generating liquid assets in a policy environment starved of central government funding. The “enhanced role” of financial capital has also played an important role in the demolition of economically ‘unviable’ housing estates and the widespread displacement of their residents. These are policies that are not only responsible for the production of new frontiers in state-led gentrification but a more fulsome financialisation of housing and urban governance (Beswick and Penny, 2018).

These are frontiers in which the recent expansion of PG has come to occupy a largely overlooked position. And yet, while the PG sector in the United Kingdom is relatively new, the practice of negotiated living in vacant properties on a temporary basis, often on precarious

leases as opposed to tenancies, is not (Author). In the remainder of this paper, we develop, following Sara Safransky (2018) an ‘historical diagnostic’ that seeks to place the wider ecology of practices associated with PG within a longer history of negotiated temporary inhabitation in vacant properties in London.

Developing a speculative comparison

More specifically, we combine an analysis of contemporary guardianship living with a critical view to the practice of ‘short-life co-operative housing’, at times known as ‘licensed squatting’, which emerged in England, and particularly in London, in the early 1970s (Bowman, 2004).

The comparison between these two modes of precarious inhabitation draws on different sets of research material. In order to outline the context and functioning of short-life co-operative housing, we have drawn on the analysis of archival sources and other secondary data, integrated through interviews with former short-life housing officers in local governments and short-life housing co-op residents. Without any attempt to be exhaustive, we take a longitudinal approach to this specific form of short-term cooperatively-managed housing to sketch out the changing conditions and transformations of publicly-owned vacant properties since the 1970s. Here we focus in particular on the case of Lambeth as one of the boroughs with the highest numbers of short-life co-operative housing (Bowman, 2004) and with well-known examples of cooperatives originated from organised mass squatting, as the case of Villa Road (Anning and Simpson, 1980), which has also been selected for convenience, given the greater availability of archival material and secondary accounts.

The position of PG in relation to vacancy is examined through selected interview material, which belongs to a larger qualitative study undertaken between 2012 and 2014 (Author)².

Rather than according to ownership, in our analysis we categorised the typologies of properties in terms of their (former) social function, be that residential or non-residential. In our study,

² The names of the interviewees as well as of the housing estates where they lived as guardians have been anonymised throughout.

non-residential vacant buildings included former public baths, schools, archives, offices, youth centres, drug rehabilitation treatment and other health facilities, while those categorised as residential were mainly elderly care homes and social housing estates (either managed by the local authority or by a third-sector registered provider like a Housing Association). The proportion of formerly public buildings was significant and consistent with survey findings that in London in 2016 at least 45% of all properties where guardians were deployed belonged to local authorities or the NHS (Hunter et al., 2017: 24).

By focusing on properties that fulfilled a social function prior to becoming vacant, we set out to examine the extent to which the study of guardianship offer a critical point of purchase from which to understand wider transformations in the social function of urban spaces. Due to the original research design, it was not always possible to draw on an accurate record of all the typologies and ownerships of the buildings inhabited, particularly as the majority of guardians interviewed had lived in more than one building. Without an accurate record, it was not possible to ascertain the subsequent function of all vacant buildings; and while some were privatised or demolished, in other cases, the vacancy was temporary and they were refurbished and put back into use. The only buildings whose trajectory we could accurately follow and confirm through secondary sources were social housing estates. For this reason, we focused our analysis on vacant social housing undergoing privatisation or demolition, and on the experience of guardians living in them. Overall, we interviewed 32 guardians, though in this paper we draw, in particular, on interviews with six of them, whose accounts shed light on a more embodied dimension of living as guardians in social housing undergoing transition, as will be seen in the second half of the paper.

Bringing together different materials, as well as a longitudinal perspective, we aim to put forward a speculative diagnostic that explores contemporary configurations of vacancy and precarity while foregrounding earlier historical antecedents and their role in the management of vacant and temporarily inhabited housing. This comparison is not without drawbacks: in the

case of property guardians, the guarantee of anonymity, an important prerequisite for participation (Author), limits the possibility to produce an in-depth and contextual analysis of the exact property and the contingent reasons for vacancy, so we can only situate subjective experiences within wider trends. In the case of short-life housing co-operatives, on the contrary, we have been able to glean significant insights into the shifting conditions for the precarious inhabitation of vacant properties, both at a precise point in time and longitudinally. This approach therefore offers a preliminary and prescriptive understanding of the politics of occupation and negotiation though there is still more work to be done to attend to phenomenological and embodied experience of urban precarity; a topic that we have addressed elsewhere (Author). Furthermore, an overview of short-life may convey an image of short-life licensees as a homogeneous and coherent groups. This idealised vision is contrasted by historical and contemporary studies of the multiplicity of rationales and experiences of short-life licensed living (Laviolette, 2008), with parallels to our own research (Author). By comparing the two we are less interested in singling out specific social groups, than in contrasting two, apparently similar, modes of temporary inhabitation of vacancy, and the material and conceptual edges that they reveal about the same city under radically different conditions.

Short-life Licensed Living in London before PG

As an historical precursor to Property Guardianship (PG), short-life housing cooperatives emerged in England in part from the negotiations of groups squatting in publicly owned vacant properties. During the 1960s and 1970s many local authorities in London had acquired land and building for comprehensive redevelopment to provide municipal housing, build transport infrastructure and other facilities. The relationship between urban renewal projects and squatting was particularly visible in south London boroughs, such as Lewisham, where it was reported at the time that “most squatting – whether licensed or illegal – was to be found in short-life property scheduled for future clearance or modernisation” (Paris and Popplestone, 1977: 43). Delays and, in the case of road expansion projects, local opposition, “often led to properties lying empty for several years” (Williams, 1990: 3), creating the material opportunity

for the development of organised mass occupations (Wates and Wolmar, 1980; see also Author). Some of these groups, particularly but not solely in inner London boroughs, constituted themselves as housing co-ops and were given temporary licenses to remain. As one author later concluded, “some groups of squatters were granted permission to remain in the houses they occupied and a few of these became established organisations providing both short-life and permanent housing” (Williams, 1990: 1). Such licensing came to be known as ‘short-life housing cooperative’ and by the 1980s had become institutionalized. It is estimated that, in 1986, there were over 250 local authority properties across 12 of London’s 32 boroughs each on short-life licenses (Bowman, 2004: 132) and housing approximately 15,000 residents (Bowman, 2004: 262). In the late 2000s it was still considered “one the five main forms of housing co-ops in the UK” (Rowlands, 2009: 37), although only seven short-life housing cooperatives remained in the capital by 2017.

From a temporary arrangement, the short-life license soon became established as a precarious long term solution. Organised squatting and negotiations for short-term use of vacant properties continued well into the 1980s, as the Conservatives’ budgetary restriction to local authorities between 1979 and 1990 meant that many urban redevelopment projects were stalled.³ At the same time, budgetary restrictions also led to local governments being unable to maintain or refurbish newly acquired housing stock, particularly 19thC Victorian terraces. Short-term licensing through co-operatives promised a cheaper way of maintaining and often refurbishing the otherwise vacant buildings. The large number of badly maintained empty properties in public ownership that offered the main material context for squatting, also offered the conditions for negotiations and proposals for short-life housing although occupations, and negotiation for short-life housing also took place in privately owned properties).

³ The population estimated in 1987 was of 31,000, according to the press release ‘Squatting in London Now: Who squats and why?’, Advisory Service for Squatters 5/4/1990, which cited data of the Salvation Army and of the Greater London Council.

In this way, a 'short-term' solution became a more permanent option for many, stretching throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. In many cases, co-op members settled for decades and "[t]he phrase 'short-life' became a misnomer" (Hoey, 2011). In a few cases, short-life became a step to setting up permanent social rented co-ops. In the 1980s and early 1990s, some short-life housing gave groups "the necessary credibility with local authorities ... to obtain public funding for permanent housing" for groups that "have been successful in using temporary housing as a stepping stone to becoming established organizations receiving official recognition and support" (Williams, 1990: 11) Since the middle 1990s, however, the position and continuity of short-life housing cooperatives has been severely undermined by a sharp increase in land and property values in formerly low income areas. Shifts in the policies that governed the licensing of 'short-life' and the abolition of maintenance grants have also been responsible for new uncertainties.

The little-explored history of short-life housing co-operative has also played, in our view, a significant role in the more recent acceptance of PG as a 'licensed squatting' option for vacant inhabitation (Author). The two share superficial similarities: living in unusual buildings, a lower-than-market cost, the need for a DIY attitude and, often, shared and communal spaces. It is important to stress, however, that short-life co-operatives were set up to use vacant buildings for community-led, non for profit housing for low-income individuals; the guardianship model, on the contrary, is driven by profit-seeking security companies and guardians do not participate in decision-making and are actually actively discouraged from self-organizing.

. In practical terms, however, the two models both rely on the availability of vacant buildings for more or less extended periods of times. In fact since the introduction of property guardianship in the early 2000s, short-life co-operatives have viewed PG companies as direct competitors for accessing vacant properties. As explained in a written statement by a member of Phoenix Community Housing Co-operative, one of the last remaining short-life in London: "Camelot [PG company] is one of our biggest competitors, along with AdHoc [PG company]" (Smith, 2012).

Set against the backdrop of these differences, the recent emergence of PG through the history of the short-life co-operative movement offers a potentially new entry point for analyzing the nature of temporary use in the precarious city: namely, the relationship between temporary licensed housing and vacancy and the modest conceptual ‘edges’ that this relationship reveals regarding large-scale urban transformation and shifts in policy priorities.

The Case of Lambeth

During the 1970s and 1980s, many Labour-led councils in London had a dedicated ‘short-life officer’, who was responsible for liaising with the short-life housing groups that had been founded in the early 1970s at a time when the mass occupation of derelict housing in the city was commonplace. While they continued to thrive throughout the 1980s, by the mid-1990s, financial and institutional support for short-life housing had dwindled (Bowman, 2004). As explained by one former short-life housing officer working in a local authority in the 1980s, what started off “as a short term arrangement”, became with time politically difficult as the residents began to resist being moved on:

Short-life groups appeared and said, well we will look after them for you, so politically [councils] saw that as a solution at the time. But as time went by [...] a short term solution became a big problem with the local authority because the people didn’t move on and they stayed and then they had all these properties with people who [started] campaign for permanent housing and so on, and so it became a political hot potato for the councils (Interview, 2017).

The fraught relationship between local authorities and short-term licensees continued throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, as many councils began to recall their short-life properties, and particularly in those south London boroughs that in the 1960s and early 1970s had embarked on large redevelopment programmes.

Lambeth had been particularly proactive in their programme of Compulsory Purchase of privately owned properties, with an average purchase of 1,000 homes a year between 1971 and 1973, of which only 65% were used for council lettings and roughly 20% were boarded up (Cockburn, 1977: 77), adding up to an estimated 2,500 council-owned empty dwellings (Ibid, 80). In a period of rising housing insecurity, the borough became one of the most heavily squatted in London, with an estimated three thousand squatters living in around 600 buildings by 1976 (Ibid, 87; see Author). In 1994, Lambeth Council, one of the boroughs with the highest number of short-life co-operatives, “agreed to provide the safety net of a one-offer of a council home for all short life residents” since it was understood that “legal challenges would be complex, lengthy and potentially damaging for the council” (Bowman 20014: 169). At a meeting held in September 1997, however, the council’s Housing Committee resolved to recall all short-life arrangements and dispose of short-life properties “at market value, except where they could be brought back into permanent use as Council housing” (Lambeth Council, 2011). At the time, the total short-life housing stock in the borough consisted of around 1,200 properties, divided between 776 homes managed as short-life housing and a further 357 council-owned homes managed as temporary accommodation (Bowman, 2004: 169).

Changes in local policy, however, meant that, throughout the 2000s, short-life co-op residents were left in a precarious limbo, with the council repeatedly threatening evictions, the recall of all short-life properties while offering, at the same time, no tenure guarantees. By 2007, the total number of short-life properties in the borough had been reduced to 388 (Northam, 2017) and, in 2009, the council decided to issue ‘Notices to Quit’ to a number of co-op residents, some of whom had under 30 days to leave the places where they had lived for more than 30 years, generating considerable media attention as co-op members could not afford to outbid other investors to buy the properties and were finding it hard to access other housing options (Walker, 2013; White, 2014). Finally, in 2011, the decision was taken to dispose of all remaining short-life stock (178 properties), either on the open market or to a Registered Provider of social housing, and between 2011 and 2014, 120 properties were sold, (Robertson, 2014).

While it was assumed that the properties would maintain their social function as either council-managed or housing association-managed social rented housing, this was not always the case as the formerly vacant and derelict properties were appraised as valuable assets to be sold. The sale of former short-life properties to generate revenue is characteristic of the effects of centrally-imposed austerity on local government budgets in London. Like many other deprived inner-city boroughs, Lambeth's capital budget has suffered a 60% reduction in central government contributions since 2010. The reduction precipitated major changes in municipal governance that prompted the council to increasingly treat housing as a vehicle for extracting financial capital (Penny, 2016; see Beswick and Penny, 2018). Large, high-value properties under short-life arrangements were thus sold, as was the case in the sale of a 10-bedroom building in The Chase, in Clapham - formerly a short-life co-operative – which raised £1.6 million in 2012 (Lambeth Save Our Services, 2012). According to information obtained through an Freedom of Information (FOI) request to Lambeth Council (Bell, 2016), since 2010 the proceeds from the sale of short-life housing in the borough have amounted to a gross total of £71,251,000 (Lambeth Council, 2016).

For a more detailed understanding of the changing conditions for licensed precarious inhabitation of vacancy, we turn to the well known case of Villa Road, in the London Borough of Lambeth, known for a high number of squatted houses as well as for a political campaign in which they were legalised as short-term housing co-operatives. As detailed by Nick Anning and Jill Simpson, the origins of the high number of vacancies on Villa Road, in an area known as Angell Town, lay in the approval of a Compulsory Purchase Order for the area in 1967 and the subsequent approval of the 1969 *The Brixton Plan* which called for the comprehensive redevelopment of the town centre to incorporate a large “transport interchange complex where a six-lane highway, motorway box, main line railway and underground intersected” (Anning and Simpson, 1980: 142–3). Around 400 Victorian and Edwardian houses were purchased to be demolished and their occupants ‘decanted’ to make way for a park to accompany the

construction of three new council housing estates for 6,000 new residents (the Myatts Fields and the Stockwell Park Estate were the ones to be built). As the process of demolition and rehousing slowed down, a few of the derelict houses were allocated - on license - by the council to Lambeth Self-Help, a short-life housing group.

Opposition to the redevelopment plan and a combination of squatting and other forms of tenant organising, led to the creation of the Villa Road Street Group, whose members included the local Neighbourhood Council, squatters' groups and Lambeth Self-Help. Between early 1973 and 1975 about 15 buildings were squatted, housing approximately 200 residents. A lengthy process of resistance ensued which included legal and media campaigning as well as a turn to direct action which culminated in the erection of barricades to avoid the execution of possession orders (**Fig 1**). On Villa Road, the stated position of organised squatters and later short-life licensees aligned with that of resident and community groups: to reopen the planning debate around the wider transformation of the neighbourhood. According to Anna Bowman, the threat to demolish the homes between 1976-8

Created a culture of solidarity and resistance. It bound together households in squatted streets, reinforcing co-ops' identities and linked the small, separate groups in defensive campaigns to oppose the council. Support from local tenants and residents groups opposed to comprehensive redevelopment and demolition strengthened the campaign's base (Bowman, 2004: 157).

In 1978, and after negotiations with a new left-Labour Council, houses on the southern side of the road were demolished, and 25 of its residents rehoused in short-life properties in the borough through the efforts of Lambeth Self-Help (Bowman, 2004). On the north side of Villa Road, the Street Group registered as a management co-op, and made a proposal for a 40-year lease to Lambeth Council, which would remain the owner, with Solon Housing Association acting as a development agent to refurbish around 20 homes (Anning and Simpson, 1980). Despite its history, Villa Road too was affected by Lambeth's program of short-life stock 'disposal'. By the early 2010s, fifteen homes at seven different Villa Road addresses had been

scheduled for short-life stock disposal and by 2017, there were no longer any short-life residents in Villa Road (Lambeth Council, 2011), and only 5 short-life properties remained in the whole borough (Northam, 2017).

In the case of Lambeth, although belonging to a wider and longer trajectory of recalling of short-life housing, the disposal of short life housing was ultimately indissociable from the fundamental restructuring in local governance brought about by budget cuts and austerity measures imposed by the state (Ward et al., 2015). One of the effects of an ‘austerity urbanism’ (Peck, 2012) is a new-found emphasis on the financialisation of housing assets as a means to generate revenue and redistribute funding. This has, in turn, produced a new relationship between vacancy and the temporary management of property. The long decline of short-life co-operative housing in inner London and the dispossession of the precarious tenants they once housed must be seen in this context. It is clear that, under conditions of austerity, there has been a shift of priority from a recalling of public stock for social rental to its overall and ultimate disposal, with longer-term, and potentially irreversible, consequences.

Contemporary Vacancy and Guardianship in London

The tendency towards the disappearance of short-life housing co-operatives from vacant properties in London has coincided with the arrival of PG companies, and laid the basis for their further expansion after the global financial crisis. Their clientele has also expanded, and as often underlined by PG companies, property guardianship has increasingly become a common form of providing in-house security for publicly-owned and third-sector owned vacant properties. leading to the hypothesis that “cuts to public services may have fuelled the use of these services” by the public sector (Hunter and Meers, 2018: 4). Since the early 2010s, local authorities and third sector social housing providers have also increased their usage of PG because of social housing estates undergoing large-scale ‘decanting’ of tenants and residents due to refurbishment or demolition. As one industry publication noted, “utilising property guardians to occupy individual void flats for housing association or council clients was not

altogether uncommon in the last five years. However, these organisations now utilise guardians for large-scale decants of 300+ units” (Global Guardians, 2012, n-d).

While accurate figures on the extent of use are difficult to obtain (see Hunter and Meers, 2018), the practice of deploying PG in estates owned or managed by Housing Associations has become commonplace, with examples such as the Guinness Trust’s Loughborough Estate, in Lambeth, and Poplar Harca’s Brownfield Estate, in Tower Hamlets (Shultes, 2017). The use of PG firms, moreover, has been widely promoted by central government agencies, as in the case of the PG company Camelot in 2010 which was used during the ‘decanting’ process in the regeneration of the Grahame Park Estate, in the London Borough of Barnet. The former council estate, which contained around 1,700 dwelling units, was managed by a subsidiary of Genesis Housing Association, the lead developer of the regeneration. The deployment of property guardians during a process of social housing demolition was seen as an example of best practice to tackle empty homes and, in 2011, the Grahame Park Estate became a case study in the Homes and Communities Agency ‘Empty Homes Toolkit’ (Camelot Europe, 2011).⁴ At the time of writing, Genesis Housing Association is seeking vacant possession of a number of blocks on the Grahame Park Estate⁵, as well as on nearby estates Dollis Valley and West Hendon, where residents have been campaigning since 2014 for maintaining council housing on the estate, or obtaining like-for-like replacement homes.⁶

A 2016 document compiled through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and questions to the Mayor of London identified that 24 out of London’s 33 local governments used property guardians, with more than 1,000 guardians living in publicly-owned buildings in 2016 (Berry, 2016). In a recent report on Property Guardianship in London by York Law School (Hunter et al., 2017) based on a sample of 210 responses, prior to occupation by property guardians

⁴ Link to the Toolkit was still accessible as of 2014 on the Homes and Communities Agency website, but has now been removed.

⁵ See <http://thebarnetgroup.org/bh/applying-for-housing/an-update-on-the-regeneration-estates/>

⁶ <https://ourwesthendon.wordpress.com/>

38,13% properties were Ex-Local Authority, 30,94% of properties were Ex-Residential, 12,23% were Ex-Commercial and 7,19% were NHS hospitals (Hunter et al., 2017: 24). 11,51% indicated 'other' under which the authors include social housing. Over a third of the properties were, in fact, built between the 1960s and the 1980s. Ironically, many would have been built at the time of large-scale redevelopment that was responsible for the high vacancy rates which triggered the subsequent history of squatting and short-life cooperatives discussed earlier.

Guardianship and Social Housing 'Decanting'

Qualitative interviews with guardians about the kinds of properties available through guardianship in London point to the fact that living in formerly social rented housing in council-owned and Housing Association's estate undergoing regeneration appeared relatively common. Six of our interviewees had had direct experience of living as guardians in social housing estates undergoing regeneration and 'decant' at some point since the early 2000s, mainly in inner city boroughs such as Tower Hamlets, Camden and Lambeth. All shared positive experiences of living on the estates and interactions with long-standing residents. As explained by L., a long-term guardian from an EU country in his late 30s, living on a council estates can be more social than in non-residential properties such as office blocks or care homes:

There, there is more interaction. That's the great thing in estates, it's very interesting I think, on a lot of estates the contact with other people is unavoidable because you share, you know, the landings [...] it's a mix, because there's people who live there through the council, there were people who own their flats [...] I think they are all being moved out. My neighbour next door, he moved a couple of months ago. He owned the flat. He was a very nice guy, and we were always chatting (Interview, 2012).

Living in non-residential properties might be convivial within the building, but tends to afford less opportunities for interactions and the presence of guardianship becomes, on an embodied everyday level, more akin to that of security personnel. Guardianship in residential complexes, on the contrary, encourages interactions with other inhabitants; this is something that some PG

companies are allegedly keen to avoid, in an effort to manage their public relations (Shulte, 2017). When guardians engage in such interactions at the edges of processes of precarisation, however, the exchanges offer important insights into expectations and misunderstandings about PG and their role in emerging new landscapes of urban vacancy.

The presence of new residents on a social housing estate undergoing ‘decanting’, particularly before wholesale demolition, unavoidably caused curiosity and suspicion by other residents and estate workers. As explained by J., a guardian in his mid-20s, the deployment of guardians on the estate was not always clearly explained to workers and residents:

I had one interesting chat with one of the caretaker guys, it was a bit unsettling for me, because I just asked him how’s it going, like, I wasn’t particularly asking about guardians, it was more like, how was your day, and he was like yeah, yeah, I mean up until now, you’ve been fine, so it’s ok. [This] led me to believe that he was ready for things to go wrong [...] I think [PG company] hadn’t properly made the neighbours aware of what was happening, and definitely one of them was really worried about us being here, thinking that we were squatters. It took a while for it to come out.

(Interview, 2014).

The same guardian explained how he and fellow guardians initially were on friendly terms with their Bangladeshi neighbours, but with the passing of time they sensed growing suspicion about their presence:

We made an effort with both of our direct neighbours and brought chocolates and stuff, and then it was really sweet, one of the ladies next door cooked some amazing Bangladeshi treat, really sweet fried balls and just brought them round [...] But then it didn’t really go anywhere. [...] I always say hi, but it’s just a bit weird. I don’t think, I don’t know whether they’ve just got fed up with us being here. (Interview, 2014).

It is not just simply the novelty of residents that elicits curiosity and suspicion: it is also their age, class and ethnic background (see Author) which make them stand out in contrast with

longer-term social tenants in council-owned housing and in Housing Association (HA) properties. A guardian in his early 30s described the clear visual difference of two kinds of people on a HA estate undergoing ‘decanting’ in preparation for demolition: “white, young hipster-looking, and those were the guardians, and normal people, south-Londoners, and those were the people being moved out” (Interview, 2012). The visible starkness of this difference made him feel “very uncomfortable” about living on the estate, a feeling that was shared by other guardians.

As explained by L., a British woman in her late 20s, there are property guardians “who do find it quite difficult, ethically” (Interview, 2014) to live on decanting social housing estates. While she personally felt “very justified” to live temporarily in vacant flats, she described a number of instances when the different positions of residents and guardians became particularly clear, raising questions about their own role in the process:

We’ve seen them protest outside, at some points, not against us, but against the council for chucking them out, and knocking this building down when there’s no real actual problem with it. We have that slight pang of guilt. It almost feels like – we aren’t the problem, but there’s that element of conspiring. And being part of it. Or supporting it. Whether they think ‘we can get a bit of money from property guardians’ isn’t going to give them a reason for changing the length of time before knocking it down, we know that, we aren’t the cause, but there is an element of supporting it by being here, yes. [...] I don’t know how established the community between them was before, and they could be quite resentful towards that, if they’re being broken up, and if the council are breaking the community up. (Interview, 2014).

The complex and contradictory position of securing a property about to be demolished, and moreover through a highly insecure form of tenure, did not go undetected. The same guardian recounted that, in order to dispel misunderstandings about her presence on the estate, she felt

compelled to explain her position to the long-term tenants encountered in the lift or on the landings of the tower bloc where she lived:

I have to explain to all the tenants here how we can just get asked to leave in two weeks. Whereas – because they see – they’re having to leave the homes that they’ve had for years and years in order for this building to be knocked down, and they see people moving in. So I feel like I have to explain to them, that yeah, we have so little rights in comparison to them as tenants. Just because... you do have a slight feeling of guilt, even though you know this flat would be empty and you know it wouldn’t be used (Interview, 2014).

The sense of unease expressed by the guardian reflects an embodied response to what it means to live at the cusp of a moment marked by the dismantling of social housing and the breaking of long established communities. As a model of insecure dwelling, guardianship is precariously positioned in the cracks of the edifice of social rented housing as the withdrawal of central government subsidies is pushing local government and third-sector registered providers into market-led logics of disposal, financialisation and privatisation (Beswick and Penny, 2018). The above vignettes do not claim to speak to the experience of all guardians living on ‘decanting’ estates. They do show, however, the fraught positionality of guardians as relatively more privileged and mobile inhabitants, living in a precarious city (see Author). As has been argued elsewhere, the disposability associated with precarity has to be understood as differentially distributed (Butler, 2011; Blomley, n.d.). In the everyday encounters between guardians and social housing estate residents, such differential distribution makes for uncomfortable conversations about the better rights of tenants about to be rehoused away from their homes and communities, as opposed to right-less licensees, both of which find themselves temporarily inhabiting the edges of much wider urban and societal transformations. With the *redistribution* of precarity being key to contemporary politics (Berlant, 2016), differential dwelling precarity around social housing decline is engendering new and complex precarious subject positions, with potentially negative consequences around the possibility of solidarity and collective political response.

Conclusion

At the heart of this paper is an examination of the role that vacancy plays in the making of the contemporary precarious city. To date, there has been little sustained inquiry into the relationship between vacancy and precarity in cities in the global North, and into the role this relationship has increasingly come to play in processes of privatisation of the built environment, and specifically of housing. In this paper we have proposed a speculative mode of analysis that treats vacant spaces as one of the conceptual ‘edges’ through which a more critical understanding of contemporary forms of urbanisation may be developed (see Sassen, 2014). For the sociologist Saskia Sassen, the systemic ‘edges’ signal the existence of “*conceptually subterranean trends*” that are largely invisible and have, as such, escaped our traditional categories of meaning and theorizing (2015: 173). While Sassen is interested in the global recrudescence of extreme forms of dispossession and expulsion, our own focus is more modest, and concerns the role that vacancy plays in producing and reproducing cities as sites of increased precarisation., by which we understand the governing of subjects, and consequent subject-formation, through insecurity and destabilisation (Author) This is the first way in which we conceive of vacancy as an ‘edge’.

Vacancy, however, can have multiple causes and consequences, and its role in the making of precarious cities requires careful analysis of the conditions through which it emerges and is sustained, as well as by the experiences and interactions that it generates. The examples of apparently similar practices of licensed temporary inhabitations of vacant buildings are evidence of it. This is the second way in which we have understood vacancy and temporary licensing as one of the ‘edges’ of the precarious city. Attentive to personal experiences, we have examined the fraught position of property guardians living at the cusp of processes of stock transfer and privatization of social rented housing. Living on the edge of intensive processes of urban dispossession, their position as temporary licensees lies at the intersection of a double process of precarisation, moving at different velocities: the dispossession of long-term residents and the

end of the ‘municipal dream’ of council housing (Boughton, 2018), predicated, in turn, on a (relatively privileged) preemptive dispossession of the guardian’s own possibility to claim a home in the made-vacant building.

It is not simply the temporariness of inhabitation which makes vacancy a significant component in the production of the precarious city, but it is its positioning within wider and longer trajectories in the urbanization of injustice. In the paper, we have developed an ‘historical diagnostic’ for thinking through the historical development of temporary licenses and tenancies in vacant public and third-sector social housing with the aim of contrasting two moments of temporary residential use through licensing of vacant buildings in London. In the case of short-life housing cooperatives, the vacancy which had created a fertile ground for the emergence of mass squatting and short-life housing cooperatives in the 1970s correlated with a period of large scale, public-led urban renewal, which involved displacement but also social-oriented investment into the built environment of cities. Its ongoing presence in the city, well beyond an interim solution was, on the contrary, the result of budgetary restrictions during the 1980s. More recently, the disappearance of short-life licensing, and the foreclosure of the possibility to transform from precarious to permanent, with its important political roots, has coincided with a global, as well as local, trajectory of value increase through the financialisation of land and property since the 1990s (Aalbers, 2015; Christophers, forthcoming; Fields and Uffer, 2014; Marazzi, 2008, 2010).

In addition, the austerity measures implemented in the wake of the financial crisis have further enhanced the neoliberal rolling back of the state, particularly but not solely in the housing sector, while changing financial regimes and government policies pushed formerly not for profit, third-sector social housing providers to function as market actors according to logics of short-termism (Smyth, 2018; Aalbers et al. 2017). In the context of a wider geographies of transformation of housing financialisation, and the role of the state in promoting them (Akers, 2013), the replacement of the function of short-life co-op by for-profit PG marks a significant

shift not only in relation to vacant housing but to the accelerated dynamics of urban disinvestment, privatization and dispossession. This is, in our view, a shift that has important implications for how we might think about and inhabit cities differently. From the decanting of social tenants as in the case of the Balfron Tower to the disappearance of semi-autonomous experiments of social tenant-led self-management, the emergence of new models of vacancy management point, if anything, to the further normalisation of the precarious city.

List of Figures

Figure 1. 'After campaign, barricades & legal battle, its[sic] victory Villa', Squatters Action Council Newsheet 24, March 4, 1977 (Bishopsgate Institute, Library: Advisory Service for Squatters Archive).

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