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Housing movements, commons and 'precarious institutionalization'

Abstract: Understanding the relationships between struggles for housing justice and alternative housing models is riddled with epistemological and methodological challenges. A posteriori definitions of specific housing typologies or sectors – for example, 'co-operative housing' – often fail to account for the often informal and fluid practices that constitute the emergence of alternatives through collective organising. An example of this is the reclaiming of vacant spaces through temporary occupations and the diverse forms of institutionalization that squatters and other precariously housed people may engaged with to establish housing commons. This paper aims to offer an empirically grounded theoretical analysis of the intersections between direct action housing struggles and short-life co-operative housing in London, UK, since the 1970s. Taking a longitudinal view, it explores how performative power surges, sustained by federative organising and aligning with central and municipal institutional experimentation, gave rise to significant shifts in housing policy and practice. The resulting institutionalization, however, remained precarious. The concept of 'precarious institutionalization' names this state of contingency and offers political insights into the processes of emergence of housing alternatives, and their relationship to past and contemporary struggles for housing decommodification.

Keywords: precarious institutionalization, social movements, co-operative housing, London, squatting

Introduction

The emergence of alternative housing models is often driven by organized efforts and social mobilizations through ~~legal~~ litigation, lobbying for policy reform and direct-action (Vasudevan 2015; 2017). Within the latter, housing movements have historically deployed protest repertoires that can include the occupation of land and property as living spaces, as a performative act of reclaiming that can institute more self-organized and decommodified housing. Ensuing negotiations for short-, mid-, and long-term use generally involve the search for recognition and degrees of formalization, which often lead to institutionalization. Social movement scholarship has developed important critiques of these processes (Pruijt 2003; 2013), often framed around the loss of autonomy and political radicalness (Mayer 2000). Conversely, scholarship focusing on housing regimes and policy has tended to neglect these temporary formalizations until they become recognized and established components of the housing sector. In a critical response to both stances, in this paper I propose the notion of 'precarious institutionalization' to bring into focus the dynamic and unfinished nature of formalizing building occupations into novel ad hoc housing institutions. To do so, I bring into dialogue a nuanced understanding of dwelling practices beyond formal/informal binaries, including squatting, and institutions (Chiodelli et al. 2021; Grazioli 2021) with debates about practices and politics of housing and urban *commoning* (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022). The argument is that short-lived performative surges of collective power, such as through mass occupations (Vasudevan 2011) can push for and sometimes align with institutional experimentation, giving rise to significant long-term shifts in housing policy, politics, and practice, which can nonetheless remain contingent upon place and time-specific power relations.

To understand how such shifts occur, it is fruitful to study processes of institutionalization as significant inflection points in housing policy and governance. Rather than attempting a too strict categorization of 'types' of institutionalization (Martinez 2020), much can be gained by paying closer attention to processes that emerge from housing struggles, and the role played by different organizations at the point of emergence *as well as* in their consolidation or decline, which remains underexplored in housing theory. Shifting the focus to 'precarious institutionalization' enables a more nuanced and less linear engagement with the thorny relationship between housing struggles and self-managed and decommodified housing models. Doing so requires an open approach to the study object and its sources, beyond pre-defined boundaries of a 'sector', bringing back in specific housing and political geographies, as well as its actors as thinking agents of change (Clapham 2001). In what follows, I first present my theoretical framework informed by commons theory and debates on housing movements' institutionalization. I subsequently offer an in-depth analysis of the relationship between housing movements, squatting and 'short-life' co-operatives as a housing commons in London, UK, which inspired the development of the 'precarious institutionalization' concept.

Housing movements and institutionalization

Social movements can be key drivers in the transformation of housing policy and practice. Recent interdisciplinary literature has empirically demonstrated the intricate relationship between contemporary and historical housing struggles, and alternatives for more participatory and decommodified housing (Thompson 2020b; Huron 2018; Grazioli 2021). Some of this work has been framed through theories of the commons, and

especially of urban commons, an alternative way of thinking and enacting collective use and maintenance of shared resources (Stavrides 2016; Stavrides and Travlou 2022). In these lineages, urban housing commons are understood dialectically not as pre-existing 'resources', but rather as spaces and ways of inhabitation that have to be 'carved out' from competing claims to place and use dominated by the concentration of interest by capital and the state (Huron 2015; 2018). In this body of work as in this paper, housing commons are broadly defined as forms temporary or long-term decommodified, collaborative, and self-managed housing provision (Balmer and Bernet 2015; Hölzl and Hölzl 2022; Noterman 2016).

Residential occupations through squatting have particularly been understood as a key component of performing and establishing housing commons (Martínez and Polanska 2020), alongside or in parallel with other community-led initiatives. Organized squatting, as the act of reclaiming vacant land or property as living spaces, can lay the basis for the creation of communities of users who mobilize for their maintenance over time, both materially and politically. The move from social movement occupations to longer-term formal initiatives, however, has been a contentious political and scholarly issue. Formalization processes, often involving temporary arrangements, have been accused of recuperating and dampening previously radical movements. In Northern European scholarship, the challenge that organized squatting poses to constituted social order and urban governance has led to two main types of responses from the state: repression or institutionalization (Pruijt 2003). In the second case, institutionalization can take multiple forms: from openness to negotiation to formalization of self-organized modes of governance to the legalization of formerly unlawful and informal uses. Often this formalization leads to temporary arrangements, such as the Zwischennutzungsvertrag introduced in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1989 (Bieri 2002), and the 'rehab squatting', or

Instandbesetzung, in Berlin, which are seen as instances of institutionalization that recuperated and dampened a previously radical movement (Holm and Kuhn 2011); more limited examples have been noted in Italy (Mudu and Rossini 2018) and France (Aguilera 2018).

The institutionalization of movements for housing justice has been discussed by squatting scholars as one of the movements' 'structural dilemmas' of when, why, and how to interact with the political, legal, and economic logics of capitalist cities, particularly around the thorny question of legalization. Placing emphasis on the relationship between squatting and housing commons should not, however, necessarily lead to an homology of processes between cycles of protest and those of commons formation and longer-term maintenance. Equating squatting to other forms of political protest, at times shoehorns it into the classical trajectory of radicalization, institutionalization, co-optation, and identity loss (Martínez 2014); the prefigurative nature of squatting, however, makes it more powerful than other forms of protest.

Legalization does not necessarily lead to neutralization of the centrality of users and of use value in squatters' practices; under specific governance arrangements and articulations of power among dwellers, owners, and the state; it may in fact lead to forms of institutionalization where the politics of squatters are capable to resist integration into state institutions and capitalist dynamics (Martínez 2014; 2020). This so-called 'flexible institutionalization' is understood not as a stable outcome, but rather as "a process always in progress, a difficult balance between forces which can come into conflict" (Membretti 2010, 258). Arguing for a more nuanced understanding of negotiations intrinsic to the process, Martínez has proposed the concept of 'anomalous institutions' as a potential reworking of state assimilation (Martinez 2020). In this formulation, 'anomalous

institutions' are those where core elements of squatting's radical transformative politics may resist integration and maintain degrees of autonomy.

In my analysis, I contend that forms of institutionalization that establish radical autonomous 'new' relations, are inevitably fragile and contingent. If, as it has been suggested, "commons thrive and survive by dancing in and out of the State's gaze, by escaping its notice, because notice invariably brings with it the desire to transform commons into state property or capitalist commodity" (Gidwani and Baviskar 2011, 42), then housing commons that emerge from struggles may always to some extent exist in this dance, which I call 'precarious institutionalization'.

From flexible to precarious institutionalization

At the intersection of these debates and of geographies of housing commons formation emerges the need for conceptualizations of housing institutionalization that pay close attention to the social, spatial, and political relations at the heart of such processes, as well as to commons formation as a dynamic process, subjected to performative reclaiming but also reversals and enclosures (Sevilla-Buitrago 2015). The transformation of community-led practices through what has been called the 'treacle walk' of technocratic bureaucratization and professionalization (Thompson 2020) is often a messier and less linear phenomenon than commonly portrayed. I propose the concept of 'precarious institutionalization' to capture the dynamic, non-linear, and unfinished nature of processes of institutionalization that remain contingent upon specific power dynamics. The term builds on recent calls to *spatialize* precarious urban inhabitation (see Ferreri, Dawson, and Vasudevan 2017). The adjective 'precarious' is here used not to address lived experiences of temporary dwelling, but rather in its etymological root of 'given as a favour, depending on the favour of another, (of property) held by tenancy at will,

uncertain, doubtful, suppliant' (Oxford English Dictionary 2nd Ed), but also as potentially generative of radical otherness (Lorey 2015), providing fertile ground for a political analysis. Extending this reflection, theoretically and methodologically, to processes of institutionalization can enable a more nuanced and politically relevant reading of the relationship between grassroot mobilizations and the emergence, maintenance and decline of housing commons.

The study of the institutionalization of practices which reclaim spaces for inhabitation through unlawful means finds important resonances with housing and urban research concerned with broader definitions of dwelling (Lancione 2020) and their relationship with the 'grey side' in the articulation of ordinary urbanism. In the work of scholars in the Global South as well as in Southern Europe, the intersection of informal, illicit and illegal activities has been recognised as a "structural component of the ordinary functioning of urban governance" (Chiodelli and Gentili 2021), and as a site for a potential rethinking of planning and housing policies (Grazioli 2021).

While there is a wide and extensive literature on reclaimed spaces as urban commons, less attention is paid to the gap "between the politics of commons reclamation and the everyday practice of the long-term maintenance of commons" (Huron 2015, 967). Taking a historical perspective to these processes is important, given the extent to which housing sectors are particularly path dependent and marked by market dynamics (Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2010). A longitudinal perspective also enables understanding how the carving out of housing commons should be seen as a complex, fraught process, through which multiple visions of urban living become entangled with power dynamics and different pulls. It enables identifying the ways in which policies move, translate, and mutate between places (Thompson 2020b), and the evolution of local and supra-local (regional, national) institutions, legal and policy frameworks, and political organising –

including federal and polycentric networks - that can enable or block certain forms of institutionalization beyond the point of emergence (Ferreri and Vidal 2021; Pruijt, 2020). These theorizations encounter fertile ground in recent calls by housing scholars engaged in systemic review of collaborative and alternative housing provision, including co-operatives (Czischke, Carriou, and Lang 2020) within a European-wide re-emergence of resident-led collaborative housing. Here, calls have been made to trace the evolution of multiple structural factors and influences (Lang and Mullins 2020), including social movement and transnational organising (Hölzl and Hölzl 2022).

Understanding informal processes, and the collective infrastructures that enable the emergence and maintenance of housing commons, is an important, if overlooked, dimensions of processes of institutionalization. The activist and housing justice roots of co-operative housing in England has been often described as its 'hidden history' (Birchall 1991; Vasudevan, 2015). Recent scholarship is beginning to uncover these roots and fill the knowledge gap (Fitzpatrick 2018; Thompson 2020a), yet key elements of the move from mobilization to co-operative formation and maintenance, remain only known at generalized, systemic level. This is partly because histories of housing co-operatives in the UK have mainly been told from the perspective of formal policy and governance practice. This often comes at the expense of a methodological and theoretical approaches which understand co-operative housing processes through more place-specific practices, histories and dynamics, both personal and collective (see Arbell, Middlemiss, and Chatterton 2020). Incorporating but going beyond official records and historiographies, therefore, the analysis of precarious institutionalization can therefore benefit from engaging with place-specific histories and legacies of organising (Briata, Colomb, and Mayer 2020), and with how groups understand and act "within specific institutional context with their web of power relationships" (Clapham 2001, 16). In practice, this

requires an interpretative approach to motivations and rationales, and an attention to non-linear and dynamic processes, allowing for resistance and building counter-power.

Methodological approaches to a 'hidden history'

The empirical focus of my analysis of, and inspiration for, 'precarious institutionalization' is the longer history of the transformation of squats into short-life co-operative housing in London, UK. Before outlining my methodological approach, it is important to explain the complexities of the subject matter. The 'short-life' qualification derives from the temporariness of the licensing arrangement to the dwellers/users, as brief as one-month license. Temporary users' organizations often remained relative informal groupings under secondary formal organizations – such as 'secondary co-operatives'[1] - many of which have long ceased to exist, or merged with other organizations, their knowledge and know-how residing within the memory of a handful of (ageing) individuals.

Aside from unpublished doctoral theses by researchers with first-hand experience (Bowman 2004; Woolley 1985), all that is publicly available on the topic are the individual histories of each co-operative, and the mythologization is often extensive. Rather than a formal sector with a central historiography or defined archival sources, short-life co-operatives and their roots into squatting needed to be reconstructed by combining fragments pertaining to a wide range of sources. Over the course of two years (2017-19), I built an heterogeneous archive which compared housing co-operatives 'about us' narratives, available online and in print, with contemporaneous secondary sources, from typewritten meetings' minutes to newspaper articles, pamphlets and

[1] For an overview of the complex and variegated landscape of legal forms taken by co-operatives, including housing co-operatives, in the United Kingdom, see https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/legalforms

professional publications written by individuals and groups involved in short-life co-operatives, collected in activist archives; and the analysis of original footage and other documentary materials; historical scholarship about both squatting and third sector housing, particularly tenants management organizations (Simmons and Birchall 2007); published interviews and oral history archives. Drawing on and integrating official data from a range of registers of housing co-operatives[2], I was able to build a database, comprising information such as addresses, number of dwelling units and residents, key dates, ownership of the property, intermediary organisations for 39 housing squats with confirmed relations to formal housing co-operatives, across nine London boroughs.

In addition, between 2018 and 2019 I have undertaken in-depth interviews with 25 former short-life co-operative members active in the 1970s and 1980s, and involved with housing co-operatives with direct or indirect roots in squatting across nine London boroughs, as well as with former local authority officers, members of co-op federations and local councillors.[3] As a former London resident and housing activist, I was able to draw on personal and political networks to reach knowledgeable contacts, while other contacts were reached through a snowballing approach, supplemented by direct email contact to housing co-operatives and other organisations identified in my parallel archival research. Moreover, interviewees valued my positionality as an action researcher into movements for housing justice and for co-operative housing in Spain (Ferreri and Garcia-Lamarca 2023). Interviewees were selected on the basis of their knowledge of the

[2] These included the Mutuals register of the UK Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), https://mutuals.fca.org.uk/; the co-operative housing database of the British Social Housing Federation (BSHF); and an unpublished database, courtesy of the London Federation of Co-operative Housing.

[3] Data about the histories of housing co-operatives is fragmented and often difficult to obtain, and this account is inevitably partial. Archives included the Advisory Services for Squatters' historical archive, deposited at the Bishopsgate Institute, and London's housing movements archives at May Day Rooms and 56a Infoshop.

technical details of the institutionalization process at both local and city-wide scales, which included people who held voluntary and paid positions within primary or secondary organizations. Often, recollections tended to reproduce somehow simplified 'official stories'. As one of my interviewees put it, "You kind of trot out the same old clichés about how we got here…" (interview, 2018).

While self-representation is a significant site of political meaning-making, the rationale behind my study was to reconstruct the organizational dynamics that enabled commons reclamation alongside the everyday practice of their long-term maintenance in the face of processes of enclosure. I therefore engaged in careful evaluation of retrospective mythmaking (in written texts, oral history projects, and original interviews) alongside political commentary and official documents of the time, acknowledging place-specific material and political conditions for the emergence of institutionalization. While beyond the scope of this paper, this experience raises important issues about the methodological challenges of undertaking this research into substantively fluid and unwritten precarious practices, even in a relatively recent past. In what follows, I first offer an overview of the city-wide context at the time, and subsequently analyse key issues and modes of precarious institutionalization through selected examples.

An overview of short-life co-operatives

Short-life co-operatives are a form of licensed self-organised housing that emerged from the formalization and institutionalization of temporary residential uses of vacant properties, in many cases initiated through mass squatting. As a 'model' for housing commoning, they sit between the fully decommodified and self-managed model of 'fully mutual housing co-operatives' - characterised by ownership by members with

par value equity share[4] - and much more precarious forms of temporary housing. Its historical roots, context and geographies are specific to London, although other large cities (e.g. Leeds) also had important cases which also led to the constitution of longer-term co-operative housing. The high volume of vacant dilapidated properties in public ownership in the 1970s is fundamental for understanding its origins. Particularly in inner London, vacant properties were often the product of Compulsory Purchase Orders of 19th Century housing for large scale infrastructure and comprehensive redevelopment. By the early 1970s, in inner cities boroughs such as Lambeth as many as 23,100 dilapidated empty dwellings awaiting demolition were counted (Wall 2017, 79). Unsurprisingly, most of the mass squatting that occurred in the early to mid 1970s were in areas with high volumes of dilapidated vacant dwellings, with an official London Boroughs Association survey estimating the number of squatters at over 20,000 (Paris and Popplestone 1977, 44).

At this time, in London and other large cities squatters and local residents were increasingly organizing to protest and stop these large-scale demolitions and present counterproposals for renovating the housing themselves. In the words of self-help architect and participant in these processes, Tom Woolley, "the experience of local group victories and public enquiries laid the foundations of the housing co-operative movement" (Woolley 1985, 38). Indeed, the *Bulletin of the society of Co-operative Studies* noted that "several squatters' group, aware of the long-term inadequacy of squatting, are turning to co-operatives as a long term solution" (Rose 1977, 60). One "result of these roots […] is the youthfulness and political radicalism of the movements' activists" (Ibid, 60) whose orientation "tends to be anarchist" (Rose 1977, 65); this was

[4] For further detail, I refer to Fitzpatrick's typology of mutual housing in the UK (Fitzpatrick 2018, 28).

an inexperienced cohort: “the housing movement is only just emerging, lacks experience and employs few workers, most of whom are learning as they go along” (Ibid).

From the standpoint of systemic housing change, this radical movement played a pivotal role in the expansion of co-operative housing for low-income residents, as opposed to the co-ownership model, in the UK. According to historical sources, only 3 housing co-operatives existed prior to the late 1960s. By 1977, there were 11 mutual housing co-operatives, with “67 co-operative development groups” registered with the Cooperative Housing Agency (Rose, 1977: 57). According to housing movement sources, at least 6 of the 16 new co-operatives registered between 1975 and 1979 came directly from squatting (Wates and Wolmar, 1980) but the figure was likely higher when including indirect links. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until their demise, short-life co-operatives continued to manage an estimated 15,000 dwelling units; by the early 2000, the estimate was of 10,000 individuals (Bowman, 2004). In 2009, ‘short-life’ was still considered “one the five main forms of housing co-ops in the UK” (Rowlands 2009, 37); by 2017 there were still at least 3 short-life co-operatives in the capital (London Federation of Housing Co-operatives 2017). As I will explain later, many transformed over time into tenant-managed co-operatives within the housing association sector.

Based on my own estimates, at least 39 of the 267 still existing housing co-operatives in London come directly from short-life co-operative housing, and in at least 19 cases, a squat preceded the formation of the co-operative. Short-life co-operatives – and the low-income tenants co-operative sector – thus emerged from a relatively inexperienced but radicalized cohort. Waves of protest, engagement and, eventually, negotiation with local governments who owned the buildings were present at the very origin of this specific instance of commons formation, rather than an a posteriori relation of repression or co-optation. Of paramount importance were strong and well-organized

local housing campaigning and neighbourhood-, borough- and city-wide mobilizations and negotiations, as I elaborate on below.

S.L.U.Gs[5] and federative networks

Far from politically autonomous islands, short-life co-operatives housing emerged and relied on vast efforts at coordination and on assembly-based infrastructures, intersecting with non-housing networks and social movements. These coordinating efforts were due to the contested claims to empty buildings, neighbourhood-based campaigns, and the need for rapid mobilizations against the constant threat of eviction. Throughout the 1970s, squatting in London was largely organized territorially through weekly and biweekly assemblies and networks in neighbourhood and boroughs, and even wider area (North, South-East, North-East), while city-wide significant references were the London Squatters Union and the Squatters Action Council, in addition to the Family Squatters Advisory Services, later Advisory Service for Squatters. Sharing overlapping political and DIY praxis, know-how, squatting and short-life co-operatives shared many of its tools and forms of organization, at neighbourhood, borough-wide and area-wide scale, are still to this day often perceived as two sides of the same self-help housing movement.

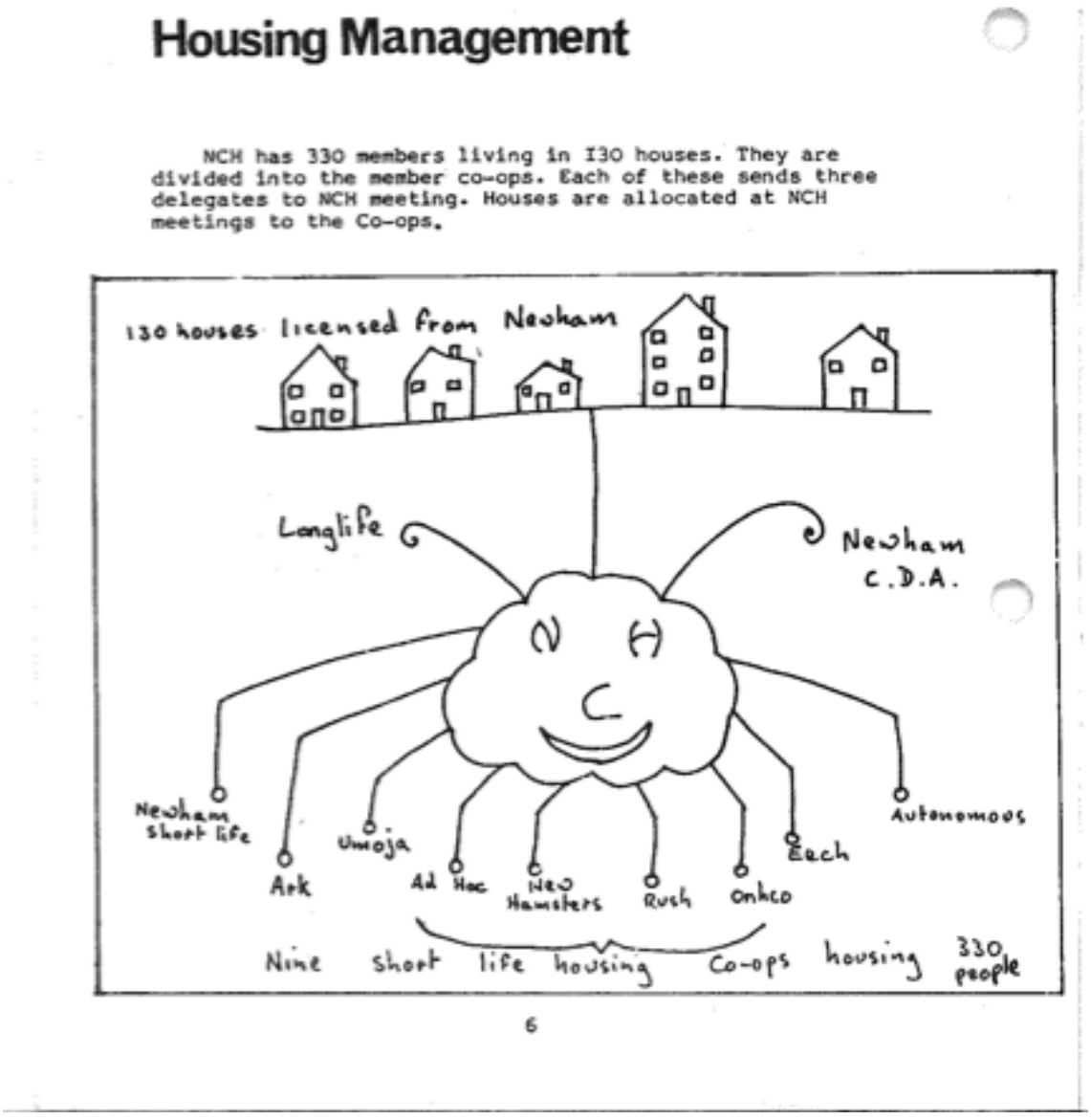
Due to the high presence of empty buildings in public ownership, specific boroughs of London became sites of intensified organized squatting and of negotiated collective licensing of vacant properties. One of the best known was the borough of Lewisham, which was the first, in 1969, where organized squatters successfully negotiated for council-owned empty properties to be refurbished and offered on short

[5] Acronym for Short Life Users Groups; a tongue-in-cheek reference to unauthorized house infestation.

leases to families living in the borough. After months of confrontation and occupations of "buildings owned by the borough, the Council acceded to the squatters' proposal that municipally owned vacant buildings be used to temporarily house the homeless" (Hollister 1972, 47). Under the agreement, the South East London Squatters Association, later reconstituted as the Lewisham Family Squatting Association, became responsible for selecting members, managing maintenance and the leases. Ron Bailey, author of *The Squatters* (1973), was named as the co-coordinator of the association.

While coordination and federal structures are important drivers that enable power surges to consolidate and negotiate recognition, at a borough level the same housing assemblies could lead to several organizations performing different functions and political purposes. As recalled by one of the founder of the first short-life housing co-operative in Newham, an outer London borough, at the origins of the group there was overlapping and very local organizing work: "It didn't just happen, it came out of a large amount of struggle" (interview 2018). There was the Newham Action Housing Group, set up in 1975 as a political campaigning group advocating for the use of vacant properties. The con- temporaneous Newham Short life Housing Co-op (NSL) started negotiating short-life licences in properties on six-month leases, owned by a (still existing) housing association, London & Quadrant. In 1978, to build capacity, the *Newham Empty Properties Group* was created and acted as a more professional intermediary, engaging with property surveys and higher-level lobbying. The council eventually offered a pilot of six properties, to be managed by Newham Short Life. As more properties were acquired, Newham Short Life worked to help create a borough-wide federation of small co-operatives, called Newham Community Housing (NCH), supporting skill sharing for DIY refurbishment and doing repairs (interview 2018). By 1984, NCH managed 130 flats licenced from Newham Council, housing approximately

330 people through 9 self-managed short-life housing co- operatives. In 1981, the Longlife Housing Co-operative Ltd was set up to acquire and rehabilitate permanent housing. Today, it still owns 64 fully improved properties. In 1981, the Newham Cooperative Development Agency was also set up to help establish workers co-operatives [Fig. 1].



[figure 1] Diagram of Newham community housing and its housing co-operatives. Source: Newham Community Housing - 5 years of short life (1984, 6).

Similar intermediary organizations were often organized at the scale of local boroughs, mirroring existing housing governance territories – primarily the local

authority - as the political frameworks of their demands and negotiations. In south London, just to name a few, there were the Lambeth Self Help Housing Association and the Southwark Federation of short-life users; in North London, the Haringey Shortlife Users Group, the Camden Federation of Short life Group (active in the 1980s), Short life Community Housing (SCH), and the Islington Short life Users' Group (appropriately and humorously shortened as SLUG); in Hackney, the Hackney SLUG. Beyond locally specific alliances, a network of support agencies brought together different boroughs and areas of the city. According to people involved in the federations, these infrastructures involved activists and housing professionals, and were crucial for lobbying local governments, navigating the semi-legal position of much of these agreements, organize and administer an often-transient population, share knowledge, and apply for funding for refurbishment. More formalized organizations emerged which often used part of the monthly license fees (often incorrectly discussed as 'rents') to pay for their workers and for maintenance.

In the North London boroughs of Haringey, Barnet and Enfield, for example, the Habarfield Group was formed to transform semi-derelict housing into a liveable state, mostly for young single people. In the late 1970s, the organization was responsible for several hundred properties, managing the precariousness of the situation through much shorter leases to individual users and co-operatives:

> "there was no long-term obligation, the borough could terminate our use of the property with a month's notice […] basically the organization, each little co-op, had to manage a process of going and bidding […] for an additional property or a replacement property to house their members. […] Obviously we gave people as much notice as we could, but we had to be able to clear the property and give it back to the borough otherwise it would have undermined our credibility as an

organization that could continue to manage the process" (interview with a former member of the Habarfield Group, 2018)

While squatters and co-operatives' own sources often minimise the support received by local and central governments, these arrangements had also began receiving recognition through grants and shifts in legal and policy frameworks.

Recognition beyond a mythology of autonomy from the State

Legal recognition at the scale of local and central governments are often key to the formalization and consolidation of radical housing alternatives (Vidal 2019). In England, higher levels of the central State informed the possibility for recognition and formalization. With the election of the Labour Party in 1974, the new government took on ideas of devolved management and transfer of housing ownership developed by the Co-operative Party. A breakthrough at policy level occurred under the Minister for Housing, Reg Freeson, who had himself been involved in the establishment of housing co-ops (Birchall 1991). Freeson was instrumental to the commissioning of the Campbell Report which explored how to promote housing co-operatives (Fitzpatrick 2018, 18) and which paved the way for increased recognition of tenants' management options for publicly owned housing, as well as for a series of amendments to the 1975 Rent and Subsidies Act, which included co-ops as beneficiaries of the grants and loans offered through the 1974 Housing Act. Importantly, this included the famous mini-Housing Allocation Grant ('mini-HAGs'), which made possible for many small co-operatives to receive funding for refurbishment.

Recognition through this inclusion had important consequences. Firstly, thanks to the inclusion of small co-operatives in the regime of 'fair rents' "co-ops became uniformly affordable to those on low incomes for the first time" (Thompson 2020a, 72).

This meant that co-operative housing was to disengage from prior experiences of co-ownership and closely align with social tenancies and the third sector, particularly the then emerging Housing Association sector. Secondly, recognition through allocation of resources led to greater stability. As mentioned by many people involved in short-life co-operatives, with mini-HAGs they could negotiate a minimum of three years in a vacant property. For some squatters who negotiated short-life, engaging with these grants and the formalization processes was 'a no brainer' (interview, 2018) as it enabled a degree of stability for precarious housed individuals and groups. As recorded by a member of the Seymour Housing Co-operative in Westminster, squatted in 1975 by 60 people and which became the first to become a short-life co-operative in London in 1976, "our evolution into a housing co-operative seemed a natural process" (in Wates and Wolmar 1980, 155). Having negotiated a 35-year lease from the local council, Seymour Housing Co-operative still exists today.[6]

A third important consequence of the Campbell report led to the formation of the Cooperative Housing Agency, within the Housing Corporation, the non-departmental public body that funded new affordable housing and regulated housing associations (1964-2008). The agency received 10% of the Corporation's budget and funded the development of local secondary co-operatives, while it also provided education and training for primary co-op members (Rose, 1977). This helped create a layer of more formal organizations - such as the Newham Community Housing discussed in the previous section - which acted as an umbrella organization and as an interlocutor with the

[6] Gaining degrees of stability had significant implications for the possibility of developing radical social and cultural movements in the city, as many activists, visual and performance artists, writers, actors and musicians, famously lived in squats and short life co-operatives, e.g. Seymour Housing was home to Joe Strummer, of the Clash; members of the squat-turned-co-operative Abeona and the experimental gay, lesbian and women's Oval House Theatre in Kennington (Potrony 2015).

property owners, in most cases the local borough. It is therefore not surprising that the exponential growth of short-life co-operatives, in terms of high number of registrations of new organizations, occurred between 1976 to 1979: the peak period of government funding for small co-operatives (Murie 2008).

The 'thin red line' of secondary co-operatives

The relationship between emergent performative reclaiming through direct action and longer-term institutionalization was dependent upon the recognition of the yet-undefined short-life co-operative housing sector in relation to established housing actors, particularly housing associations. While the legal frameworks for distinguishing between housing co-operatives and housing associations remained relatively loose and flexible – guaranteeing a high degree of autonomy - this recognition was fraught with tensions and was eminently political. Within the squatting movement the licensing of squatters and the emergence of recognized 'short-life' intermediaries, or secondary co-operatives, was often seen with suspicion and debates ensued in local and city publications. As argued in the weekly newspaper of the London Squatters Union, "licensed groups walk a thin red line between being a Housing Association and a Squatting Group" (*Squatters News* n.4, 28 September 1977, 4). The risk was of becoming more of the former due to requests for public grants and campaigning calls for the involvement of local councillors.

One article, titled 'From Conflict to Compromise', raised questions about the function of Short life Community Housing (SCH), a secondary short-life housing group created in 1970 which had been closely linked to important squats in the north London boroughs of Camden and Islington, such as Elgin Avenue, in Maida Vales. After 7 years of operation, the possibility of an autonomous political stance was queried:

> SCH's function should be principally as a political force to make the councils use their sub-standard housing for single people. This cannot be done if they are put in a compromising position […] Too much dependence on council finance will also lead to very strong political dependence on the council (*Squatters News* n.4, 28 September 1977, p.4).

The 'thin red line' between being a political force and being dependent on local governments due to legalization processes needs to be understood as a point of debate within the political and practical networks that straddled the two forms of organization. As has been observed in other contexts, such as the case of Berlin, whether the radical dimension of collective occupied housing can survive legalization often "depends on the strength and coherence of the movement, and it necessitates that the members of a collective living together continue to develop ideas and practices which challenge capitalist logic" (Lucrezia Lennert, in Pattaroni 2014, 80). While the political tension around institutionalization through licensing remained unresolved, over time some of these secondary level organizations indeed became more and more professional, providing services to co-ops or becoming themselves housing associations. The strong enmeshing of the co-operatives into state institution through grants, led to a degree of embeddedness – and political vulnerability - to institutional policy shifts and the pressure towards privatization and third sector ownership through housing associations.

It is important to note here that commentators at the time argued that the difference between housing associations and tenants and licensees' co-operatives was not as marked as it appears today (Gorman 1975). In fact, by the 1980s many short-life secondary co-operatives were already, in practice (although not always formally), part of small housing associations (Williams 1990). Nonetheless, the increasing incorporation of many short-life co-operatives into the more structured and formalized housing association sector, was

perceived by some as operating an enclosure of the specificities and non-normative elements of short-life co-operative living, alongside a residualization of tenants' self-management (interview, 2018). Dwellers' control in the form of tenants' management was not always seen as compatible with the more formal housing association sector:

> "There were always housing associations in Britain who were very much anti tenant involvement. Because many of them grew out of the sort of paternalistic charitable sector, they had this attitude towards their residents […] And so where they could, they destroyed housing co-operatives, especially from the mid-90s onwards." (interview with former short-life co-operative resident in Islington, 2018)

While ideological tensions between small housing co-operatives and larger housing associations are certainly important, this interpretation needs a complementary acknowledgment that the slow but clear decline during the 1990s and 2000s was due to several additional factors, including their fragile legal and political institutionalization in the face of rapid changes in political support, housing policy and housing market dynamics.

Decline through housing and political enclosures

Taking a longitudinal view clearly shows that the 'flexible institutionalization' negotiated in the 1970s and 1980s came under threat in the 1990s once the wider political infrastructures that sustained and fed on it waned, and the disposal of properties through mergers with housing associations and privatization became more commonplace, alongside an increase in land and property values in formerly low-income areas of the city. On the legal front, one of the key drivers was the Housing Act 1988, which challenged the status of co-operative tenants and licensees, leading many smaller groups

to become part of or incorporated as housing associations. Only a small number of short-life housing co-operatives were able to consolidate in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s (e.g. Abeona Housing Co-op in Camden, Carol Street Co-op in Islington, or Brixton Housing Co-op in Lambeth). Those short-life that continued to exist are tenants' management co-operatives – that is, co-operatives of users that self-manage but do not own the lease to their homes - in property transferred from municipal governments to housing associations, known as tenants-managed housing co-operatives.

The vast majority of short-life co-operatives, however, were 'recalled'. Lower income licensees were absorbed back into the social rental sector, through individual social tenancies in housing associations or council housing, or were pushed into market housing provision. In a number of well-known cases, higher income tenants and licensees of short-life co-operatives that had emerged from squatting were able to purchase their homes, reverting them to individual homeownership (Wall 2017). This was prior to the rolling out of 'Right to Buy' policies in social housing; commentators at the time called it, instead, a form of 'squatters amnesty' by Conservative-controlled boroughs and the Greater London Authority, notably in 1977. Many of these cases are now in areas where properties are worth millions of pounds. In this process of disposal, some short-life users were able to realise individual gain; as has been argued in the Danish case, the legal and economic conditions that informed processes of formalization and institutionalization can usher in a transformation of relations and subjectivities from 'alternative' to hegemonic (Larsen and Lund Hansen 2015).

Local governments engaged in the disposal of properties under short-life licensing at different velocities and through different processes of enclosure. Data about the end of short-life co-operatives is often difficult to obtain and varies greatly depending on the local authority. In the London Borough of Islington, for example, all short-life housing

co-operatives of the Islington Short life Users Group disappeared, and only three co-operative housing organizations still remain: Islington Community Housing Co-op, Finsbury Park Housing co-op and New Swift Housing co-op.

> "As the council got its act together and had the resources to renovate these street level properties […] one by one the small co-ops who didn't adapt to the times disappeared as the supply of derelict housing dried up and roughly about mid-1990 the house prices in London started to go through the roof, and of course that killed off short-life." (interview with former short-life co-operative member in Islington, 2018)

In the London Borough of Camden, by the early 2000s there were less than 300 homes left on short-life licensing and only 7 short-life housing co-operatives; and by 2018 only one survived, managing just 12 shared houses on the same street. The London Borough of Lambeth also has a significant history in this respect. As one of the most heavily squatted in the city (Cockburn 1977), the borough was the site of a high number of short-life licensing which by the mid-1990s still amounted to 1,200 properties. Despite protests and even a parliamentary debate, all were disposed of by the end of the 2000s.

Federative infrastructures of commoning and resistance

The strength of housing commons – being as they are always in tension with enclosure by the state and the market – has been shown to often lie in their ability to maintain grassroot mobilization and coordinated governance networks (Vidal 2018). In London, the infrastructure of commoning discussed earlier became important frameworks for the establishment of longer-term umbrella institutions capable to advocate on behalf of marginal self-managed housing in the face of policy shifts, such as federations. These can shed light on non-linear longitudinal mobilizations, and their relationship to wider

political social movements in the city. Two different examples can illuminate this point in relation to the threat of dissolution: the case of the Southwark Federation of Short Life Users, and the case of the Black housing association UJIMA.

The first example concerns a successful struggle against dissolution of short-life co-operatives in the London Borough of Southwark. As previously noted for other boroughs, in 1997 the local government 'recalled' short-life properties, in many cases after over 20 years of precarious leases. However, many co-op members refused to comply. Rather than short-life 'stop-gap' for single young individuals, as originally intended, "there were people who had had children while living there, and that was part of the argument for getting rehoused. People had been born into it, gone to school locally, been involved in the communities" (interview with former short-life co-operative member in Southwark, 2018). Rejecting individual rehousing, in 1998 many short-life co-operatives across the borough re-constituted a previous federal organization, the Southwark Federation of Short Life Users – commonly known as 'the Fed'[7]. Their successful campaigning led to an agreement, in 2002, for the permanent rehousing of over one hundred units by the small housing association Hexagon. Some short-life licensees were even able to negotiate rehousing in new built housing: William Blake House (WBH) in Peckham, Mariner House in Rotherhithe and The Arrows in New Cross Gate, each managed by tenants' co-operatives. At times of danger, latent federative structures and territorial networks were reignited as a vector for maintaining a low income, self-managed housing common.

The second example, conversely, concerns the demise of an important Black housing association UJIMA and its associated federation. UJIMA (Swahili for 'working together', 1977-2008) had its roots in mid-1970s organized squatting, and later emerged

[7] See ABC Southwark Housing Co-op, http://www.abchousing.co.uk/history.html

from the youth-oriented organization 'Black Roof' (Waters 2016; Soares 2012). It was the largest of a number of initiatives led by Black, Asian and other minority groups, including migrants and refugees such as the African Refugees Housing Action Group Housing Association (ARHAG) (Bowman, 2004), that engaged in local and city-wide organising against racist discrimination in housing (Ferreri 2023). While most disappeared over time, in a few important cases coordinated efforts led to the establishment of long-term community-led organizations, such as the Spitalfields Housing Association, with roots in the Bengali Housing Action Group (Glynn 2005; Glynn 2014). During the 1980s, many of these organizations formalized into Black Housing Associations, of which UJIMA was the largest, thanks also to targeted government renovation grants called the 'Black Mini-HAG Programme' (Williams 1990). Black and minority ethnic-oriented housing strategies were implemented by Conservative governments and maintained by New Labour until 2003, leading to "more than 50 black-led housing associations registered, hundreds of millions of pounds invested to support housing programmes, and a growing cadre of black leadership at the helm" (Beider 2012).

This phase came to an end with the publication of the Macpherson Report into the racist attack and murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1999 and the Cantle Report that investigated the disturbances in Burnley, Bradford, and Oldham in 2001 (Harrison et al. 2005). Both reports, although not specifically about housing, led to a reading of the Black and ethnic minority housing sector as part of the perceived problem of spatial concentration and 'self-segregation', which was to be tackled by New Labour's 'community cohesion' agenda. In 2008, the Housing Corporation (under special powers of the 1996 Housing Act) forced the acquisition of UJIMA by housing association London & Quadrant (Hetherington 2008a; 2008b). The loss of UJIMA led, shortly after,

to the dissolution of the Federation of Black Housing Organizations (Beider 2012), which had been the main political muscle of the sector.

At different scales, these two cases show the important relationship between institutional and societal recognition, formalization, and federal structures of political representation. Both are examples of the legacy of past experiences and collective self-organization and negotiation, which created latent infrastructures of mobilization such as the Southwark Federation of Short Life Users, but also of potential vulnerability. Large scale recognition and institutionalization, such as in the case of UJIMA and the Federation of Black Housing Organizations up to the early 2000s, remained precarious and dependent upon central government's support, once grassroot organising and wider political support for the project were withdrawn.

Conclusions

Processes of institutionalization can be key to the passage from housing movement mobilizations to longer term decommodified and self-managed housing. This has been the case for thousands of former squatters who still live in affordable and self-managed co-operative housing in inner London. As I argue in this article, such institutionalization may always be understood as 'precarious' in virtue of its dependency upon formal and informal legal and policy frameworks, and the ebb and flow of political counter-power. This precariousness poses methodological and theoretical challenges to housing studies theory and scholarship. A posteriori definitions of specific housing typologies or policy sectors, such as 'co-operative housing', often restrict the scope of research by failing to account for the informal and fluid practices that constituted the emergence and maintenance of alternative housing models from and through housing struggles and unlawful uses. Understanding such practices requires engaging with

heterogeneous sets of materials, memories, and representations of multiple visions of housing justice organising, in their complex entanglements with power dynamics and different institutional pulls.

A thick qualitative understanding of these relations over time and place enables insights into both individual and collective actors, and the material, social and political conditions that made such commoning arrangements possible in the long term. As shown in the case of short-life co-operatives in London, place-specific and multi-scalar coordination of housing movements and allies, capable of instituting umbrella and intermediary organizations, was key to sharing know-how, negotiating conditions, and maintaining pressure on local authorities. After the peak moment of politicization and the 'window of opportunity' offered by central and local government to self-management in the 1970s, the model of short-life remained highly vulnerable to the normalizing push of market and policy shifts. As discussed by recent literature, here too federal coordination of city-wide and local social movement networks (Pruijt 2020) played a significant role in maintaining and resisting commons enclosure.

Exploring the institutional and territorial power relations at the core of such historical institutionalization, while not aiming to be exhaustive, can nonetheless restore granular- ity and a sense of dynamic reversibility to our understanding of these processes. As discussed elsewhere (Ferreri 2023), in the "transitional commoning" of housing forms such as short-life co-operative lies the potential for long-term decommodification through formalization; but this remained always as an unfinished political project. Placing the emphasis on the precariousness of institutionalization processes reveals the extent to which material and symbolic gains are contingent upon changing economic cultural, and political priorities, expressed in government policy shifts but also in the decline of activist mobilizations. Analysing the specific articulations of this "precariousness" can be both

theoretically and politically generative by enabling a better understanding of dynamics of resistance to state and market enclosures and challenging the presumed linear path of institutionalization from direct action to formalization. Beyond London, reconstructing and analysing these statistically marginal yet significant histories can enhance our understanding of present and future challenges and potentials of contemporary movements for decommodified self-managed housing.

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