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Refurbishment versus demolition? Social housing campaigning for degrowth

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The global financial crisis has stimulated a renewed interest in the growth-versus-environment debate. Ecological economics proposes 'a-growth' (van den Bergh 2011) and 'degrowth' (Schneider et al. 2010; Kallis 2011) to challenge orthodox growth measures such as gross domestic product that do not account for a wide range of environmental and social costs and benefits and to discuss multiple alternative scenarios to the imperative of compound growth in local, national and transnational political agendas (van den Bergh and Kallis 2012). In post-crisis Europe, the notion of degrowth has begun to gain traction as a potential opportunity for rethinking the economy in terms of social equity and ecological sustainability, as 'an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global' levels, in both the short and long terms (Schneider et al. 2010, 512).

Moreover, as a 'deliberately subversive slogan' that aims to challenge a political imaginary dominated by growth and development, degrowth has offered an expanded vocabulary (D'Alisa et al. 2015) and an interpretative frame not only for interdisciplinary debates within academia but also for discussions in the arenas of policy-making, civil society organising and

social movements (Demaria et al. 2013). Within these discussions, housing provision has remained a comparatively under-investigated issue, often addressed in terms of new housebuilding models or small-scale living experiments.

In this chapter, I argue the need to examine the potential role of existing dwellings for a wide-reaching housing degrowth agenda. Combining environmental and social concerns, I engage with the ideas and proposals of residents about the future of low-income housing — a significant non-market sector now under threat in many cities across the globe — in the context of pro-growth urban development agendas (Porter and Shaw 2009; Watt and Smets 2017). Drawing on the analysis of a high-profile campaign against the demolition of a social housing estate in London, United Kingdom (UK), I discuss the centrality of the politics of valuation in the wider 'demolition versus refurbishment' debate.

Housing and degrowth

Perhaps surprisingly, housing has remained a relatively under-explored theme in debates about imaginaries and prefigurative practices for a degrowth urban society. The literature on housing and degrowth to date appears to be focused on small-scale examples that provide various degrees of social, economic, environmental and technical innovation. Many involve the analysis of relatively marginal, if growing, alternatives to mainstream building and residential typologies, such as low impact collective living and co-housing (Lietaert 2010; Pickerill 2011) and intentional communities in rural or semi-rural settings (Pickerill and Maxey 2009; Cattaneo and Gavaldà 2010). Combining environmental and social concerns, these studies share thematic insights with literature on community-controlled and democratically managed models of housing provision in the search for housing *commons*, a

key term in the degrowth vocabulary (Helfrich and Bollier 2015). Similarly, cooperative housing for rent (Johanisova et al. 2015; Larsen and Lund Hansen 2015) and community land trusts (Thompson 2015) have been proposed as tenures and mechanisms for producing and maintaining housing outside the logic of growth and urban development.

Such a small-scale approach risks limiting research into housing degrowth in two significant ways. First, by focussing on marginal experiences that are numerically, socially and geographically insignificant and imaginaries of exclusivity in which innovative housing options exist only under rare conditions and are accessible only to those who have specific sets of resources, be they economic, cultural, social or political (Thompson 2015). Studies in alternative housing models such as community land trusts (Bunce 2016) and refurbished senior co-housing (Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia 2015) in metropolitan cores such as London have drawn attention to the political economy of land ownership and the financing of construction as significant barriers to self-organised forms of more socially and environmentally just housing provision.

Second, by neglecting already existing housing provision, small-scale approaches disregard the vast multiplicity of housing models that co-exist alongside market housing, some with the potential for important large scale social or environmental responses. If existing market conditions engender very high entry costs for new 'alternative' housing, the wider transformative potential of a housing degrowth agenda should be tested against its capacity for transforming *existing* housing towards greater social and environmental justice.

Reflecting this perspective, this chapter argues that a truly 'subversive' degrowth housing agenda pays great attention to urban material conditions and addresses the challenge of

reimagining and transforming existing housing, particularly housing that is at the margins of the housing market. Therefore, I consider housing degrowth in the context of the experiences and demands of residents and local communities working towards the transformation of existing low-income municipal housing provision. Specifically, I draw on an extended case study approach to review plans to demolish a social housing complex, the Heygate Estate, and to discuss the social and environmental alternatives proposed by residents and campaigners within a wider 'demolition versus refurbishment' debate on the future of municipal housing in London. Critically examining the efforts of residents and campaigners can offer important insights into the political, legal and institutional barriers to challenging the dominance of an urban growth agenda on housing in cities today.

The question of municipal housing in London

Greater London was transformed by the construction of a high number of municipal housing for social rent from London County Council construction pre-World War II (WWII) to the vast and rapid developments from the late 1940s through to the mid-1970s (Cole and Furbey 1994). By the late 1970s, public housing represented 31 percent of total dwellings and reached nearly half in some inner London boroughs (Forrest and Murie 1988, 116). The British model of public housing was characterised by municipal production, management, maintenance and financing of public housing stock — supported by a central state subsid — with the tenure of choice being social rent.

Since this peak, an estimated 1.9 million social rented homes have been lost through demolition and privatisation (Hodkinson, 2012, 510) in what Hodkinson and Essen (2015) — quoted in Peck and Tickell (2002) — have described as an example of 'roll-back

neoliberalism'. By 2014, public housing in Greater London had dwindled to 12 percent of all total dwellings, although still a considerably higher proportion of housing stock in inner city boroughs (Mayor of London Office 2014). Alongside disposal, public housing stock was affected by a policy of residualisation (Cole and Furbey 1994), produced by reductions in central government subsidies for building new public housing, and diminishing repair and maintenance budgets for existing housing which, by 1997, had left an estimated £19 billion disrepair backlog (Hodkinson and Essen 2015).

The withdrawal of political and financial support for existing public housing, combined with the deterioration of the housing stock, offered fertile ground for New Labour's urban regeneration discourse and policy programme, which targeted disinvested urban areas with large proportions of public housing (Imrie et al. 2009). In addition to long term shifts in central government housing policies, urban regeneration housing programmes were majorly impacted by shifts from municipal housing to other social housing providers (Social Registered Landlords), from direct public investment to private-public partnerships and financial initiatives (Hodkinson and Essen 2015), and practices of demolition and rebuilding in 'mixed-community' neighbourhoods (Bridge et al. 2012).

The Mayor of London Office (2014) acknowledged that, with the deterioration of the municipal stock, 'programmes to demolish or refurbish estates have divided opinion amongst communities, social landlords and developers'. The replacement of social rented units with private homes and less affordable rental on offer were interpreted by critical commentators as encouraging gentrification de facto (Lees 2014; Watt 2009a). Such socially disruptive urban policies have promoted and naturalised the demolition of council-built housing undertaken 'often without adequate consultation, and involving disruption and some degree of dispersal

of established communities' (Edwards 2016, 233). The Heygate Estate, in Southwark, became an emblematic case (Lees and Ferreri 2016).

The Heygate Estate in Southwark

After WWII, inner city boroughs had higher percentages of public dwellings under local government's ownership and management than outer areas of London. The London Borough of Southwark (LBS) is a key inner city borough of over 300,000 inhabitants where, until the late 1990s, nearly half of all housing stock was publicly owned and managed (Watt 2009b, 221). In the mid-1990s, LBS embarked on a strategy to redevelop the northern parts of the borough through investment in infrastructures and the built environment. The launch of the Southwark Urban Design Initiative aimed at creating a cultural quarter in north Southwark stretching from the Tate Modern on the riverbank to the Elephant & Castle, where the Heygate Estate was located. Plans were made to demolish and redevelop the 1974 medium-sized purpose-built estate housing around 1,200 households (social tenants and leaseholders), as part of a comprehensive council-led urban regeneration programme.

The deteriorated state of the physical fabric of the buildings was an important argument in favour of its demolition and redevelopment but a decision that needs contextualising. As with many other municipalities across England facing dwindling central government budgets for maintaining existing municipal dwellings, in 1998, the *Southwark Housing Stock Condition Survey* calculated the estimated cost of maintaining its over 40,000 public housing units over a 30-year period as £21,742 per dwelling over 30 years, below the £23,363 average for the rest of the stock in the borough (London Borough of Southwak 1999). Around the same time, the council commissioned a comprehensive Option Appraisal Study of the Heygate Estate to

establish and evaluate cost estimates for repair and refurbishment versus demolition. The survey, presented in September 1998 by engineering firm Allott and Lomax Consulting (1998), found the buildings structurally sound and recommended refurbishing the maisonette blocks whilst redeveloping the perimeter blocks on the North and Western end of the estate. Despite these independent recommendations and the council cost assessment, a Strategic Committee report — not made public until the late 2000s — revealed that the decision to demolish was taken in 1998. In January 2001, the council stopped issuing new secure tenancies and only minimally maintained the site, further exacerbated the building's state.

In the late 1990s, in the context of the regeneration, estate residents and community groups began organising for more democratic decision-making processes. Initial proposals revolved around rehousing on site for former Heygate Estate residents. Later, the demand was for rehousing in nearby early housing sites and on site 'like-for-like' replacement homes (DeFilippis and North 2004), a key demand Bloom et al. (2015) point out seldom found in processes of social housing redevelopment. As tenants began to be rehoused elsewhere in the borough and leaseholders received compensation for the early termination of their leases, local organising shifted to trying to influence redevelopment plans. Activities of a key local organisation, the Elephant Amenity Network, promoted open master planning, affordable housing and 'regeneration that benefits all'. Mapping Heygate's social facilities included calculating the social and environmental value of its trees and green areas, to counter its image of an inhuman 'concrete jungle'. A range of alternative proposals collected through a public conference were published in the *Imagining the Elephant* report (2011).

Socially and environmentally just alternatives to demolition

A lesser known aspect of opposition to the regeneration plans was the attempt to reshape debate towards more socially and environmentally just solutions than those in the redevelopment masterplan. In May 2012, local residents and groups started the '35 percent campaign', referring to the then current percentage of social rented housing required by local planning policy. The campaign questioned local benefits brought by the regeneration plans and critiqued the proposed development scheme on the basis that it generated a net loss of genuinely affordable housing in the area, entailed the destruction of existing open green amenities (including over 400 mature trees) and their replacement by a privately-managed park and, finally, offered negligible renewable energy provision in a development that originally strived to be 100 percent renewable housing. Additionally, research undertaken by community groups unearthed the already mentioned 1998 Option Appraisal Study and raised public awareness of the option of refurbishment.

The option of refurbishment for high rise council dwelling began gaining traction, particularly due to case studies such as the £16.13 million regeneration of the Edward Woods Estate in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham — built between 1966 and 1971, slightly earlier than the Heygate Estate, and containing about two-thirds units (854 in total), but a similar mix of high rise towers and walk-up blocks. The case for retrofit combined environmental rationales, such as reducing energy consumption, and social benefits, including improving the estate's attractiveness and decreasing risks of fuel poverty for existing low income residents who remained in situ while works took place (Bates et al. 2012). Importantly, Edward Woods Estate showed that retrofitting social housing does not need to lead to 'renoviction' (displacement or displacement pressure due to rent increases for low-income households), a risk recently debated by Swedes Baeten et al. (2016) and Thörn et al. (2016).

Moreover, the idea that the Heygate Estate could be refurbished gained city-wide attention due to a published proposal by multinational architecture firm Gensler and constructing consultancy Baqus to the 2012 Building Trust International's HOME competition (Building Trust International 2012). The call was for a design and costing exercise to create creating decent urban dwellings for less than £20,000. Gensler's team showed that it was possible to refurbish the entire 1,200 Heygate Estate units for an estimated £35 million. The refurbishment was presented as feasible and the estimated unit cost of £14,000 was close to a £13,000 grant available to local authorities under the Homes and Communities Agency´s Grants Programme (2012). Furthermore, this refurbishment would save up to 40,000 tons of embodied CO_2 per square meter, and retain the 40+ year-old open access canopy and biodiversity of the green areas of the estate (Southwark Notes 2013). The Gensler proposal provided not only an important case study to challenge current development plans but also the possibility to discuss different scenarios for the Heygate and other large scale dilapidated estates across London. For example, the HOME competitions' winner proposed converting council estate's garages into homes without any structural modifications, all at once giving impetus to car-free developments and providing more housing on site.

Building on the attention generated, the community-led campaign group Better Elephant formed to explore and divulge 'proposals for an alternative and more sustainable regeneration of the Elephant & Castle: environmentally, socially, and economically'. Exposing that alternatives to complete demolition were discarded without proper consultation highlighted the high social costs of displacing residents and supported those leaseholders still living on the estate awaiting the expropriation of their homes by the government through a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO). The Better Elephant campaign contrasted the estimated cost of £35

million of the Gensler proposal with the £65.4 million that LBS had already spent on emptying the Heygate Estate — by 35 percent in 2014. Not only was the LBS's decision exposed as counter the independent surveyors' recommendation, but also its socially and environmentally disruptive strategy of long drawn out rehousing and demolition had been much costlier than if residents had stayed put. An example of corporate gagging of alternatives to hegemonic pro-development and pro-growth agendas, shortly after publication, Better Elephant received a formal request to remove the Gensler's presentation slides from its blog and the slides were removed from the official competition website.

Making the case for refurbishment versus demolition

The activities promoting refurbishment versus demolition centred on the Heygate CPO Public Inquiry, the results of which spread to campaigns outside their immediate area.

The Heygate CPO Public Inquiry

Organising to give visibility to the refurbishment option was not limited to level of campaigning. Local community groups used the formal and public planning inquiry into the Heygate CPO as a platform to challenge and dissect the decision-making process that favoured demolition and forced a rethink of the Masterplan planning application being approved at the time. They argued that alternatives to wholesale demolition and displacement had not been given due consideration. The original architect of the Heygate Estate was an expert witness during the Inquiry who questioned the evidence and rationale behind LBS's decision: although the estate had been poorly maintained over the years, no structural

assessment of the building had been carried out to justify demolishing it. Additionally, no assessment had been made to evaluate, architecturally and financially, a potential retrofit.

In their rebuttal, LBS conceded that partial demolition and refurbishment had been recommended by the independent consultants in 1998 but other considerations prevailed. As explained in the written testimony by the Elephant & Castle project director:

> the option to repair and refurbish was the minimum option and had the lowest capital cost but it did not represent best value for money when taken into account whole life costs and social viability (London Borough of Southwark 2013, 12).

A formulation of 'whole life costs and social viability' points towards a wider political agenda of dismantling the edifice of municipal social rented housing in the medium to long term. It was clear that the objective of 'realis[ing] the value of this strategically placed site' (Ibid.) was given priority over an option that was, from the onset, considered less environmentally and socially disruptive, as well as less costly.

The dispute clearly reveals a conflict of valuation between the rationales of an ideology of urban growth and alternative imaginaries of municipal housing futures. In this case, objectors to the demolition sought to make a persuasive argument by appealing to cost-benefit analysis and 'the common language of economic valuation' (Martinez-Alier 2009, 86). The response of the local government demonstrated a wider shift in how local authorities in London have become 'constrained to think of their land and social housing as "assets", not use values' (Edwards 2016, 223), leading to a dismissal of the social and environmental costs of demolition and displacement.

Beyond the Heygate

While the CPO was confirmed and the estate ultimately demolished in late 2013, the case of the Heygate gained public notoriety, laying the basis for campaigns in other municipal estates threatened with demolition. To support the argument for refurbishment, a review of evidence of demolition versus refurbishment was commissioned by the community planning network Just Space and the London Tenants Federation. The 2013 report, jointly produced by UCL Urban Lab and Engineering Exchange, noted that existing technical studies rarely measured the embodied carbon of municipal housing estates while the construction and demolition sectors contribute up to 47 percent of all waste in London every year. Taking a holistic approach to social housing improvement, it noted that promoting refurbishment would enable 'the creation of jobs requiring a new set of skills that will be in demand if the UK is to meet its carbon emission reduction targets' (UCL Urban Lab and Engineering Exchange 2014). Consequently, at a London Assembly Hearing in June 2014, Just Space demanded that the Mayor of London make a strategic requirement for reports on embodied carbon emission for future public housing, as raised in the *Knock it Down, Do it Up* report on the future of public housing in the city by the London Assembly Housing Committee (2015).

A similar argument over the methods and politics of valuation was made in 2015, during the Public Inquiry into the CPO of a bloc of leaseholder flats that were part of the large-scale regeneration by demolition of the Aylesbury Estate in Southwark (Lees 2014). As with Heygate opposition, the objectors demanded 'a full independent cost/benefit analysis, which includes not only an economic but also environmental and social analysis of the benefits of demolition versus refurbishment' (Aylesbury Leaseholders Group 2015, 7). They cited as

other successful cases of council estates the Doddington Estate in Wandsworth and the Six Acres Estate in Islington (Aylesbury Leaseholders Group 2015). The argument for different forms of accounting for the social and environmental costs of demolition was not even considered in the Inspector's judgement revealing further difficulties in pressuring elites to measure the full costs of economic growth in a scenario dominated by the urban growth agenda at local and metropolitan levels (Greater London Authority 2016).

Refurbishment as degrowth? Some final reflections

One of the aims of the 'deliberately subversive slogan' of degrowth is to decolonise an imaginary dominated by a one-way future expressed in terms such as 'growth' and 'development' (D'Alisa et al. 2015, 5). Further work is needed for such decolonising to occur in the housing sector, particularly in core cities where decision making is dominated by growth-seeking policy orthodoxies. In this chapter, I have proposed to expand the degrowth debate by addressing one of the casualties of this colonised urban imaginary: the withdrawal of state support and the dominance of the demolition-to-redevelop agenda for ageing low-income housing across Europe and beyond (Watt and Smets 2017).

Taking on the challenge of rethinking the future of low-income housing through a degrowth perspective means expanding its research agenda to include the transformation of existing stock through retrofitting. The argument for refurbishing the Heygate Estate was not explicitly framed through degrowth slogans but the strategy of challenging the imperative of urban growth through a demand for different languages of valuation, as such echoing degrowth insights into environmental disputes of the poor (Martinez-Alier 2009). The in-depth analysis of campaigning strategies has outlined the multiple institutional and political

challenges faced by residents and community groups resisting demolition and displacement, and shown the ways in which political power was expressed at the level of imposing a decision and 'as the power to impose one particular decision-procedure and a standard of valuation' (Ibid, 87).

To conclude, conflicts of valuation are embedded in the balance of priorities that motivate decision-making processes around the future of social housing, both within the 'refurbishment versus demolition' debate, and within the rationale for refurbishment. To iterate, in some cases privileging environmental over social issues supports gentrification and displacement, making retrofitting a double-edge demand for low-income residents (Baeten et al. 2016). In other contexts, monetary logics of cost-benefit analysis have led to complex structures of subcontracting and a diminished accountability to residents in key phases of refurbishment processes.

In London, June 2017, tragic consequences came to international attention when a fire devastated the newly refurbished Grenfell Tower and led to the death of over 60 residents of the low-income Lancaster West Estate in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (Architects for Social Housing 2017). Beyond a demand to account for the social and environmental costs of demolition, a degrowth agenda for decolonising the imaginary of social housing through retrofitting requires a fundamental reassertion of the value of human life above urban growth and economic profit, and of low-income residents' right to reimagine and decide the future of their homes.

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