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# Living precariously: property guardianship and the flexible city

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In this paper we examine the precarious everyday geographies of property guardianship in the United Kingdom. Temporary property guardianship is a relatively new form of insecure urban dwelling existing in the grey area between informal occupation, the security industry and housing. Young individuals, usually in precarious employment, apply to intermediary companies to become temporary ‘guardians’ in metropolitan centres, most notably in London. The scheme allows guardians to pay below market rent to live in unusual locations while ‘performing’ live-in security arrangements that are not considered as a form of ‘work’. The experiences of becoming and living as a property guardian can be ambivalent and contradictory: guardians express economic and social advantages to being temporary, while also exposing underlying anxieties with ‘flexible living’. In this paper we offer a detailed description of the various practices of property guardianship and how they must be understood, on the one hand, in light of recent geographical scholarship on housing insecurity and, on the other hand, as an example of a precarious subjectivity that has become normalised in recent decades in cities of the global North. Drawing on in-depth interviews with long-term property guardians in London, we unpack the narratives and rationales of university-educated and highly skilled individuals for whom the city is a site of intensified insecurity and flexible negotiation. In the end, we conclude that the form of permanent temporariness experienced by property guardians needs to be understood as a symptom of wider dynamics of work and life precarisation in urban centres and argue that it is imperative to extend recent geographical debates around work and life insecurity to include new housing practices and their role in co-constituting urban precarity.

**Key words** precarious geographies; property guardianship; London; precarity; flexibility

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## Introduction

Join the many professionals, key workers and mature/post graduate students across the UK who have chosen the new affordable alternative to renting. (Ad Hoc 2015)

As a nurse, living for Camelot means I can afford to live in London. My colleagues really envy me; so much space for very little money. (Camelot 2014)

Over the last 15 years, a number of private companies have been founded in the UK and elsewhere in Europe to operate as intermediaries in the area between security and housing through the mechanism of ‘property guardians’ or ‘live-in guardians’. The role of these businesses has been to introduce and promote schemes that provide low-cost security of vacant buildings and protect them from squatting and vandalism. At the same time, the schemes enable individuals to find temporary accommodation in properties otherwise considered unsuitable for rent, either because of their

class of use (for example, warehouses and other commercial properties) or because of pending demolition or redevelopment plans. In this way low-income but ‘flexible’ individuals such as students and precarious, part-time and self-employed workers, especially in the creative sectors, are able to live inexpensively in both unusual sites and central urban locations.

In the UK national media, property guardianship (hereafter PG) has been variously described as a solution to the lack of housing affordability (England 2015; Meyer 2013), as a form of adventurous living (Norwood 2010) and as a viable security option for owners of dilapidated properties, particularly in contexts of urban regeneration (Wainwright 2014). Despite widespread media coverage there has, however, been limited research on the topic. This paper is one of the first academic pieces dedicated to PG in the UK<sup>1</sup> and, as such, it seeks to describe as well as analyse PG as an emergent form of insecure low-cost housing. It focuses, in particular, on the experience and understanding of

guardianship by guardians themselves, but also asks wider questions about the meaning and instrumentalisation of 'guarding' as a form of security, the preservation of property values and neoliberal experiences and expectations of housing and work. How does PG function as a socio-economic-legal mechanism for short-term occupation and tenure? Who are the applicants, what are their rationales for *becoming* guardians and what kind of spaces do they tend to occupy? What is the relationship between the everyday geographies of PG and the increasingly precarious nature of contemporary city life? And what do these geographies reveal about the city as a site of intensified precarity?

In order to answer these questions, this paper offers a thick description of the various practices of PG and how they must be understood, on the one hand, in light of recent geographical scholarship on housing insecurity (Dorling 2014; Hodkinson 2012) and, on the other hand, as another example of the precarity that has emerged in recent decades in the cities of the global North (see McDowell *et al.* 2014; Molé 2011; Ross 2009; Standing 2011; Strauss and Meehan 2015; Weeks 2010). By examining the conditions and experiences of property guardians we seek, in this paper, to respond to recent calls for the development of new conceptual tools to address the challenges posed by new austerity urbanisms and the precarious geographies that they produce (Lewis *et al.* 2015; Peck 2012; Vasudevan 2015a; Waite 2009). The paper aims to extend recent debates in this journal, and in geography more generally, around work and life insecurity and the constitutive socio-spatial precariousness of our present conjuncture (Noxolo and Featherstone 2014; see Craig *et al.* 2015; Ettlinger 2007; Lewis *et al.* 2015; Urry 2014; Vasudevan 2015b; Waite 2009). To do so, we engage with debates around the concept of precarity, understood as the intersection of new conditions of heightened economic and political insecurity and their normalisation as specific 'structures of feelings' and subjectivities. Following Nancy Ettlinger, we deploy a framework that places particular emphasis 'on the everydayness of conditions that give rise to precarity' (2007, 321), but within a specifically spatial approach that insists on attending to the range of sites and social relations through which precarity is produced and reproduced. At stake here, we believe, are important implications for how we come to think about and research precarity as spatially generative and co-constitutive of urban life.

This paper is organised into three parts. In the first section, we develop a theoretical framework for the study of PG that builds on and furthers existing scholarship on housing and geographies of work and life precarity in the global North. The second section offers a detailed analysis of PG as a new and rapidly

growing model of temporary property occupation at the intersection between housing and security, particularly in large urban centres. Drawing on in-depth interviews with current and former property guardians in London, the third section explores and discusses the rationales, conditions and geographies of living as a property guardian. We argue that an analysis of the different coping strategies and narratives mobilised by guardians in response to the multiple precarities that shape their lives and labours offers insights into the under-researched normalisation of life and work insecurity for often highly educated and relatively young urban professionals. In the end, we believe that these experiences are only the visible tip of a much wider spectrum of precarious geographies that are at the heart of contemporary forms of urbanisation. The lessons of PG thus derive less from strict typicality than from illumination – from the way it sheds light on the everyday nature of contemporary precarity.

### Geographies of property guardianship at the intersection of housing and precarity

As the feminist philosopher Judith Butler has recently argued, precarity is not a 'passing or episodic condition' (2015, xii). If anything, it represents a key point of reference through which our present moment has been understood and felt, shaped and regulated. Precarity here names the experience of induced insecurity that is of a piece with contemporary neo-liberalism and this process, in Butler's view, acclimatises populations to forms of hopelessness and insecurity that are hard-wired into the very texture of contemporary governmental practices from the normalisation of temporary labour regimes to the decimation of social services

in favour of entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximise one's own market value as the ultimate aim in life (2015, xiii).

Butler also detects in these developments a new understanding of precarity as a structure of feeling; what she describes as a 'heightened sense of expendability or disposability that is differentially distributed throughout society' (2011, 13).

As a number of scholars have argued, terms such as 'precarity', 'precariousness' and 'precarisation' were first picked up and adopted by labour and social movements in Europe in the 1970s and have since become key placeholders for describing the emergence of new forms of flexible, contingent and irregular work (Lorey 2010; Molé 2010 2011). At the same time, there has been considerable confusion over the precision of these terms, especially given the historical ubiquity of precarious work for most workers around the world (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). The process of

precarisation (Lorey 2015; Ferreri 2016) has nevertheless tended to converge around two primary meanings. First, as the production – historical and otherwise – of deregulated privatised regimes characterised by short-term semi-permanent work. Second, as the normalisation of uncertainty and hypervigilance among worker-citizens no longer guaranteed the security of full employment (Molé 2010, 38). Precarity has therefore come to describe both a subject position and the affective embodiment of that position (Vasudevan 2015b, 350). It references, in other words, a particular notion of work *and* the lived experience of that work as a form of intensifying anxiety and fragility. In the process of precarisation, new ‘techniques of governing and subjectivation’ (Lorey 2015) emerge that represent far more than the strict withdrawal of mechanisms and institutions that were central to the emergence of the Fordist welfare state in the global North. At stake here, according to Isabell Lorey and many others, is the normalisation of precarious working and living conditions as both an art of government and as a source of intensifying exploitation (2015, 106; see also Lazzarato 2008; Lemke 2001; Lorey 2006).

While precarisation is, in this respect, hardly new and is shaped by deeply sedimented patterns of insecurity, it is also, we argue, marked by its uneven spatialisation. As the anthropologist Anne Allison has recently suggested, precarity inhabits the ‘loss of something that only certain countries, at certain historical periods, and certain workers ever had in the first place’ (2013, 7). Allison’s own focus is on Japan, though others have drawn attention to the crystallisation of precarious living across the global North as a condition ‘that distinguishes *this historical time*’ (Butler 2015, vii; emphasis added; Berlant 2011 2016; Molé 2010 2011; Muehlebach 2012; Ross 2009; Standing 2011). Our own aim, in this context, is to further sharpen the geographical optic at work here and examine how cities themselves have become key laboratories for new social and economic practices associated with the production of precarious insecure lives (see Vasudevan 2015b). To this end, we develop a framework that heeds Louise Waite’s (2009) call for a ‘critical geography of precarity’ and that can be plotted, in our view, along two intersecting axes. The first revisits recent debates surrounding the potency of the concept of precarity as an analytical tool adequate to the theorising of work and life insecurity. The second re-centres ongoing attempts to spatialise the concept of precarity through a focus on the relationship between urbanisation and housing inequality. In sketching the conceptual contours of the ‘precarious city’ in this way, it is not our intention to advance a new understanding of city life that is all-encompassing. Our motivations are more modest and are shaped by a commitment to *analysing* the different ways in which employment and

life insecurity, and new forms of insecure dwelling, are co-constitutive of increasingly precarious urban geographies. In what follows, we are not calling for the further plenary expansion of the term precarity, but rather insist on *connecting* the use of the term as an analytical tool to detailed qualitative research into the mutually constitutive relation between work precarity and precarious relations to place, and how this is experienced and narrated.

## Spatialising precarity

Recent studies of precarious life have tended to focus their sightlines on the rise of precarious employment in relation to urban living across advanced capitalist cities. Particular attention has been paid to the rise of casualisation and the concomitant decline of labour rights across different class and professional divides (see McDowell *et al.* 2014; Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Ross 2009; Standing 2011). A number of studies have also explored the range of coping strategies and tactics adopted by workers as they negotiate the uncertainty of a labour market that forces them to repeatedly move in and out of precarious work (see Hardgrove *et al.* 2015). In a case study of contemporary Italian workers, the anthropologist Noelle Molé (2010, 40) has argued that workers *anticipate* precariousness in a state of ‘heightened uncertainty’ where the uncertainty of the labour market is internalised by the individual, who ‘bears risk in exchange for labour market entrance’ (see also Muehlebach 2011). Beyond Italy, where new forms of workplace precarity have spawned a number of important studies, a small but growing body of geographical scholarship on the precarisation of labour regimes has also emerged (Dyer *et al.* 2011; Fudge and Strauss 2013; Lewis *et al.* 2015). In the UK, the widespread shift towards workforce casualisation, characterised by temporary and contract positions, has increasingly come to include graduate jobs. Scholars have noted how the shift has particularly affected young entrants in third-sector (Leonard *et al.* 2016) and creative and cultural industries (Gill and Pratt 2008; Neff *et al.* 2005), who experience a ‘state of economic and social uncertainty’ through a combination of low-pay, insecure part-time contracts and second-jobbing (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009, 423).

While some scholars have, unsurprisingly, advanced an understanding of precarity that is of a piece with conspicuously neo-liberal labour regimes, others have argued that it represents, in fact, ‘something more than a position in the labour market’ (Neilson and Rossiter 2005, np). An important and emerging body of literature has focused attention on the interconnections between new forms of hyper-precarious labour and the deepening exploitation of migrant workers across the global North (Lewis *et al.* 2015; Reid-Musson 2014;

Craig *et al.* 2015). Precarity, according to this view, is a direct product of the 'ongoing interplay of neo-liberal labour markets and highly restrictive immigration regimes' (Lewis *et al.* 2015, 582). Here the concepts of 'precarity' and 'precariousness' have been deployed as distinctive and different from related concepts of risk and vulnerability, in order to deepen our understanding of the condition of migrant labourers and refugees in terms of the interconnected questions of unfree labour and status. Along similar lines, Banki has proposed the term 'precarity of place' as distinct from labour precarity, to analyse the experiences of a subset of the precariat, 'that of non-citizens' (2013, 452) as exemplified by migrant labourers from Burma living in Thailand, whose multiple precarities encompass insecure legal status, labour and housing, as well as weakened social networks.

Other scholars, building on feminist materialist approaches to social reproduction and labour, have explored the ways in which precarious work and living are mutually constitutive (see Strauss and Meehan 2015), while recent sociological studies have drawn particular attention to a form of *double precarity* marked by insecure employment *and* insecure housing (Desmond and Gershenson 2016, 47; Desmond 2016; Purser 2016). With an attention to multiple and intersecting insecurities, we seek to further these arguments by attending to the entanglements of work and life precarity, and their co-constitutive relationship with precarity of place. Precarisation, we argue, needs to be understood as a *spatial process* that generates and sustains a varied geography of insecurity, flexibility and temporariness, at once intensifying and normalising precarity. Returning to the spatial roots of the term and its original usage in English, both the adjective precarious and the noun precariousness refer to specific relations to land and space. The etymology comes from the classical Latin *precarius*: 'given as a favour, depending on the favour of another, (of property) held by tenancy at will, uncertain, doubtful, suppliant' and usage in English language is attested as early as the first half of the 17th century, especially in connection with tenancies 'held or enjoyed by the favour of and at the pleasure of another person' (Oxford English Dictionary 2nd Ed.). While this original meaning as related to land rights is now rarely applied, it adds a specific spatial dimension to other current etymologies that stress the sense of obtaining something by prayer, entreaty or favour (Shukaitis and Figiel 2012).

## Urban precarity

A spatial approach to the mutually constitutive relation of work, life and place precarity allows us to revisit current debates about emerging conditions of urban

living and of urban housing in particular. The evolving housing crisis in cities in the global North is a well-documented phenomenon whose root causes pre-date, but have been made more visible by, the 2008 global financial crisis. Scholars have been returning to basic questions around housing and urbanisation (Harvey 2012 2014) in order to re-centre and reformulate our understanding of the current crisis (Aalbers and Christopher 2014a). While housing crises are recurrent elements in capitalist societies and speak to the centrality of housing within the complex circuitry of capitalist accumulation (Aalbers and Christopher 2014b), new avenues for research into precarious housing conditions have been outlined by literature drawing significant connections with debates surrounding the financialisation of everyday life (Craig *et al.* 2015) as well as recent work on the role of housing in the implementation of what Jamie Peck has called a post-crisis regime of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck 2012).

Features of the current widespread housing crisis in Europe and North America include, on the one hand, an intensification of tenure insecurity and an increase in forced evictions (Brickell *et al.* 2016; Desmond 2016). They have also prompted, on the other hand, a rise in protest and new forms of organising, as well as the development of informal alternatives that have their own geographically specific histories and trajectories. In focusing on the situation in the UK, perhaps the most important facet of the current housing crisis is the increasingly widespread insecurity of tenure for individuals and households in rented accommodations, both across the social and the private rented sectors. Insecurity of tenure in the social rented sector has been analysed in relation to the rise of 'conditionalised temporary tenure' (Hodkinson and Robbins 2013) and the introduction of fixed-term 'flexible' tenancies in council housing and housing associations (London Tenants Federation 2011), which should be understood in the context of stock transfer from the public and third sector to the private sector, as well as of the rapid spreading of schemes that involve the redevelopment and demolition of former council housing (Fenton *et al.* 2013; Lees 2014; Watt 2009). While low-income groups eligible for social housing have been disproportionately affected by the recent housing crisis, for over a decade calls have been made to reconsider the traditional relationships between tenure and level of education. University-educated 'marginal professionals' have been shown to 'make use of a range of housing forms and tenures' (Watt 2005, 362) and young graduates in precarious occupations have, in this context, been identified as a significant demographic marginalised by the current housing system (Stephens 2014).

Within the uneven geographies of housing in the UK, the cardinal significance of London cannot be sufficiently stressed, both as an experimental testing



site for emerging semi-legal housing practices, such as the so-called 'bed in sheds' phenomenon (London Councils 2012) and as a policy powerhouse (see Edwards 2016; Watt and Minton 2016).

London occupies a unique place within a broader national housing crisis. As the centre of the economic recovery and employment growth, demand for affordable housing exceeds supply, which is, moreover, dominated by an unregulated Private Rented Sector (Kemp 2011). Furthermore, affordable housing provision in the capital has been further affected by the erosion of the policy category of 'affordable housing' in new built developments (London Tenants Federation 2011) and by the increasing privatisation (Watt 2009) of the still relatively large public housing sector through processes of stock transfer, redevelopment and demolition (Fenton *et al.* 2013; Lees 2014).

It is our contention to firmly situate the emergence of PG as a form of unregulated, semi-formal housing in the context of the growing shift of many housing practices from marginal to mainstream. We strongly believe in turn, that housing precarity cannot be studied on its own, and, in this paper, we propose a synthetic framework that builds on recent attempts to bring different geographical approaches to precarious work and precarious life into conversation (Strauss and Meehan 2015, 1). At stake here is a framework that tracks the co-constitution of precarious urbanisms and that builds on recent work on the 'geographies of precarity'<sup>2</sup> by attending to a more expansive landscape of urban uncertainty.

## Researching property guardianship

In the following two sections we develop a spatial reading of the life and work precarity experienced by property guardians. Particular emphasis is placed on the economic, social and legal mechanisms that inform PG, as well on the rationale of guardians and the geographies of 'licensed living'. The first part of this section provides a detailed overview of the various forms of PG that have emerged in the United Kingdom since the early 2000s. We examine the specific legal and economic mechanisms that constitute PG as a new form of vacant property inhabitation that operates at the intersection between housing and security provision. Drawing on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, interviews with founders of property guardian companies and a review of relevant industry reports, we argue that PG is a growing sector that has over the past five years developed into a spectrum of positions and forms of organisation between the private and third sector. In the second section, we hone in on the experience of being a property guardian in London drawing on 32 in-depth interviews with current and former property guardians undertaken over a three-

year period (2011–2014). Interviewees were or had been guardians with seven different organisations, of which four were for-profit property guardian companies, one a housing association, one a social enterprise and one a cultural organisation providing 'live/work' space.<sup>3</sup>

To be considered for a guardianship, candidates need to provide up to three references, proof of sufficient savings or regular income during the three months before the application,<sup>4</sup> must not have a criminal record, children or pets; the application procedure also often includes a vetting interview. In addition, guardians are not officially permitted to use the property as their primary address. Such requirements evidently circumscribe the availability of PG to a limited section of the urban population. In fact, the majority of guardians interviewed belonged to a relatively homogenous group: they were university-educated, British or EU citizens, within the age range of early 20s to early 40s, either in work or education or both, often part-time or intermittently; they generally self-identified as middle-class and as geographically and professionally mobile. When asked about their understanding of guardians' profiles, interviewees indicated that our interview sample was largely representative of the wider demographic of PG.

We acknowledge, however, that our methodology presents potential limitations with regards to the breadth and diversity of experiences documented. Recruitment of participants was affected by guardians' anxiety about losing their homes due to a clause in the licence agreement that forbids them from talking about their living conditions to the media. It was therefore felt that a relationship of trust needed to be in place in order to carry out the investigation and interviewees were thus approached through snowballing and personal networks of two of the researchers, both of whom were young university-educated women. Within this sample, care was taken to explore diversity of experience through interviewing current and past guardians, as well as including individuals who lived as property guardians for different lengths of time. The second half of the article draws in particular on in-depth interviews with 11 individuals who have been property guardians for a minimum of three years in an attempt to develop a longitudinal understanding of what we conceptualise as the co-constitutive life, place and work precarity of PG living. Interviewees' names, their places of residence and the companies for which they acted as guardians have been fully anonymised.

## The rise of property guardianship

The model of PG as a form of low-cost temporary housing in vacant buildings originated in the Netherlands in the early 1990s and became, over the following

decade, an established form of affordable dwelling for low-income individuals. The model expanded during the mid-2000s, coinciding with the demise and eventual criminalisation of residential squatting in 2010. In the Netherlands, PG is known as *Anti-Kraak* (Dutch: anti-squatting) and it is officially considered an appropriate alternative to the squatting of vacant property (Buchholtz 2009). There are around 50 property guardian companies operating in the Netherlands alone (Bond Precaire Woonvormen 2014). PG schemes are also currently present in Belgium, Ireland, France and Germany (Dawson 2012; Heijkamp 2010).

PG companies position themselves as intermediaries between two different groups and sets of demands: property owners and managers looking for low-cost security options and individuals looking for affordable living space. Legally, the relationship is set through two different agreements: an authorisation agreement (owner or manager) and a temporary occupation licence (guardian) (see Figure 1). To preserve the company's role as intermediary, the licence forbids guardians to engage in direct communication with the property owners or managers.

Most commonly, both property owners or managers and guardians pay the property guardian companies for their intermediary services, although smaller companies may offer their service to owners for free or on a trial basis. Guardians pay a monthly 'licence fee' (in lieu of rent) to access the dwellings. Companies may also ask for administration fees, returnable deposits and a one-time fee to provide security equipment such as fire safety packs. Although the guardians' monthly fees are usually below market rent for a similarly located dwelling, critics of the scheme such as the British campaign group SQUASH (Squatters' Action for Secure Homes) have criticised

this agreement as providing a double income for the companies, to the detriment of the guardians (Boehner 2012).

In the UK, PG can be seen as a continuation of the Dutch model as well as developing locally specific variations. Our research indicates that there are at least 31 registered organisations that offer live-in property guardians as a vacant property security service (Dawson 2012). The Dutch-originated businesses Camelot and Ad Hoc dominate the market. Their first offices in the United Kingdom opened in 2001 and 2006 respectively, in London; Camelot has six UK offices at the time of writing, Ad Hoc ten, their newest being in Leeds and Liverpool. Security firm Orbis estimated that 4000 individuals live as guardians in the UK (2014, 7), but given the rapid growth of the sector, and the fragmented information in the public domain, the overall figure is likely to be significantly higher. Desk-based research has shown a rapid growth of PG in the UK since the global financial crisis of 2007/8, with at least 21 out of the 31 companies being founded since 2009. PG companies have enjoyed growing public currency and acceptance, with large PG companies regularly attending international real estate investment fairs such as MIPIM (*Le Marché International des Professionnels de l'Immobilier*; see Bond Precaire Woonvormen 2014), where they promote their services to private and public property owners. As will be discussed further on, PG companies offer security for a wide array of vacant properties, from residential to commercial, and have been regularly deployed by local governments to secure buildings in public ownership, with UK national government agencies promoting or directly supporting 'live-in guardians' in the context of public housing demolition and redevelopment (Homes and Communities Agency 2011).

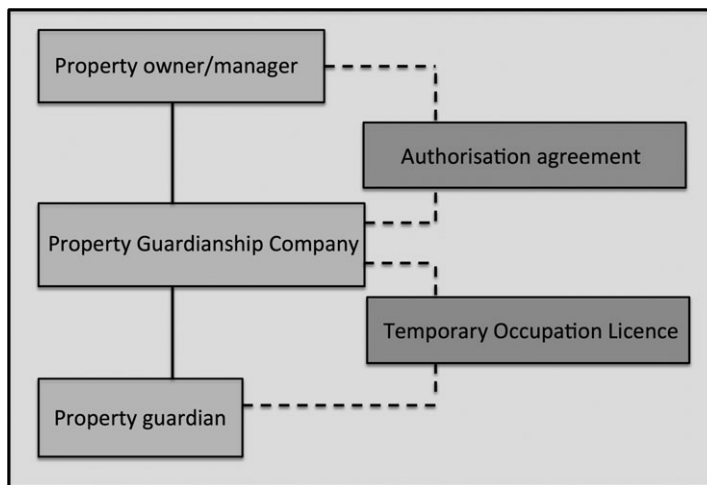


Figure 1 Diagram showing property guardian companies as intermediaries

In terms of a typology of PG companies, as illustrated in Table I, they can be grouped into three main categories. We have categorised companies as type 1 when the provision of live-in security constitutes their main profit-making activity; this typology comprises both established and newly founded companies. Type 2 companies are PG organisations that present themselves as ‘ethical’ alternatives; they are usually aimed at volunteers and individuals working in the arts and creative sectors and are sometimes registered as non-profit. Type 3 includes security companies that offer PG as a minor part of a wider portfolio of security options for property owners; these are all large, for-profit organisations. According to recent industry reports, PG is projected to grow in the future as a ‘professionalised’ section of the sector (Orbis 2014) as well as a growing ‘niche’ market for ‘ethical’ social enterprise organisations with a quite different emphasis.

In terms of their geographies, DEX Property Management, Camelot and Ad Hoc, marked with an

asterisk in the table, were founded in the Netherlands and operate internationally. Around two-thirds of UK-only companies appear to only have a single office in London, and 36 per cent appear to be exclusively operating in the capital, reinforcing the significance and uniqueness of London, both as a site of heightened property sale and development and as affected by an undersupply of affordable housing. While such tables can be useful to outline similarities and differences between companies, in practice it would be more accurate to talk of a continuum of forms of guardianship; from paying to non-paying guardians, to paid ‘caretakers’ and security guards, operating within the legal grey area at the intersection of housing and security. Such a complex framework requires an understanding of the ways in which companies and schemes actually operate on the ground and their implication for the emergence of forms of precarious urban subjectivities, as explored in the following part of the paper.

**Table I Companies offering property guardians in the UK, ordered by date of establishment (when known)**

Organisation	Type	Founded	No. of offices	Office locations	Property locations
Ambika Security	1	1988	1	London	UK
*DEX Property Management	1	1999	1	London	
Gallowglass Security	3	1999		Edinburgh and W. Yorks	UK and abroad
*Camelot UK	1	2001	6	London, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, Bristol, Leeds	UK
*Ad Hoc UK	1	2006	10	London, Manchester, Birmingham, York Liverpool, Bristol, Glasgow, Peterborough, Cardiff, Newcastle	UK
Newbould Guardians Ltd	1	2009	1	London	London
Live-in Guardians	1	2009	1	London	
Minae Property	1	2009	1	Manchester	UK esp. Midlands
Property Guardians	1	2009		London	UK – cities
Guardians of London	1	2011		London	London
Global Guardians Management Ltd	1	2011	1	London (North)	London
City Guardians	1	2011		London	London
Dot Dot Dot property	2	2011	1	London	London, Cambridge, S. England
Plage Property	1	2012	1	London	
GPP – Guardian Property Protection	1	2012		London	UK
Property Guardians in Cooperation	2	2012		London	London
Blue Door Property Guardians	1	2013		London	London
Intuitive Guardians	1	2014		Brighton and Hove	Brighton and Hove
Cerberus Property Guardians	1	2014		London (South)	London
Acorn Guardians	2	2014		London, Bristol, Brighton	
Orbis	3	2014			UK-wide
Eddisons	3	2014			London, Kent, Suffolk
Secure Guardians	1	c. 2012		London	London
Grandploy	1	c. 2013	1	London	London
Art Guard	2	c. 2015		London (East)	London
Violet Guardians	2	c. 2015		London (South)	London
Umbrella Guardians	1		1	London	London
London Caretakers Ltd	3			London	London
Clearway Security	3				
Oaksure Security	3			London	
VPS Specialists	3				

Source: Authors



## Becoming a property guardian

Want to live somewhere unusual and meet great people?  
Live the Ad Hoc way. (Ad Hoc 2015)

While understanding the socio-legal and material infrastructure of PG is important, living as a property guardian cannot be simply approached as the management of property security and housing insecurity. PG, we argue, is a 'form-of-life' that presupposes a process of *becoming* a guardian, constituting a specific subjectivity by promoting and establishing precarious forms of *relating* to home and to the city, while at the same time being co-constitutive of wider forms of life and labour precarity. To develop this thesis we draw on the everyday geographies of living as a property guardian in London. We do so by outlining three interconnected dimensions of PG as a form of precarious urban living: an analysis of the rationales, requirements and processes of applying for a property; the relationship between labour and the home; and, finally, the issue of spatial flexibility expressed in city-wide mobility and the use of space.

### *Social networks, requirements and entrepreneurialism*

Guardians are often well integrated into urban social and professional networks, which are key to their engagement with PG. As explained by a former guardian, such networks were initially central to the establishment of PG as companies could 'capitalise on the interpersonal relationships of creative types' (Martin, 28, visual artist), relying on 'word-of-mouth' to recruit guardians. The initial popularity of the scheme among workers in the creative and third sectors can be explained both by the notoriously low-paid and precarious working conditions of these industries (Merkel 2015), but also by their 'networked' nature, in which access to work is often reliant on personal and professional networks (McRobbie 2002). Guardians who joined the scheme after 2012 were more likely to discover the option through online searches or newspaper articles, a fact that correlates with findings about the surge of newly registered companies and the wider public acceptance of the scheme. The vast majority of recent guardians, however, still decided to apply only after having been advised by other guardians in their inner or wider social and professional circles, evidence that social and professional networks play a significant role in accessing housing arrangements through PG.

Becoming a guardian in central London can be a long and highly competitive process. As early as 2010, one of the largest PG companies claimed to have received 2000 applicants in four days for 15 apartments in a central London borough (Camelot 2010). The waiting time varies widely, depending on the size of the

company and on its business model. Larger companies openly state that they do not keep waiting lists, while guardian candidates with smaller PG companies can wait for several months before being offered a property. The uncertain temporality of waiting contrasts with a demand for availability at short notice once a property becomes available, with some companies requesting candidates to attend viewings on the same day. At a viewing, prospective guardians often reported being pressured to inspect and decide whether to take a room within minutes at the risk of losing the option. Piero, a part-time text editor, freelance musician and long-term guardian in his mid-30s, described the experience of viewing a property as 'a rat race' in which candidates 'are very well aware that if [they] don't make [their] mind up very soon, other people will take the rooms'. Another guardian described how the viewing process itself acted as a filter for perspective guardians:

[the officers from the PG company] turn up really late so there's people milling around, so that when they arrive there, they're really ruthless, they go around numbering the rooms, like, this will be number 1, number 2, who wants it? Who wants it? And they'll try and fill them up really quickly [...] I've recommended a lot of friends to do it and they've been put off by that. You have to be really up for it, you have to be like, yep, cool, I want to do it. Yeah I'll pay you, yeah, I'll move in tomorrow. (Jenny, late 20s, part-time architect)

The waiting time, on-demand availability and the pressure experienced by guardians when viewing a property can be seen as an important component of the process of *becoming* a guardian. Prospective guardians have to be 'really up for it' and able to endure the 'rat race': a self-narrative that highlights difficulties while simultaneously celebrating a spirit of adaptability, alertness and readiness in an unfamiliar environment. Such expectations have become increasingly commonplace within a range of precarious workplaces (food delivery, taxi driving, warehouse logistics, etc.) and point to the internalisation of an ethos of entrepreneurship and personal responsibility within a much wider 'on-demand' economy (Malin and Chandler forthcoming).

### *Precarious work, flexible home*

The close relationship between flexibility and insecurity in housing and work-related life choices is a key recurring theme in our interviews. With regular income as a prerequisite to becoming a guardian, the majority of interviewees were in employment. For most, entering PG coincided with their move to London as young graduates or to pursue further study. As an 'affordable alternative to renting' (Ad Hoc 2015), PG has become, for many, the only viable option for moving to the capital. This was the case for Lucy, a young guardian in her mid-20s originally from the North East of England

who applied to become a guardian immediately after being accepted on a Master's course. After waiting for three months to be contacted, and with the starting date of her course approaching, she 'was getting worried because it would [have been] really difficult to pay rent at a normal London price' while living off her savings. Guardianship enabled others to remain in London and be available for work, which they needed to establish themselves professionally. As explained by Jenny:

I'm working in performance design, but it's really low pay and quite bitty, and I haven't got complete work in that, so I have a three-day-a-week job [but] I can't work more than three days and keep the theatre going, so I needed an affordable place to live so that I could only work part-time. Until theatre stuff becomes permanent, this is my only way of keeping a base in London. I could easily afford a place in [city outside London] but for some reason I feel like it might be beneficial to have a place here for London theatre work if it comes up.

Such accounts are not unusual. Several interviewees had decided to become guardians in order to work part-time, develop a practice in the creative or third sectors and still be able to live in London. According to Piero, guardians in music, and the arts especially, tended to live on 'this sort of poverty threshold where you have enough to have a decent living, and you spend enough time to do your own projects'. For some, the experience has been largely positive. In the words of Justine, a visual artist in her late 20s, living as a guardian can be 'a very good career kick-starter' in sectors that require volunteering or long periods of intermittent, low-paid and unpaid work. As explained by Eleanor (late 20s, community worker and freelance researcher), many of her fellow guardians were musicians who 'wanted flexible short-term jobs so they could stop and start, go on tour [with their band]'. The flexibility of living arrangements thus corresponded to and fed on the requirements of job mobility and flexibility. In this context, understanding PG as a positive enabler for professional careers is grounded in a widespread acceptance of job insecurity in many creative sectors and of what the founder of a Type 2 'ethical' PG company defined as a 'new, more precarious way of living'. The 'new, more precarious way of living' is narrated by guardians as simultaneously a matter of personal choice and as something systemic, evidencing a process of 'self-precarization' (Lorey 2006) for young entrants in creative and third-sector professions.

While the notion of living in an insecure home as 'a career kick-starter' reproduces the narrative of hardship followed by success and job security typical of the creative industries, other guardians were more sceptical. For Liam, a guardian in his mid-20s doing two temporary part-time admin jobs to save for an MA,

guardianship is certainly not the ideal housing situation. His resignation to it draws on a widespread feeling, among university graduates, of being trapped within cycles of *intensifying* precarisation, leading to a sense of powerlessness:

[W]e're having to work harder and live less securely, and accept the fact that there actually aren't any rights to work and nobody's particularly geared towards changing that, I guess. We're so busy all the time, it's harder to do that kind of thing.

Insecure creative career and precarious housing arrangements thus appear mutually constitutive, reinforcing each other in the manufacturing of new forms of flexible urban subjectivities, particularly in highly prized centres of higher education and professional development such as London.

### *Spatial flexibility of 'licensed living'*

...the key to being a property guardian, you've got to be so flexible in every respect. (Louise, 26, part-time charity worker)

Beyond work, flexibility 'in every respect' also includes guardians' relationship to the space and its use. The properties occupied by guardians in London are widely different, depending on the area of the city, individual borough and neighbourhoods, and on whether the property owner is private or public. The fast turnover at point of application and the possibility of losing their home in two weeks was often described as 'stressful'. Some guardians highlighted the unpredictability of available properties, which might be inconveniently located, for example too distant from places of work and study, or within badly lit and unsafe green areas, industrial estates or semi-abandoned and dilapidated council estates. A large number of guardians interviewed, however, claimed that they would consider accepting a property 'anywhere in Greater London' (Piero); for some, the unpredictability and relative lack of choice was a positive element, as it was 'interesting to see parts of London in that way', particularly those that would be otherwise inaccessible, such as affluent inner city and suburban areas (Judith, early 30s, part-time shop assistant and freelance sound engineer). Guardians' attitudes to moving frequently between different buildings, boroughs and neighbourhoods of the city at times drew on narratives of exceptionality and 'neobohehian' subjectivation (Lloyd 2004), with some even taking pride in their mobility by claiming, in the words of a former guardian, to belong to 'quite a special species in London – that can [just be] dropped in' (Clemons 2014) wherever and whenever.

Among non-residential properties, one may find guardians in former office buildings, town halls, libraries, fire stations, adult education facilities and schools, hospitals and care units, warehouses and even

an abattoir, all of which require a high degree of adaptability, particularly if the building does not possess living facilities, such as a heating system or cooking and sanitary services. While PG living was lacking in some comforts, guardians often experienced poorer living conditions in more expensive, smaller and short-term private rented accommodation. This made guardianship a better living option for the majority of interviewees. Moreover, many understood their spatial precarity as inevitable in a city like London. Widespread resignation, for some, was evidence that 'living in a big city like London produces a certain subjectivity where you're like, I'm so lucky to have somewhere to live at all' (Liam). The temporary and instrumental relationship to the city of many young graduates was also mentioned as influential in the general acceptance of the constant uprooting experienced through PG. As commented by Piero, very few expect to be able to root themselves in an area: 'London is [...] a place where few people stay for more than 10 years. So it's like a transit. People do a bit of education, career, whatever. Then you realise you've done that for a time [and] you find a place that suits your values better'.

Flexibility is also a key attribute of the relationship of guardians to the buildings as 'licensed living' is conditional on regulations and codes of behaviour set out by the licence agreement. While different companies have their own respective 'codes of conduct', there are broad similarities including the prohibition to smoke on the premises and restrictions on the use of electrical equipment such as electric heaters and toasters. When rules are breached, guardians may receive fines, lose part of the initial deposit or even have their licence immediately terminated. In the case of breaches, companies may send 'threatening' emails to all guardians in a property, which for some created 'this aura of fear where you always have to be afraid that they are going to get you, somehow, that you are going to do something that is prohibited by the licence agreement' (Piero).

Compliance with the code of conduct is usually monitored by unannounced inspections. In contrast to a tenancy agreement, a licence does not grant exclusive possession of the property. PG companies are able to access living spaces at all times. Inspections are usually marked by 'inspection cards' with notes and warnings contributing to a heightened sense of awareness among guardians. George, a freelance designer in his early 30s, explains his ambivalent feelings about finding inspection cards in his room:

That's the only slight uuuuhm thing about [PG]. It's only a little card but it does remind you [...] you never know when they are coming, so it's not like I clean especially [...] but it's just like, when my girlfriend is over, you want to make sure that the pack of condom is put away and not left out, things that might embarrass them, like dirty underwear.

Like George, most guardians expressed a general sense of acceptance about the lack of privacy in their living spaces, with some experiencing surveillance as a form of individual and collective boundary negotiation. Emma, a visual artist in her late 20s doing casual work for a catering agency, explains that inspections are marked by arbitrariness and inconsistencies. Just as guardians are fined for minor issues such as propping open a fire door in a communal area, others may not be fined at all for graver misdemeanours, and the situation 'can be very exasperating' as 'you don't know how much you can push on either boundary, you don't even know if the boundaries are there'. Others described the emergence of forms of cooperation among guardians living in the same property to alert each other about inspections and the need to hide potential breaches (Julia, mid-30s, teacher on a temporary contract).

To prevent the possibility of cooperation, some companies also rely on overt and covert surveillance by selected guardians within properties. Recently, at least two companies have formalised this role by appointing 'Head Guardians' in properties where several guardians live. One of them explained on its website that the role may involve 'tak[ing] an active part in securing the building, above-and-beyond those outlined in your induction packages. [...] Obviously, the more responsibilities you adopt, the more favourable your accommodation costs will become',<sup>5</sup> which in practice often means first choice of buildings and rooms and a discount on the monthly fee. The flexibility and adaptability demanded of guardians in their relationship to urban space as well as to the individual properties they inhabit thus combine a sense of exceptionality with a widespread resignation to precarious and low-quality accommodation, not to mention a general acceptance of work and life transience in the capital. In controlling spatial use, PG companies operate through surveillance techniques paired with an individualising distinction between deserving and undeserving guardians; a framework of punishment and rewards that echoes similar practices in precarious work relations (Carls 2007).

## Conceptualising precarious geographies of work and housing

In this paper we have argued for the need to address the spatialisation of precarity beyond questions of labour and to examine how the city has become a key laboratory for emerging geographies of flexible insecure living. More specifically, we have explored the recent growth of PG in the United Kingdom as a highly symptomatic expression of wider forms and patterns of urban precarity. At the heart of this paper is a thick description of the everyday experiences of current and former guardians that highlights the emergence of PG

as a form of low-cost housing through which multiple precarities are produced and experienced. The paper focuses, in particular, on the *spatialisation* of labour and life insecurity and the paradoxical links – most notably in London – between a guardian's geographical proximity to centres of professional development and work and the unaffordable conditions that increasingly characterise their life in the capital as many struggle on intermittent, part-time and low-paid work. Housing flexibility through PG is experienced, we argue, in terms that are mutually constitutive of the on-going casualisation of professional work, particularly in creative and third-sector organisations. The need to be available and ready to move in and out of properties is paralleled by and feeds on a similar imperative in the world of professional employment, so that the uncertainty and insecurity of entrance into the world of work becomes intimately related to housing that has the same attributes. To therefore return to Molé's (2010) definition of precarity, property guardians simultaneously bear risk for labour market entrance *and* for housing market entrance, at a point when both are increasingly characterised by insecurity.

In acknowledging the profound social, economic and legal differences between the hyper-precarious subjects discussed by Banki (2013), Lewis *et al.* (2015) and the largely middle-class university-educated cohort that principally makes use of PG schemes in London, we nonetheless argue for the need to approach the rise of property guardianship not as an exception in contemporary urban housing and labour dynamics, but as a symptom of more widespread and less visible experiences of 'precarity of place' in cities in the global North. An attention to the types of properties and the forms of inhabitation is key. Studying property guardianship sheds critical light on individual and collective practices of negotiation and adaptation that are of a piece with wider logics of urban dispossession and displacement. This is particularly the case as a large portion of the vacant buildings being secured belong to public institutions and are vacant because of entrenched processes of privatisation and sale of public sector assets, such as libraries, town halls, schools and health facilities (Whitfield 2010), and, most importantly perhaps, of council housing (Hodkinson and Essen 2015), a process exacerbated by public budget reduction measures introduced by the UK Coalition Government (2010–15) (Whitfield 2012).

If the experience of PG offers important insights into emergent precarious geographies, it does so by foregrounding the spatial significance of the *normalisation* of flexible neoliberal subjectivities where the demands and risks of the property security market and of precarious employment are internalised through forms of self-governance (Lorey 2006 2015).

Returning to Nancy Ettliger's definition of precarity as 'a condition of vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict' (2007, 320), we have examined the interconnected ways in which 'precarity of place' in the global North includes a range of conditions of vulnerability that are experienced as 'ordinary' and that inform the emergence of new precarious urban subjectivities. What is, we believe, especially remarkable and politically significant about the experience of PG is the guardians' acceptance of their multiple insecurities as an *inevitable* condition of contemporary urban life. As numerous scholars of the 'flexible' workplace have argued, the study of PG highlights the production of precarious urban subjectivities in which the acceptance of widespread precarity not only borders on resignation to the very condition of precariousness itself, but it also appears to present the requirements of flexibility and adaptability as an enabling and liberating choice (see Cockayne 2016; Gill and Pratt 2008; Neff 2012). The glamorisation of alternative forms of urban living as markers of elective marginality has led to forms of self-identification that shun ideas of victimhood in favour of imaginaries of resourcefulness and expediency under adverse circumstances. The mobilisation of the notion of *flexibility* in relation to the city, the buildings and the use of spaces themselves belongs, we argue, to the internalisation of a neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility and adaptability, particularly in times of a labour and housing 'crisis'. It is with this context ultimately in mind that we have sought to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to emerging geographical scholarship on precarity and precariousness with the aim of stimulating a wider research agenda in the study of the interrelation between new models of insecure housing, precarious life and work and the normalisation of flexibility and uncertainty as a mode of urban governance.

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## Notes

- 1 With the notable exception of Hunter and Peaker (2012) and Peaker (2012) in Law.
- 2 See sessions organised on 'Precarious Geographies' at the AAG Annual Meeting and at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in 2015.
- 3 Nearly half of interviewees had lived at one point with one of the largest for-profit PG companies.



- 4 In guardians' experiences, the degree of scrutiny about regular income varied greatly across PG companies.
- 5 Published on the 'Secure Guardians Ltd' website (2014), no longer trading as a subsidiary of Secure Foundations (Norwich) Ltd.
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