Radical difference in 'transitional commoning': hidden histories of London's squats to co-ops

**To cite this article:** Mara Ferreri (2023) Radical difference in 'transitional commoning': hidden histories of London's squats to co-ops, City, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2023.2213123

**Title:** Radical difference in 'transitional commoning': hidden histories of London's squats to co-ops

**Abstract**

The wave of organised mass squatting that started in 1969 had a profound impact on London's geographies, transforming the built environment and enacting different imaginaries and practices of home. Groups excluded from existing housing provision or seeking unconventional forms of collective dwelling turned to occupying publicly owned empty properties and setting up collectively managed homes as a form of precarious housing commons. Infrastructures of mutual support, local alliances and knowledge-sharing made possible for some of them to become formalised into 'short-life housing co-operatives' which provided affordable community-led housing for tens of thousands of individuals. Drawing on archival research and in-depth interviews, in this article I take a critical historical perspective to revisit the little-known case of squats that became short-life co-ops in London. I outline how squats and co-ops enabled and responded to the emergence of plural needs and desires at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression and struggles for women, gay and lesbian and Black liberation, and introduce the need for a research agenda on radical difference in processes 'transitional commoning'.

Keywords: short-life co-operatives, intersectionality, transitional commoning, housing commons, squatting

**Introduction**

Approaching housing justice through the lens of urban commons can enable a rethinking of demands and alternatives proposed and enacted by social movements. An approach centred on praxis – or commoning – above pre-established blueprints opens the possibility for a reformulation of both social reproductive 'needs' and the collective, plural and de-commodified means to fulfil them (DeAngelis 2019). Concerning urban dwelling practices, this means challenging facile definitions of housing 'needs' as mere shelter to embrace more plural dimensions of housing and home as desired, imagined, created, and maintained. Prefigurative forms of non-normative and unlawful inhabitation that emerge from collective needs and desires have been shown to often break new ground and be profoundly generative of urban spaces of possibility (Vasudevan 2011, 2015; Lancione 2020). Attuning to these generative dimensions requires an approach that is both critical of established narratives and open to the often silenced or marginalised intersecting dimensions of negotiated use, occupation and the making inhabitable of urban spaces. The relationship between squatting and processes of collective subjectivation, I argue, are key to gain a deeper understanding of the emergence of housing commons in their potential to embody radically different ways of inhabiting the city.

In this article, I develop this argument by engaging with a minor yet profoundly transformative moment in the overlapping trajectories of the squatting and co-operative housing movements in 1970s London. During that decade, across major cities in the UK housing cooperatives had a rare window of opportunity when "community activists established themselves as credible political actors and forged a closer relationship with local councils, gained access to material resources, information and political networks" (Ellis 2017, 56; see also Arbell, Middlemiss, and Chatterton 2020). This rare window was often quite literally opened by organised squatters reclaiming vacant properties in alliance with neighbourhood and city-wide gay and lesbian,[1] feminist and anti-racist organising. My aim here is to offer glimpses of the complex interrelation between collective non-normative dwelling, including squatting, and short-life co-operatives as instances of housing commons. To address the complex histories of the transition from squats to co-ops, I combine interdisciplinary literature on housing co-operative and on urban squatting, arguing for a more nuanced definition of the geographies of housing commons not as a concrete, pre-defined typology, but rather as a bundle of processes that reclaimed, materially and symbolically, dwelling spaces. Exploring the varied legal, material

[1] Here and elsewhere in the article I deliberately use the phrase 'gay and lesbian', instead of the more inclusive LGBTQ+, to remain close to the historical movement sources of the 1970s and early 1980s.

and governance forms engendered by processes of differential commoning (Noterman 2016), I build upon critical geographical approaches to the commons as "a *generative spacing* that is not simply reducible to but that variously precedes, responds to, and exceeds processes of enclosure" (Jeffrey, McFarlane, and Vasudevan 2012, 1257). Keeping the dialectic of enclosure-commons in tension, and seeing it as generative, requires identifying how such dialectic can produce specific materialities, spatialities, and, importantly, subjectivities.

To understand this generative potential, in my research I embarked upon a process of questioning undifferentiated understandings of 'housing needs' in the transition from squats to co-ops. While material considerations around lack of affordable, salubrious and secure housing are central to housing justice mobilisations, the relationship between squatting and urban commons can be theorised to exceed, performatively and collectively, demands and forms based on existing relations, towards novel modes of self-organisation and identity making (Martinez and Polanska 2020). Alongside understanding material conditions for the transition towards short-term co-ops, I have drawn upon feminist and decolonial approaches to examine self-representations and first-person accounts, as well as gaps and hidden connections. Insights into plural rationales and imaginaries were assembled through heterogeneous sources: published materials, from books to pamphlets and broadsheets from archives of the London squatting movement and of the housing co-operative sector; video and audio documentary materials about housing co-operatives; and original interviews – undertaken in person and online between 2017 and 2019 - with former local authority officers, co-op members and activists involved with housing co-operatives with direct or indirect roots in squatting in the 1970s and 1980s.[2] In this article, I focus the attention on processes of radical difference that informed the 'transitional commoning' (Caffentzis and Federici 2014) of short-life co-operatives, through an attention to gender and sexual identification, class and anti-racist demands and rationales, situated in neighbourhood and borough-wide dynamics. This analytical choice enables appreciating the multiple enclosures that squatters and co-operators struggled against and through, and to understand the powerful articulations of different imaginaries and practices of alternative urban dwelling.

[2] Data about the histories of short-life housing co-ops is fragmented and often difficult to obtain, and much of archival materials are still analogic. The research underpinning this paper could not engage with such a rich topic in an exhaustive way, so this account is inevitably partial. The archives consulted include: The Advisory Services for Squatters' collection at the Bishopsgate Institute, MayDay Rooms and 56a Infoshop in London. Further research on this subject could fruitfully engage with local authority archives, especially records of local government debates on housing policy, as well as with housing-specific collections within archives of political movements, such as the George Padmore Institute and the Feminist Library.

**Commoning through squatting**

The commons designate collective social practices of self-management of a non-commodified resource (Federici & Caffentzis 2013), grounded in a plurality that claims use values and "governs its production and reproduction, its sustainability and development" (DeAngelis 2019, 30). Organised squatting, as the act of reclaiming vacant land or property as spaces for living, has been seen as the prefigurative basis for the emergence of powerful urban commons (Bieri 2002; Huron 2018; Stavrides 2016; Varvarousis, Asara, and Akbulut 2021). Reflecting on specifically *urban* barriers to commoning, geographer Amanda Huron has described cities as 'saturated' by a concentration of control by capital and state institutions, but also by an intensification of competing and diverse claims to place and to use (Huron 2015). In consequence, urban commons must be 'wrenched' and 'carved out' from city landscapes: performatively brought into being through symbolic and material action that challenges and reimagines the city (Vasudevan 2011). Residential occupations through squatting have particularly been understood as performing and establishing precarious housing commons (García-Lamarca 2015), which often exist alongside organising for longer-term community-led initiatives.

Moments of urban crisis can momentarily challenge or suspend state and capital power relations and institutions and offer fertile grounds for experimentation. The inhabitation of vacant spaces can become 'edges' from which wider urban tensions and dynamics can be diagnosed (Ferreri and Vasudevan 2019; O'Callaghan and Di Feliciantonio 2021). Their reclaiming through temporary occupations have often intertwined with other political organising at the roots of collective and partially decommodified forms of housing provision (Huron 2018; Starecheski 2016). Organised mass squatting of land and property, for example, has responded to crisis of housing availability and affordability, but has also, importantly, offered spaces for experimentation with novel radical possibilities for dwelling which are deeply etched in the history of many European cities, for instance in Vienna after WWI, in the UK and Germany after WWII (Watson 2017; Vasudevan 2015), or in Spain after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (Gonick 2016; Di Feliciantonio 2016).

Social movement studies' frameworks have classically analysed squatting in relation to 'protest cycles' and broader political contexts, at times reducing the legacy of these practices to a binary between eviction and repression, on the one hand, or institutionalisation through formalisation, legalisation or co-option, on the other (Pruijt 2003). Institutionalisation processes across Europe have in many cases involved temporary arrangements, for example the *Zwischennutzungsvertrag* (temporary-use contracts) in the late 1980s Switzerland (Bieri 2002); 'rehab squatting', or *Instandbesetzung*, in Berlin; and other forms of temporary legalisation in

Italy (Mudu and Rossini 2018) and France (Aguilera 2018). Debates on the multi-faceted question of the interface between radicalisation, institutionalisation and co-option have raised important questions about the possibility for autonomy from the market and from state institutions (Balmer and Bernet 2015), and some institutionalisations, such as Berlin's *Instandbesetzung*, have been taken as examples of the dampening of a previously radical movement (Holm and Kuhn 2011; Rossini, azozomox, and Debelle 2017).

More recently, different interpretation of the somewhat classical trajectory from radicalisation to co-option has been put forward to maintain open the possibility that some core elements of squatting's radical transformative politics may resist integration and maintain degrees of autonomy even in processes of formalisation and institutionalisation (Martínez 2014; Martínez 2020). In fact, radical challenges to established models and political imaginaries of housing provision has informed both historical (Birchall 1991) and contemporary scholarship (Thompson 2020; Fitzpatrick 2018) that has striven to recover and value the radical, 'hidden histories' of many alternative housing movements. In understanding London's squats to co-ops as a process of commons formation I build on and extend such approaches. Rather than evaluating the fulfilment of their radical potential in the long-term, in my approach I want to place emphasis on the moment of emergence as a practice of differential inhabitation: a carving out of commons as a complex, fraught process, through which transformative visions of urban living become embodied. As will be explained in the following sections, squatting brought a fundamental critique of existing housing provision through the promotion of self-management and dwellers' control, but also enabled a fluidity of uses and organising which demands an expanded understanding of this praxis beyond preconceived binaries separating 'needs-driven' and 'political' squatting (Milligan 2016). In the collective reclaiming of vacant properties, both squats and short-life co-ops became sites of experimentation with radically different inhabitation, which seeded a profound transformation within and beyond the co-operative housing movement.

**From squats to co-ops: the birth of 'short-life' in London**

Short-life co-operative housing emerged alongside and in direct relationship to the wave of mass squatting that began in London in 1969. 'Short-life' indicated the temporariness of ad hoc arrangements for the management of vacant properties, often the result of direct action and negotiations; over time, however, the term became a misnomer, with many precarious arrangements extending for decades (Ferreri and Vasudevan 2019). For pragmatic reasons, squatting at the time concentrated on publicly owned vacant properties, particularly but not

solely in inner London boroughs (Kearns 1979)**.** While examples of short-life licensing preceded negotiations through squatting (Bowman 2004), according to Ron Bailey's *The Squatters* (1973), short-life licensing was a direct result of politically organised squatting, engaging with media campaigning for housing rights, negotiating with local and city authorities, alongside offering practical and legal advice through groups such as the Squatters' Union and the Family Squatters Advisory Services (Vasudevan 2017). The co-operative form taken by many of these licences were therefore also a direct result of the assembly-based movements that gave rise to the negotiations in the first place. Beyond a formalised recognition of access to housing as individuals, granted through the licences, such negotiations led to reclaiming collective forms of self-governance and living together, often interlinked with practices of DIY and self-help refurbishment.

Commoning and the search for autonomy often entail dynamic processes of struggle and negotiation with existing urban powers (Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer 2010). In this case, interaction with state institutions was central to short-life 'licensed squatting' from the very beginning through arguments and demands for the mobilisation of publicly-owned vacant properties. For short-life user groups – or S.L.U.G.s, as they humorously self-identified - local governments and public ownership were the framework within which autonomy was negotiated, and new flexible institutions were created.[3] Scholarship about short-life housing co-operatives after the initial moment of emergence in 1969 to the mid 1970s is scarce and highly fragmented. According to Anne Bowman's estimates, in the 1980s at least 12 boroughs (out of a total of 33 in Greater London) had over 250 local authority properties (each) on short-life licences, most of these in inner city boroughs: Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Newham, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Camden, Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham.[4] The difficulty in ascertaining the exact number of short-life housing co-operatives derives from the fact that most were not directly registered, but made use of secondary co-operatives, or even housing associations, as umbrella organisations. Moreover, many were small, generally consisting of a large house or a few dwellings clustered in the same road or neighbourhood, often relating to local street or neighbourhood struggles. Despite the name, some co-operatives started as 'short-life' became an interim phase towards permanent co-

[3] The political intricacies of such negotiations are beyond the scope of this article, as I discuss in more detail in another paper titled "Housing movements, commons and 'precarious institutionalization'"(under review).

[4] Other boroughs with between 25 and 250 properties were: Croydon, Greenwich, Redbridge, Enfield, Barnet, Ealing, Hillingdon and Hounslow. In Bowman's estimates, around 15,000 residents were still living in short-life housing cooperatives in 1986, and still 10,000 approx. in the early 2000s (Bowman 2004, 262).

operative or social rented housing; for some, the agreements with the property owners remained a precarious and insecure form of housing and were rapidly revoked in the 1990s and 2000s as the city became more gentrified (Ferreri and Vasudevan 2019); for others, it was the basis for a longer-term and resilient decommodification and self-management, as they became established fully mutual co-ops.

Housing 'need' was identified by commentators at the time as the key reason for the rise of squatting, and, relatedly, of negotiations for short-life co-operative housing. One interpretation for the causes of such need was that the housing system in the capital was becoming polarised as 'a duopoly' (Rose 1977, 59) between municipal (council) housing at regulated social rent and home-ownership, while the private rented sector had been steadily declining since the 1950s, reaching its lowest peak of 16.9% of London's total housing stock in 1981.[5] The individuals and families engaged in squatting, and later in negotiations for short-life co-operative housing, were mostly low-income individuals and families who could not gain access to secure housing through rental or home-ownership, and yet did not have statutory rights or had low priority on housing waiting lists for council housing allocation. A survey conducted by the UK Department of the Environment in the early 1970s, found that squatters were mostly young families (54% with minors) and single people who were excluded from public housing and homeownership; 59% of surveyed squatters simply "couldn't find anywhere at a rent they could afford".[6] While largely in line with debates at the time, this reading remains blunt and without nuance. Short-life was not simply a form of legalised squatting which provided affordable housing to those excluded by the existing system: it was one in which the centrality of dwellers and their ability to control their homes was key.

**Dwellers' control**

Dweller-controlled affordable housing has long been an item of campaigning since the historical tenants organising in the first decades of the 20th Century (see Grey 2018), which was grounded in a bottom-up critique of the paternalistic approach of philanthropic social housing and oppressive private rented landlordism. Public housing in its dominant format of council-owned and council-managed properties was often not a demand of housing campaigners but rather a pragmatic compromise, where control remained strongly in the institutional public sector. Yet the demand for self-management and autonomy can be as important, if not more,

[5] GLA, Annual trend in household tenure dataset.

[6] Department of the Environment Survey 1975 Squatters' Survey, cited 'Squatters - Myth & Fact. A Summary of Surveys on Squatters' by the Self Help Housing Research Library. 1977.

than a response to 'housing need'. As noted by Huron writing about the motivation at the origins of tenants organising for Limited Equity Housing Co-ops in Washington, "very little housing that is truly affordable is also controlled by its occupants" (Huron 2015, 972). Dwellers' control marks a crucial difference between state-led and community-led low income housing, and it is a key component in the definition of housing commons. In a context where mass public housing for rental existed, and was historically at its all-time peak, reaching nearly half of all housing stock in some London boroughs, the negotiations for short-life co-operatives did not emerge solely from material need for shelter, but also alongside more radical demands for autonomy, community control and decision-making about dwelling (Ward 1990).

The idea of resident self-management that took root with the squatting to short-life co-operative transition was, in many ways, different from anything that pre-existed and became generative of a radical rethinking of alternative housing forms. For one, the tenants-led co-operative format had virtually no prior examples nationally. According to Jonathan Birchall's *The Hidden History of Co-Operative Housing in Britain*, only 3 registered housing co-operatives existed in the UK by late 1960s, and all those followed a common ownership model imported from Scandinavian examples (Birchall 1991). The unprecedented growth of tenant-led co-operative housing was, in fact, noted by many accounts of the time as a profound innovation. In a 1977 article by the Education Officer of the Co-operative Housing Agency, for instance, it was noted that of the 14 mutual housing co-operatives that existed in Britain, 11 had been founded in that decade, and another "67 co-operative development groups" were registered with the Agency (Rose 1977, 57). In my own conservative estimates, at least 25 housing co-operatives in London originated directly from squatting; at least 6 out of 36 organisations were established in the 1970s (Building and Social Housing Foundation 2015).

Such a growth can be explained, in part, by politicised local authority governments, but also by the important shift marked by the election of the Labour Party in 1974, and the emergence of ideas of devolved management and transfer of housing ownership, which had been developed by the Co-operative Party. The commissioning of the Campbell Report on ways to promote co-operative mechanisms in housing paved the way for increased recognition of tenants' management options in publicly owned rental housing and led to a series of amendments to the 1975 Rent and Subsidies Act, which enabled co-ops to become beneficiaries of the grants and loans offered through the 1974 Housing Act (Fitzpatrick 2018, 18). Specifically, this included the mini-Housing Allocation Grant (or 'mini-HAGs'), which made it possible for many small co-operatives to receive funding for refurbishment (Williams 1990). Recognition through this inclusion had several important consequences, the most significant of which was that 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 2020, 72). This intersected with a moment of high politicisation of both housing need and urban vacancy and to a mass housing movement that made co-operative housing a reality for thousands of former squatters and tenants, particularly for low-income groups who did not have the economic capital to purchase or build cooperative homes in London (Fitzpatrick 2018).

Stopping at the notion of dwellers' control in the abstract, however, risks reproducing ideas of a homogeneous and unmarked political subject, and of presenting a reductive view of the plurality of dwelling experiences, needs and desires which informed the historical conjuncture. The emphasis placed by commons literature on prefiguration through use, and on commoning as a process that both transforms and is transformative of spaces and subjects, can help refocusing attention on dwellers as plural, diverse and dynamic subjects, traversed by intersecting axes of oppression and identification, and engaged in deeply transformative world-making through radically different forms of inhabitation. In this vein, a more nuanced and intersectional approach enables understanding how the emergence of housing self-organisation in the form of short-life cooperatives is rooted in a much more complex picture of differential individual and collective housing needs and desires that shaped their commons formation.

**Making space for non-family households: lesbian and gay experiences**

Priority housing allocation played a role in setting the conditions for the emergence of such precarious commons, but so did discrimination against non-normative models of house sharing. While families had priority in processes of rehousing in public housing for rent, single individuals and non-orthodox or non-heteronormative families did not. Gay and lesbian communities and women's only groups who had experienced homophobia and discrimination were important actors in the negotiations towards short-life co-operatives, and even long-term ones. During the 1970s and 1980s, for these social groups squatting and negotiations for short-life co-operatives became ways to create and sustain low or no-cost collective housing for self-organisation and lifestyle experimentation. Well-known examples include the famous 12 houses squatted in 1974 on Mayall Road and Railton by the South London Gay Liberation Front and linked to the South London Gay Community Centre at 78 Railton Road, in Brixton. Some of these properties eventually became part of the Brixton Housing Co-operative, which still manages 80 properties in the borough (Brixton Housing Cooperative 2022; Cook 2013).

A lesser known, yet important example is Abeona Housing Co-operative in Camden, a street of dilapidated Victorian houses (48 units) that were squatted for collective living in 1974. The squatters, many of whom had close ties both with the gay and the theatre communities, particularly around the Oval Theatre in South London (Potrony 2015; Unfinished Histories n-d).

In 1975, the squatters had negotiated a short-term licence, and finally obtained a government grant to purchase and refurbish the buildings in the early 1980s, becoming a fully mutual, common-owned and tenants-managed co-operative still in existence today. The argument for receiving the grant was laid out in an official proposal. As recounted by a member:

> "We could say: this is significantly less than most people earn and how are we going to ever buy a property? Now we're single people, we're gay, we're lesbian, we're heterosexual but we're single. What are you going to do about it? […] The deal was: give us the money, we won't sell you out, we will put people in here who are refugees, who are low-income earners, we will not buy [the properties], we will not sell them and profit from them, because we can't". (Group interview with Abeona co-op members, 2018)

As in many other cases, Abeona's squatting origins involved communal housing, where a new understanding of non-family domesticity, involving gay and straight people, living communally as 'non-families' was being forged: "there was a need for changing the world and that's why gay people, straight people, all this, because it was about non-families […] all these things were fundamental to create a glue for the group to be able to think this is more than us, this is about the new society" (Group interview with Abeona co-op members, 2018).

Networks of mutual aid expanded understandings of kinship and care. The self-managed structure and the strong political ties with gay men organising, for instance, led to Abeona being one of the first places, during the 1980s AIDS epidemic, to pioneer 'care in the community' housing for terminally ill HIV patients, in a push for extending understandings of 'housing' to include care practices:

> "we would push boundaries further than other people. We went to see the Housing Corporation and said, there's a crisis developing around HIV. We want to be able to provide housing for people with HIV, and the guy was scared at what we had suggested, and he said, we couldn't possibly do that, we'd have to change our royal charter to be able to find housing for people with medical problems and homosexuals, and we thought, alright, what's he talking about? A year later people were coming to us to ask us advice about [it]" (Group interview with Abeona co-op members, 2018).

Returning to the proposition of commons as models for collective, plural and de-commodified forms of addressing reproduction needs, the example of Abeona clearly shows a significant experiment at the intersection of housing and care.

Another notable experimentation with non-family households was the experience of single women, of various sexual orientations, who sought liberation from patriarchal domesticity by organising their housing through the women's liberation movements in the city: "women-only houses began to appear in established areas of squats across London, to the north

in the boroughs of Camden and Islington, to the east in Hackney and Tower Hamlets, to the west in Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea and in the south in Lambeth and Southwark" (Wall 2017, 83). In Hackney, for instance, the Broadway Market Squatters Association was at the origin of three separate housing co-operatives, one of which, the London Fields Housing Co-op (1978), was composed mainly of women-only households and managed 17 properties (Wall 2017, 92). As argued by Wall, the squats "delineated a spatial framework for the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, providing for women's centres, refuges from domestic violence, workplaces, and nurseries as well as homes" (Wall 2017, 92) and were key to the struggle of securing low cost, safe homes for young lesbian and heterosexual single women, some with children, "who were not provided for in standard council accommodation designed around the nuclear family" (Wall 2017, 92).

While literature on these practices remains limited, anecdotal and archival evidence indicates that women-only communal flats were not uncommon, even within co-ops that were not explicitly feminist or women only, such as the already mentioned Abeona (Potrony 2015). Both squats and co-ops also served as important nodes within much broader globally mobile networks of women separatist and lesbian feminist communities, well into the 1980s (Jennings 2022). A more translocal and relational approach could therefore complement city and neighbourhood-based case studies, towards a global relational understanding of the geographies of feminist and LGBTQ+ radical inhabitation and the challenges they posed and pose – theoretically and practically – to heteropatriarchal understandings of home and care.

**Anti-racist and Black liberation roots of squats to co-ops**

The incorporation of differential individual and collective housing needs and desires requires engaging with colonial and postcolonial dynamics in housing movements and their intersections with wider social and political struggles, including anti-racist organising. With few exceptions, official narratives about the history of both squatting and co-operative housing from the 1970s and 1980s tend to present a rather homogeneous picture when it comes to race and migration status. Political categories such as class are given greater prominence, while other experiences remain relegated to oral histories or ephemera in subject-specific archives. Responding to calls to decolonise the institutions, formats and approaches of urban scholarship requires engaging with the politics of representation and visibility, and the 'continued whiteness' of post-colonising heartlands such as London (Noxolo 2017). It requires a firm commitment to read archives and historical against the grain not simply to incorporate 'minority histories' into the squatting and housing co-operative canon, but also to acknowledge the

marginalisation of "life-worlds subordinated by the 'major' narratives of the dominant institutions" (Chakrabarty 2007, 101) and, it may be added, of housing justice.

Approaching the question of the transition from squats to co-ops through a postcolonial lens means bringing attention to racist discrimination and migration patterns, and to the still little-known history that interlaces housing and anti-racist struggles in the liberation roots of many collectively managed housing in the city. Despite the scarce literature on the topic, Black, Asian and other minority ethnic people, both British and recent migrants and refugees were significant protagonists in the transition from mass squatting to short-life and long-life co-operatives. Not only were their organising efforts crucial to neighbourhood-based housing politics; their efforts also led to the establishment of long-term anti-racist community-led housing organisations. As was noted in the late 1980s, those groups "would have not necessarily chosen to take this route but have been successful in using temporary housing as a stepping stone to becoming established organisations receiving official recognition and support" (Williams 1990, 11).

A well-known example was the case of the Bengali community in London's East End. By the mid-seventies, overcrowding and the dilapidated conditions of private housing stock in the area combined with prejudice in council housing allocations and widespread racism. As explained by a former Greater London Council (GLC) housing surveyor who worked in the area in the early 1980s: "Back then the council officers were overtly racist and would segregate Bengali families. And of course, the East End was the heartland of the racist right, a lot of direct action by the BNP, nasty stuff. It was a real, complicated, sometimes physical battle." (Interview with a former GLC housing surveyor, 2018). The response was self-organisation and direct action, as "[m]any Bengali families who were allocated council housing on white estates returned to Spitalfields preferring to face the extreme discomfort of a squat to the constant danger of racist attack" (Glynn 2005, 536). From this street-based housing organising and squatting emerged the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) in Tower Hamlets. BHAG organisers, with the support of the Tower Hamlets' Squatters Union and members of the *Race Today* magazine collective, squatted several vacant blocks in the early to mid-1970s. In 1976, as part of the controversial Conservatives GLC's 'amnesty on squatters', the group was offered tenancies and established the first Bengali community-led housing in the country (East London Big Flame project n.d.), which was the basis for the Spitalfields Housing Association, still the largest Bengali Housing Association in the UK (Begum 2021).

Squatting and housing organising against racism and discrimination were also key to less known African and Afro-Caribbean/West Indian liberation struggles and led to the establishment of several housing co-operatives, such as the Pan African Housing Co-op in Camden, Brockley

Tenants Co-ops in Brockley and, in part, the already mentioned Brixton Housing co-op, in Lambeth. Traces of these radical housing organising are to be found in archives and oral histories about famous groups such as the British Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Front, but also lesser known such as the Black Feminist collective Brixton Black Women's Group (1974-1990 c.ca). As explained in this written recollection by the group's members:

> "Something else that [Black] women were involved in at the time [mid 1970s] was the whole move in Brixton and other parts of the country on the question of housing and the demand for empty houses to be given over to local people to be renovated. At the time a squatters' movement was developing and one of our sisters who is dead now, a woman called Olive Morris, was involved in that. […] Our demand was that there are empty houses; we have a right to them as Black Folks; we're going to take them." (Brixton Black Women's Group 1990)

The picture of Morris, a young West Indian woman member of the British Black Panthers and founder of the Brixton Black Women's Group, climbing onto the roof of 121 Railton Road squat during one of the attempted evictions became the cover of the sixth edition (1979) of the Advisory Service for Squatters' *Squatters Handbook* [figure 1]. Despite living "side by side" and "having cordial relations, Black and White squatters did not organise themselves together" (Remember Olive Morris project 2007). There would be sharing of practical know-how (gas, electricity), but not much co-organising, with implications for how the story was later told: "[t]he absence of joint activity might explain why in most accounts of the Brixton squatting movement written in later years, there are no references to the early Black squats of the 70s." (Elizabeth Obi, quoted in the Remember Olive Morris Project 2007).

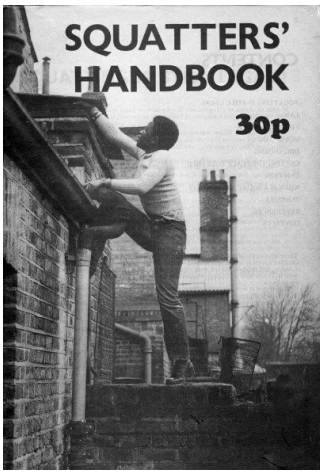


Figure 1: Cover of the Squatters Handbook (1979) with a picture of Olive Morris resquatting 121 Railton Road after an eviction attempt. Source: Sam Burgum.

The struggle for safe, community-controlled and affordable housing was also an important component of reclaiming space by the Black Liberation Front (1971-1993), alongside the establishment of schools and community bookshops. As recounted in a published oral history interview with Black politician and former Black Liberation Front's member Ansel Wong:

> "We were one of the leading people squatting in short-life property. So we would have a group of people who would go and occupy short-life property, who drew on expertise within our community, the plumbers, the carpenters and so on, coming to our flat and putting the young people there." (quoted in Waters 2016).

Squatting and then negotiating for short-life housing became the entry point to the set up the housing organisation 'Black Roof', which later became the first and largest Black and Minority Ethnic housing association, UJIMA (Swahili for 'working together'). As written by another BLF member, Tony Soares: "[w]hen, along with some black housing workers, I started UJIMA in the summer of 1977, we were housing almost exclusively homeless black youth from the inner cities who had been thrown out by their strict first-generation immigrant parents" (Soares 2012). By 1987, the organisation housed around 4,000 people in about 800 shared short-life properties and 28 hostels (Soares 2012). By the mid-1990s, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) housing associations "had sprung up across England, catering for the needs of diverse communities including African-Caribbean, Vietnamese, Chinese and Asian" (Murray 2010). Of the over 50 black-led housing associations, UJIMA was the largest, until its demise, followed shortly after by the demise of the Federation of Black Housing Organisations, in the late 2000s (Beider 2012). The examples briefly discussed above indicate a close relationship between squatting, short-life housing, and wider organising against racist discrimination and for greater autonomy for differential 'needs' beyond simply affordability and shelter, intersecting, axes of identity, such as gender, age, and migration. But for a few exceptions (see Hendrickson and Fernández Arrigoitia 2022), these histories remain largely untold in dominant UK squatting and housing historiography, indicating the need for further research to decolonise urban scholarship about an important and complex chapter in the history not just of housing organising, but also of community-led experiences that brought anti-racist sensitivities to housing policy and management, across and beyond specific housing typologies.

**Conclusions: radical difference in transitional housing commoning**

Short-life co-ops in London emerged from a range of collective urban practices and struggles that radically re-imagined housing and urban 'needs'. They were the direct and indirect result of a politicised coordination of squatters and other housing movements and allies with an

interest to experiment with collective self-organisation and life; yet their generative strength derived from broader and well-organised social movements, across and beyond housing struggles, and to a conducive institutional framework. As a 'typology' for housing commoning, short-life co-ops sit somewhere between squatting and decommodified and self-managed model of permanent fully mutual housing cooperatives. Their significance, however, extends beyond the establishment of a housing commons model, and can only be fully grasped by maintaining a more fluid approach to the generative process through which intersecting needs, desires and imaginaries found a prefigurative opening into immanent practices of inhabitation.

Bringing a feminist and decolonial approach to analysing oral interviews and archival sources, in this article I begin to outline a framework for researching historical intersections of housing struggles and wider place-based organising for more autonomous, collectively and radically diverse urban living. Although short-life co-ops may be considered mere 'transitional commons' (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), they enabled space for those seeking non-normative and communal reformulations of urban living, and ultimately played a significant role in and, in some cases set important precedents for, the establishment of community-led housing for low-income groups, alongside other examples within an emerging body of collaborative housing scholarship (Thompson 2020; Czischke, Carriou, and Lang 2020). Resisting path-dependent and place-specific processes of discrimination, racialisation, capital accumulation and erasure of difference, they remained precarious nodes in wider networks of commoning the city, and beyond, both materially and at the level of the imaginary. Their experiences emerged also from a critique of a model of public housing provision and an immanent experiment in a radically different form of home-making, which responded more closely to the varied 'needs' and desires that emerged at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression and struggles for liberation.

The powerful roots of some of London's short-life in gay and lesbian, feminist and Black liberation organising remain a woefully underexplored area of investigation within urban and housing debates. Approaching the fluid emergence of housing commons in an intersectional vein is a necessary first step to begin recuperating the often hidden and unwritten histories of urban mobilisations at the intersection of housing affordability, race, migration, gender and sexuality. As referenced in this article, many oral history and documentary projects are beginning to contribute to this task. Beyond recovering individual stories, however, a much broader relational, and global, approach is needed to piece together the ways in which the squat to co-op shift enacted a precarious crystallisation, through housing, of wider urban experiments and organising for collective liberation, capable of rethinking gender roles, relationships, sexuality, decolonial struggles, intergenerational politics and community care. Understanding housing politics as "one node articulated into a broader ecology of urban commoning" (Joubert

and Hodkinson 2018; see also Martinez and Polanska 2020) opens the possibility for further, more in-depth research into building collective power against structural discrimination and the foreclosure of more plural praxis of urban inhabitation. Combining feminist, queer and anti-racist lenses to commons transitions enables appreciating the powerful articulations of visions of dwelling that eschew normative definitions, supporting efforts towards imagining and reclaiming space for radical difference in cities, beyond transitional forms.

Acknowledgements
This article is a revised version of the paper 'The long legacy of short-life co-ops in London', presented at the session 'Critical Geographies of Occupation, Squatting and Trespass (1): Shelter, Housing, Home', RGS-IBG Annual Conference 2019. A prior version of this paper was presented to an audience of activists and housing organisers on 28th March 2018 as part of 'The Politics of Organised Squatting' research programme at MayDay Rooms, London. My profound thanks to all research participants and to those who contributed to this work through comments and questions.

Funding
The research presented in this paper was made possible thanks to the support of UAB's P-Sphere COFUND programme, part of the Horizon 2020 Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions programme, grant n. 66591). The writing up was supported through the 'Inhabiting Radical Housing' ERC Starting Grant project, n. 851940.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References**

Aguilera, Thomas. 2018. 'The Squatting Movement (s) in Paris: Internal Divides and Conditions for Survival'. In *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements*, 121–44. Springer.

Arbell, Yael, Lucie Middlemiss, and Paul Chatterton. 2020. 'Contested Subjectivities in a UK Housing Cooperative: Old Hippies and Thatcher's Children Negotiating the Commons'. *Geoforum* 110: 58–66.

Balmer, Ivo, and Tobias Bernet. 2015. 'Housing as a Common Resource? Decommodication and Self-Organization in Housing – Examples from Germany and Switzerland'. In *Urban Commons: Moving beyond State and Market*, by Mary Dellenbaugh, Markus Kip, Majken Bieniok, Agnes Katharina Müller, and Martin Schwegmann, 178–95. Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser.

Begum, Shabna. 2021. 'A Struggle of Memory: The History of the Bengali Squatters Movement'. The Runnymede Trust. 19 March 2021. https://www.runnymedetrust.org//blog/a-struggle-of-memory-the-history-of-the-bengali-squatters-movement.

Beider, Harris. 2012. 'Back to the Future? Race, Housing and a Changing Society'. *The Guardian*, 19 April 2012, sec. Housing Network. https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2012/apr/19/race-and-bme-social-housing.

Bieri, Sabin. 2002. 'Contested Places: Squatting and the Construction of 'the Urban' in Swiss Cities'. *GeoJournal* 58 (2): 207–15.

Birchall, J. 1991. 'The Hidden History of Co-Operative Housing in Britain'. Working Paper. Brunel University. http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/5669.

Böhm, Steffen, Ana C. Dinerstein, and André Spicer. 2010. '(Im)Possibilities of Autonomy: Social Movements in and beyond Capital, the State and Development'. *Social Movement Studies* 9 (1): 17–32.

Bowman, Anna. 2004. 'Interim Spaces : Reshaping London : The Role of Short Life Property, 1970 to 2000'. PhD Thesis. University of Bristol.
Brixton Black Women's Group. 1990. 'Talking Personal, Talking Political'. *Trouble & Strife*, 1990.
Brixton Housing Cooperative (2022) 'Welcome'. Accessed 20 September 2022. http://www.brixtonhousing.coop/welcome
Caffentzis, George, and Silvia Federici. 2014. 'Commons against and beyond Capitalism'. *Community Development Journal* 49 (suppl_1): i92–105.
Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2007. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton Studies in Culture / Power / History. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton university press.
Czischke, Darinka, Claire Carriou, and Richard Lang. 2020. 'Collaborative Housing in Europe: Conceptualizing the Field'. *Housing, Theory and Society* 37 (1): 1–9.
Cook, M. 2013. '"Gay Times": Identity, Locality, Memory, and the Brixton Squats in 1970's London'. *Twentieth Century British History* 24 (1): 84–109.
Di Feliciantonio, Cesare. 2016. 'Social Movements and Alternative Housing Models: Practicing the "Politics of Possibilities" in Spain'. *Housing, Theory and Society* 34 (1): 38-56.
East London Big Flame project. n.d. 'BHAG and Stephen & Matilda - BHAG and Stephen & Matilda.Pdf'. Accessed 20 September 2017. http://www.eastlondonbigflame.org.uk
Ellis, D. 2017. '"On Taking (Back) Control: Lessons from Community Action in 1970s Britain"'. *Renewal* 25: 53–61.
Ferreri, Mara, Gloria Dawson, and Alex Vasudevan. 2017. 'Living Precariously: Property Guardianship and the Flexible City'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2): 246–59.
Ferreri, Mara, and Alexander Vasudevan. 2019. 'Vacancy at the Edges of the Precarious City'. *Geoforum* 101: 165-173.
Fitzpatrick, Daniel Madav. 2018. 'Governance of Mutual Housing in London'. PhD Thesis. University College London.
Glynn, S. 2005. 'East End Immigrants and the Battle for Housing: A Comparative Study of Political Mobilisation in the Jewish and Bengali Communities'. *Journal of Historical Geography* 31 (3): 528–45.
Gonick, Sophie. 2016. 'From Occupation to Recuperation: Property, Politics and Provincialization in Contemporary Madrid'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40 (4): 833–48.
Hendrickson, C. and M. Fernández Arrigoitia (2022) Community-Led housing in the UK: Learning from Black British and migrant histories. *Radical Housing Journal*, 4(2), pp. 183-191
Holm, Andrej, and Armin Kuhn. 2011. 'Squatting and Urban Renewal: The Interaction of Squatter Movements and Strategies of Urban Restructuring in Berlin'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (3): 644–58.
Huron, Amanda. 2015. 'Working with Strangers in Saturated Space: Reclaiming and Maintaining the Urban Commons'. *Antipode* 47 (4): 963–79.
———. 2018. *Carving Out the Commons. Tenant Organising and Housing Cooperatives in Washington, D.C.* Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
Jeffrey, Alex, Colin McFarlane, and Alex Vasudevan. 2012. 'Rethinking Enclosure: Space, Subjectivity and the Commons'. *Antipode* 44 (4): 1247–67.
Jennings, Rebecca. 2022. '"A Meeting of Different Tribes"? Travelling Women and Mobility between European and Australasian Women's Lands'. *Women's History Review* 31 (1): 88–106.
Joubert, Tim, and Stuart Hodkinson. 2018. 'Beyond the Rent Strike, Towards the Commons: Why the Housing Question Requires Activism That Generates Its Own Alternatives'. In

*Rent and Its Discontents A Century of Housing Struggle*, edited by Neil Gray. Rowman and Littlefield International.
Kearns, Kevin C. 1979. 'INTRAURBAN SQUATTING IN LONDON∗'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69 (4): 589–98.
Lancione, Michele. 2020. 'Radical Housing: On the Politics of Dwelling as Difference'. *International Journal of Housing Policy* 20 (2): 273–89.
Martínez, Miguel A. 2020. *Squatters in the Capitalist City: Housing, Justice, and Urban Politics*. Routledge.
Martínez, Miguel A. 2014. 'How Do Squatters Deal with the State? Legalization and Anomalous Institutionalization in Madrid'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38 (2): 646–74.
Martínez, Miguel A. and Polanska, Dominika. 2020. Squatting and Urban Commons: Creating Alternatives to Neoliberalism. *Participazione e Conflitto*, 3(13), pp.1244-1251.
Milligan R T (2016) The politics of the crowbar: Squatting in London, 1968-1977. *Anarchist Studies* 24(2):8–32.
Mudu, Pierpaolo, and Luisa Rossini. 2018. 'Occupations of Housing and Social Centers in Rome: A Durable Resistance to Neoliberalism and Institutionalization'. In *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements*, 99–120. The Contemporary City. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
Murray, Kate. 2010. 'Black Housing Bodies Helped Build Communities'. *The Guardian*, 8 December 2010, sec. Society. http://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/dec/08/black-housing-associations-build-communities.
Noterman, Elsa. 2016. 'Beyond Tragedy: Differential Commoning in a Manufactured Housing Cooperative'. *Antipode* 48 (2): 433–52.
Noxolo, P. (2017). Introduction: Decolonising geographical knowledge in a colonised and re-colonising postcolonial world. *Area*, *49*(3), 317–319.
O'Callaghan, Cian, and Cesare Di Feliciantonio, eds. 2021. *The New Urban Ruins: Vacancy, Urban Politics and International Experiments in the Post-Crisis City*. Bristol: Policy Press.
Potrony, Albert. 2015. *ANOTHER UTOPIA*. https://vimeo.com/125319527.
Pruijt, Hans. 2003. 'Is the Institutionalization of Urban Movements Inevitable? A Comparison of the Opportunities for Sustained Squatting in New York City and Amsterdam'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27 (1): 133–57.
Remember Olive Morris Project. 2007. Accessed 22 January 2020. https://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com/
Rose, Brian. 1977. 'Future Forms of British Co-Operation. Co-Operative Housing'. *Society for Co-Operative Studies* Bulletin 30 (September): 57–67.
Rossini, Luisa, azozomox, and Galvão Debelle. 2017. 'Keep Your Piece of Cake, We'll Squat the Bakery! Autonomy Meets Repression and Institutionalisation'. In *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements*, 247–69.
Soares, Tony. 2012. 'On the inside: The Demise of the BME Housing Sector'. *The Guardian*, 26 April 2012, sec. Housing Network. https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2012/apr/26/on-the-inside-bme-housing.
Starecheski, Amy. 2016. *Ours to Lose. When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Stavrides, Stavros. 2016. *Common Space: The City as Commons*. London: Zed Books.
Thompson, Matthew. 2020. *Reconstructing Public Housing: Liverpool's Hidden History of Collective Alternatives*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
Unfinished Histories (n-d) 'South London Gay Community Centre', *Hidden Histories: Recording the History of Alternative Theatre*. Accessed 20 September 2022.

https://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/brixton-faeries/south-london-gay-community-centre/
Varvarousis, Angelos, Viviana Asara, and Bengi Akbulut. 2021. 'Commons: A Social Outcome of the Movement of the Squares'. *Social Movement Studies* 20 (3): 292–311.
Vasudevan, Alex. 2011. 'Dramaturgies of Dissent: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin, 1968–'. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (3): 283–303.
Vasudevan, Alex. 2015. *Metropolitan Preoccupations: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
Vasudevan, Alex. 2017. *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting*. Verso Books.
Wall, Christine. 2017. 'Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney'. *History Workshop Journal* 83 (1): 79–97.
Ward, Colin. 1990. *Talking Houses: Ten Lectures*. Freedom Press.
Waters, Rob. 2016. 'Student Politics, Teaching Politics, Black Politics: An Interview with Ansel Wong'. *Race & Class: A Journal on Racism, Empire and Globalisation* 58: 17–33.
Watson, Don. 2017. *Squatting in Britain 1945–1955: Housing, Politics and Direct Action*. Merlin.
Williams, Bob. 1990. *Filling the Empties. Short-Life Housing and How to Do It*. 2nd ed. London: Shelter.

Mara Ferreri is Senior Researcher at the Beyond Inhabitation Lab and Assistant Professor at the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), at the Politecnico di Torino. Email: mara.ferreri@polito.it