

ANTH314: Social Lives of Buildings**Una Dubbelt-Leitch****300440778****Collective subjectivity under Capitalism on the British council estate**

Council estates in the United Kingdom are a form of social control by British councils under broader capitalist rule that aim to curate a certain kind of citizen that makes up a community and eventually, a nation. This control has attempted to limit the socialisation of its residents through the mass production of brutal, separative architecture and design. Despite this, residents have overcome state control by creating their own interior assemblages and subjectivity through home-making. In Britain the high proportion of marginalised people in council estates has culminated in isolating homes of exclusionary design as the norm. The council estate, a state-owned private space, is positioned in a liminal state between the public and private spheres. As a direct result of this, residents navigate their agency within this space in a way that defies capitalism through collective action, both actively and unconsciously. Capitalist regime has sought, both deliberately and indirectly, to deprive lower-class citizens of this freedom and resulted in home un-making. The use value of council estates has overcome their exchange value by way of collective power; residents are cognisant of the role they play in a broader scheme. The Grenfell

Tower disaster has brought these conversations to the surface. The public and private dichotomy has encouraged attempts at repurposing council flats through home making, thus highlighting an innate human condition, that which is to dwell.

Post-war capitalist social policy in Britain oversaw a major shift in socialisation; from localised social networks to a private 'nuclear' notion of domesticity in the form of oppressive industrial housing. The British government enabled this shift by allowing low-income tenants to rent in council estates and tower blocks.¹ The development of council housing estates in the post-war period led to the privatisation of the English working class through organised labour and gender roles.² This directly fed into the design strategies of council estates that were built en masse following the Housing Act of 1919, infamously dubbed 'a home fit for heroes'. The origin of council housing can be first traced back to the passing of The Housing of the Working Classes Act in 1890.³ As a result, in 1930, slum clearances occurred allowing the state to control citizens. The Aylesbury development in Southwark is a prime example of this housing movement, it sought to house '8000 people in deck access blocks varying in height from 4 to 14 storeys at a density of 175 bedspaces per acre.'⁴ Thousands of high density tower blocks were constructed, using cheap brick, concrete, cladding and panels. In 1979, 42% of Britons lived in council housing, thus it became a prominent style of British home. During this same year Thatcher passed the 'Right to Buy' scheme, encouraging renters of council flats to buy their own residence.⁵ This saw

¹ Alexander et al. 2018, 127.

² Franklin 1989, 108.

³ Bentley 2008.

⁴ Schoffham 1984, 139.

⁵ Woodward 2010, 10.

an incremental shift in individual sense of status and self as owners. However ‘the state’s role is multisided—it has played an active role in constructing the blemish of place it then purports to remedy.’⁶ Mass industrialisation facilitated social change in orchestrating council estates as matter out of place, ‘the ‘blemish of place’ was not only engineered by the state, but also the target for demolition by the state.’⁷ This initially idealised, organised housing becomes a hindrance to society once inhabited and actualised by lower-class citizens. Slum clearances and the consequent erection of poorly-built council housing manifests as authoritative justification to further separate marginalised communities from society. Similarly, migration policy is duplicitous in structural racism by placing migrant families in isolating underfunded housing with dismal insulation - masked by the government as the altruism of refugee housing policy. Craigmillar, an area in Edinburgh shifted during the 18th Century from an egalitarian suburb to one entirely inhabited by people struggling to survive in newly developed estates, and would become the ‘most sharply divided of any British settlement’.⁸ The state dictates, transforms and orients lives through the construction of council estates, deeply harmful not only to the wellbeing of its citizens but to racial and class bias in such a way that if it were not for collective individual action, would be irreparable.

Douglas’ ideas around dirt and pollution, purity and danger feed into the way that council estates are considered to be a ‘blemish of place’ and to dirty an otherwise ‘pristine’ area.⁹ Council estates are a visual and cultural indicator of class in the

⁶ Kallin and Slater 2012, 1354.

⁷ Kallin and Slater 2012, 1353.

⁸ McCrone and Elliot, 1989, 66.

⁹ Douglas 1966.

United Kingdom, which despite their varied and multitudinous internal life, are often reduced to aesthetic-based generalisations. The following is a quote from Tamika, a mother of two who moved from Jamaica in 2002 and is living in a council tower block in Birmingham,

when people drive past these blocks I think they think of us like [a] slum but it's not, because you've got beautiful families living in these blocks. You've got the odd drug addicts and the odd mental patients and all of that but you've got decent people living in the blocks.¹⁰

As Tamika explains, council estate architecture traps individual lives into prison-like blocks, deliberately designed so no one from outside can see in, an architecture which purposefully repels communitas.¹¹ Another account of this removal can be heard by Hanley, who grew up on an estate in Birmingham,

You are sewn into rows of houses that are all inhabited, and yet you don't see anyone to whom you are not related for days at a time. You were put here and you don't know why. Your environment makes as little sense as your life.¹²

The deliberate segregation of class is an example of surveillance. Instances of high-income households being coerced out of council properties in Brighton during the 1960s reflect this.¹³ In a capitalist moral economy, the highest class has 'traditional obligations to the people', this social contract and saviourism acts to oversee and justify industrial council housing.¹⁴ Equally, this privatism created intimate spaces in an otherwise segregated community. Gloucester House in the Borough of Brent is typical of this style, all communal areas such stairways, landings and corridors are external.¹⁵ Some tower blocks include a central communal green space or courtyard

¹⁰ BBC, 2018.

¹¹ Hanley 2008, xi.

¹² Hanley 2008, 45.

¹³ Jones 2010, 530.

¹⁴ Alexander et al. 2018, 122.

¹⁵ Teymur et al 1988, 107.

yet inaction around the upkeep of council estates and active dispossession have led to growing discontent among residents. As a result of this disparity residents are unconsciously working towards collectivity through constructing and deconstructing interior assemblages in this liminal space; a form of activism by extending their personhood beyond being a citizen of the state. 'Residualisation' as described by Jones perpetuates council estates remaining as sites of reprieve and exacerbating extreme forms of ostracization towards urban slum areas. Residualisation,

implies a process whereby the provision of a particular tenure (in this case council housing) is targeted at poorer households, rather than catering for the general housing needs of the wider population.¹⁶

Migration policy saw newly arrived workers from the West Indies moved to 'grossly inadequate conditions' which created an entire generation of Black British children who have grown up in severely oppressive housing.¹⁷ Violent forms of organised housing such as this is a form of systemic racism. A common trope associated with council estates is their low exchange value, recidivist crime statistics and surveys ignore the multiple contributing factors to their claims. The concentration of people under financial pressure that exists uniquely in council housing plays a key role in the increase of violent behaviour among residents.¹⁸ Whilst council estates are an organised form of housing, in reality they become associated with gangs, violence and organised crime. Council estates are an oppressive and divisive form of social housing that fosters scepticism of the other, shared by residents and onlookers. The harsh, often dark and confined design of these estates perpetuates violent behaviour among residents. We must be conscious not to underestimate the impact that

¹⁶ Jones 2010, 511.

¹⁷ Jacobs 1985, 14

¹⁸ Murie 1997, 30.

‘degraded and neglected spatial landscape can have on the bodies, social prospects, and psychological well-being’ of inhabitants and look towards the use value and ways tenants redefine these constraints.¹⁹ The separatist architecture of most council estates promotes individualism; residents are physically discouraged from interacting with or entertaining their neighbours. While the home as a ‘socio-temporal space, a pattern of regular doings’ broadly encompasses the goings-on within a house, the material culture and lived experience must also be considered when analysing the impact of council estates on society, class-relations and capitalism.²⁰ The notion of homemaking indeed supports Douglas’ claim, though equally considers the role that aesthetic judgement plays in what constitutes a house. Financial and social security are easily indicated by the components or interior assemblages of a home, but further complicated when it is not outwardly visible.

The stigma associated with renting a council flat as opposed to owning a home boils down to what Gurney describes as ‘ontological security’ which is, simply put ‘the pride of possession’ and is closely associated with status’.²¹ A study taken during the 1970s in a North London council estate made up of 300 flats found that its residents were partial to consuming material that would lead to a sense of self-actualisation and subjectivity a process of ‘appropriating the state’.²² The study examined how the kitchen is a canvas on which to project one’s individual subjectivity. The kitchen is linked historically and symbolically to the ‘housewife’ and is therefore a contested, politically charged space. Miller has observed that for many women on the estate,

¹⁹ Cuming 2013, 333.

²⁰ Douglas 1991, 287 in Alexander et al. 2018. 129.

²¹ Gurney 1999, 1706.

²² Miller 1988.

retaining sociality is a recurring obstacle to negotiate between outside and inside spheres.²³ Inhabitants alter these spaces through decoration and renovation to make them more liveable and to affirm a sense of self through improvements such as lino flooring, lampshades, or picture hanging. Individual interior assemblages form a wider, collective movement and physically manifest a wider social subjectivity. Social aspiration and subjectivity in the form of home making is a process of engaging with a wider cultural capital by projecting one's idealised self onto one's home.²⁴ Bachelard likens the home to a nest in its undulating, simple and quiet nature that governs our state of being. Although written from a romanticised view of the bourgeois home, it is a notion that can be relevant to council housing. 'Would a bird build its nest' he writes, 'if it did not have its instinct for confidence in the world?'²⁵ As a place in which we self-actualise and a point from which we enter the world each day, the home is crucial to the making of ourselves. It is through home improvement and seeking collaboration outside of the estate that transforms estates into bases from which communities grow.

The standard of living in tower blocks has been one of concern since their emergence in 1952.²⁶ The Grenfell Tower disaster exemplified how council shortcuts and cost reduction compromised safety, culminating in public sympathy and attention for council estates residents and the conditions of their buildings. The significance of the 2017 fire is immense and crucial as a lesson in preventing further such tragedies happening. As the demand for technology labour has grown, the need for 'socially

²³ Clarke 2001, 30.

²⁴ Clarke 2001, 25.

²⁵ Bachelard 1994, 103.

²⁶ Schoffham 1984, 61.

necessary' labour has diminished.²⁷ For this simple, preventable reason, seventy two people died following the fire in June 2017. An ongoing inquiry has recently uncovered information about the local authority's knowledge and continued use of flammable cheap cladding leading to the fire.²⁸ The official advice to tenants was to 'stay put' which is indicative of a larger, ugly negligence beneath the surface.

The State is interested in the citizen as an abstract notion in disasters and emergencies and is more concerned with maintaining capitalism, social control and cohesion and ultimately in its own continued existence.²⁹

These factors lead to processes of home unmaking, inhumane living environments that tear families apart. The process of 'home unmaking' is a 'brutal, alienating and discriminatory' means of social control.³⁰ Community-led events that followed the Grenfell Tower tragedy were a testament to the networks established prior and ones that remain.

While the home as a 'socio-temporal space, a pattern of regular doings' broadly encompasses the goings-on within a house, the material culture and lived experience must also be considered when analysing the impact of council estates on society, class-relations and capitalism. Council housing is a direct effect of welfare provision under capitalism and homemaking proves the underlying human condition of communion when socialisation is discouraged. Collective individual subjectivity within socio-spatial polarization of council housing on the peripheries proves how collectivism prevails. This concentrated sense of community and shared experience

²⁷ Preston 2019, 62.

²⁸ Booth 2021.

²⁹ Preston 2019, 2.

³⁰ Lees and White. 17093

found in council estates is inextricably bound into the social fabric of the United Kingdom as microcosms of diverse lives unify in more ways than one.

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