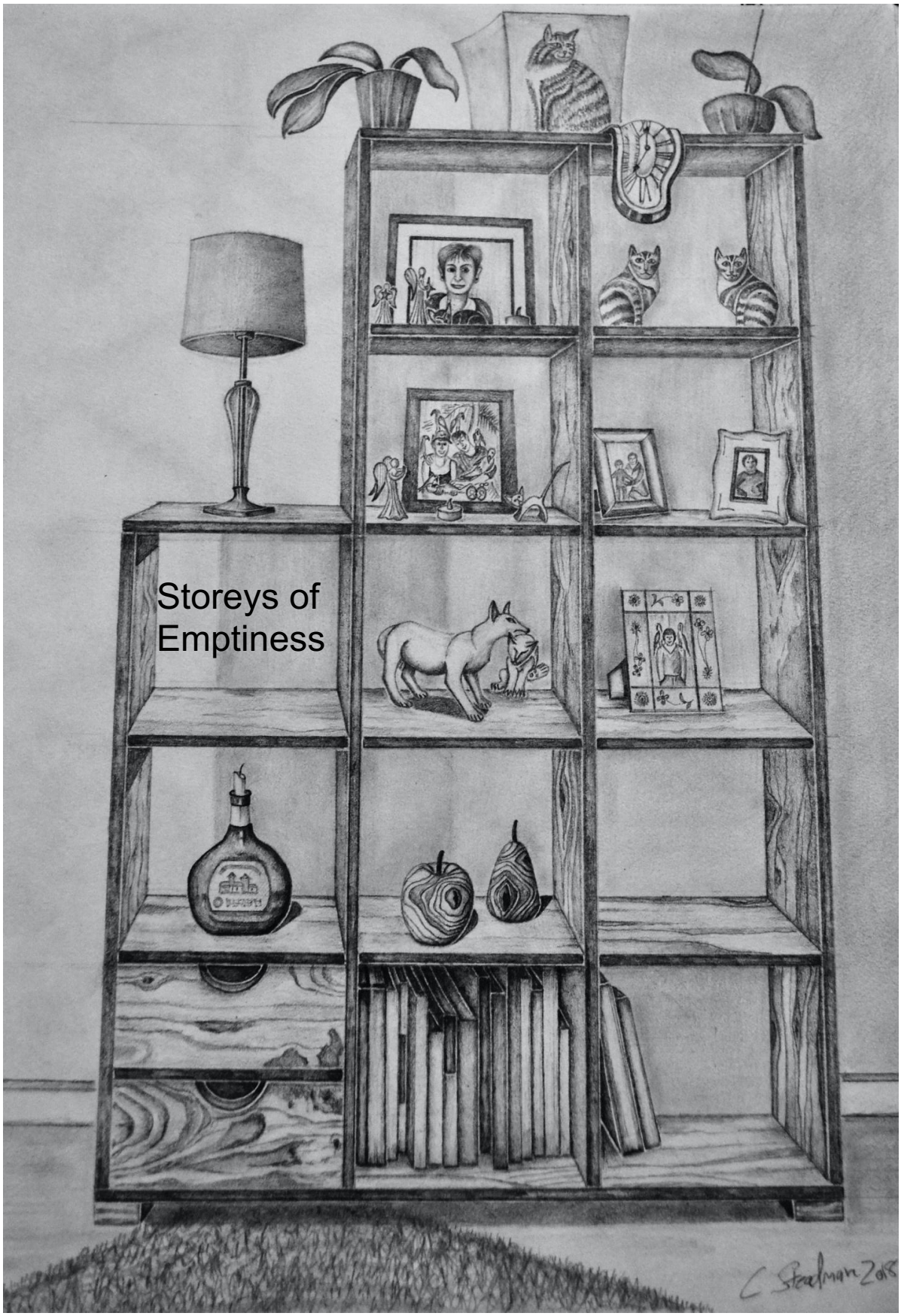

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Storeys of Emptiness

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF EMPTY HOMES IN LONDON

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Abstract

Based on 12 months of ethnographic research in a luxury square and a council estate in Chelsea, London, this thesis questions widespread conceptualisations of empty homes as sites of decay and decline associated with a loss of community. I combine current debates about the transformation of homes into financial assets with the latest material culture approaches to land, belonging and the home, to offer unique insights into everyday experiences of living alongside empty homes. Through rituals and practices such as gardening, visiting the nearby cemetery, drawing family trees and carol singing, the participants in my research created strong feelings of belonging and identity amidst flows of capital and the financialisation of housing. By focusing on specific creative practices that residents engage in to battle or conceal emptiness across the two sites, the thesis extends beyond the policy-oriented approach of "solving" the problem of emptiness, while allowing for a critical interrogation of which homes fall within this problematisation in the first place. I argue that the perceived emptiness is less about absence and more about neglect towards particular forms of care. By paying close attention to practices of care and the trope of the community that is evoked across both my sites, my research transcends any simplistic binary narrative of emptiness as absence or crisis and reveals instead how the concept is linked with deeply ingrained patterns of ownership, cycles of renewal and long-lasting relationships to land.

Acknowledgements

I wrote several parts of my thesis in pubs, mainly in *The Builder's Arms*, where the regularity of my presence and the peculiarity of my research prompted conversations with strangers who narrated their own encounters with empty homes, as well as the occasional free lunches and lemonade. Even as my thesis focused on empty homes, the process of writing was punctuated by moments of fullness. The fullness was created through the support of my partner, Andrew, whose work on housing with local councils sharpened my theoretical arguments with the nuance of living processes, my family, whose Skype calls over my morning tea started each day with love and warmth, my mum who read all my chapters and wrote insightful as well as embarrassingly loving comments in the margins, and my closest friends who inspired me to hold kindness and empathy as my driving principles for writing. Dr Dace Dzenovska and Dr Inge Daniels have been the most supportive and engaged supervisors, and their detailed comments on my chapters as well as the long meetings where we would lose track of time while discussing ideas, approaches and frameworks, have been the greatest avenues of learning. They have read the chapters multiple times, and in each reading, they brought out new elements and insights, helped me draw connections between different fragments of my research and strengthen these connections through ethnographic findings.

My fieldwork unfolded across two sites, namely the Sutton Estate and Cadogan Square, and in both of these places, I was nervous at first to approach people to talk about something as political as emptiness and something as intimate as homes. I was aware of my own positionality, given that very few anthropological projects are carried out by researchers from the Global South focussing on places like London, and therefore there were limited ethnographic resources that could guide me through the process. However, my early encounters undid most of my anxieties. Stepping into a local bookshop as a way of finding a book about Chelsea brought me to Barbara, a resident of Cadogan Square, who, after learning about my research, invited me for

breakfast as well as organised a poetry evening where we read poems about empty homes. This allowed me to meet many of the other residents as well as the Rector of the nearby church, where I started going regularly for the Thursday morning Eucharist. I am grateful for all my respondents who gave me their precious time, invited me for meals, grabbed coffees and took walks with me. Some of the respondents who went out of their way for my research included Loida who works for Royal Mail, the Rector of the nearby church, Barbara, Dorinda, Chris, Teresa, Brian among many other residents across the sites. The community I was hoping to study enveloped me into its folds. Similarly, in Sutton Estate, Dorinda and Chris invited me for gardening sessions and before we knew it, we built a deep friendship as we ran to the nearby pub in time to get the outdoor seats, or drew out protest banners for various demonstrations in the city, exchanged book recommendations and favourite recipes, shared stories and drawings, and more recently, went for a funeral of one the residents who passed away from cancer. The reciprocity of friendship engulfed the one-sidedness of research, as the residents of the Estate were there for me when I lost a dear friend and my aunt and grieved these losses from a geographical distance.

Last but not the least, I am thankful to the Rhodes Scholarship that funded my time at Oxford and gave me a community of scholars who strived to make a difference with their research, the Alain Locke Senior Scholarship that funded my final year of writing, the Departmental grant that covered my continuation fees at a moment of extreme financial stress, and the Murray-Speight scholarship that allowed me to fund a creative project with the residents of the Sutton Estate, thereby making possible the foundations of collaborative research. The staff at the Kensington archives brought my attention to old photographs and maps of Chelsea, and organisations like Advice4Renters and Concrete Action taught me the intricacies of housing policies and the richness of housing activism. Writing a PhD is a tiring, stressful and often, lonely process, but the constant encouragement and excitement from my supervisors, the support of my partner in writing out grant applications and feeding me home-cooked meals every day, the postcards sent from long-distant friends and weekly calls from my grandma made it a special journey.

Introduction

How to Tell the Story of Emptiness Without Telling an Empty Story?



The National Bird Watching Day was on the 28th of January in 2018. It had been a month since I began my fieldwork in the Sutton Estate, and the gardening group at the Sutton Estate invited me to participate, asking me to bring along a paper, pen and my “youthful eyesight”. As we passed around the binoculars, I met Linda, the head of *Community Champions*, a wing of the Kensington and Chelsea council that helps out with community driven initiatives. She distributed a list of birds, and asked us to tick against the names of the birds that we spotted around us. A few residents made sounds to call the birds while the others stretched out palms full of seeds towards the clear sky. Chris, one of the residents and members of the gardening group, sat on a bench made out of second-hand tyres and sketched the birds in his notebook, capturing each one at different stages of flight. My line of sight was a little lower; my attention

focused less on the birds and more on those who were observing them as they moved from one end of the garden to another, with their eyes fixed to the sky. I looked around the garden that rested at the heart of the Sutton Estate and noticed the residents who would over the course of the year transform into interlocutors, friends and characters featuring in my ethnographic short stories.

Mapping Emptiness

I had stumbled into the gardening group on my first visit to the Estate as I was walking around, trying to match the photos from the newspapers with the blocks before my eyes. Blocks A-D were closed off with metal barricades and chained gates but their decay was visible. The newspaper cutout in my hand confirmed that the four blocks were lying empty for the past five years. I spotted the gardening group from a distance, as the colourful gloves caught my eye amidst the dull red bricks that surrounded the garden. The group was made up of six residents, and several others who would occasionally join in. Jose was wearing a hat and smoking a pipe, sporting a look that he was often teased about by the others. Chris was untangling the water hose, complaining about the short lifespan of the sun in December. Dorinda was distributing cleaning tools from the shed amongst the remaining members of the group. She kept the garden tiller for herself, and began to pierce it into the soil and twist it into a clockwork motion that loosened the soil. She eased the pressure abruptly as her eyes met mine across the garden, and she waved to me, trying to place me in her mind.

I walked over and introduced myself to her, clarifying that I do not live on the Estate but was simply studying the estate for my fieldwork. I described my research to her: I wanted to study the empty blocks in the Sutton Estate and the various ways in which the residents manage, govern, deliberate and negotiate with the emptiness. My research puzzle emerged in the post-Grenfell moment. Taking the Oxford Tube into London after completing my masters term in July 2017, I stared through the window at the charred remains of the building. In the coming months, I read many newspaper articles about the fire, the common intervention running through multiple articles was around the extreme inequalities in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea that was

embodied by the empty homes that the borough was known for. There were emotive juxtapositions drawn between people without homes and homes without people, as a means of making a case for the empty homes to be used for rehousing of Grenfell inhabitants who were rendered homeless by the fire (David Batty, *The Guardian*, 20th September 2017; Luke Barratt, *Inside Housing,* 24th July 2017).



As I briefly defined my research questions, I noticed an amused smile on Dorinda's face. Jose titled his hat to get a better view of this momentary disruption, and asked me if I worked for the Clarion housing group, the Housing Association that managed the Estate. I shook my head with an instinctive rigour and the group broke into a scattered laugh. While I think they took me at my word, the question made me aware of the fact that I was not the first person to come into the estate with a list of questions. Clarion had conducted surveys and consultation sessions with the residents to ask them about their conditions of living. Insa Koch (2017; p. 113) got a similar reception in the council estates where she carried out fieldwork, until she built relations with the residents at the

local community centre, through which her status changed from “researcher” to a ‘someone who could claim to be a “local resident”’.

This was a transition, Koch argued, that housing officers and council workers could also make once they participate in the local community. Field sites such as council estates are not only over-researched, but also stigmatized as “trouble spaces”, a status that invites many concerned outsiders, ranging from local politicians, council workers and community action workers. Under such conditions, I had to prove that I was not here for evaluation of behaviour or conditions of living, but just to understand what it means to live with empty homes. Linda, who worked in the Kensington and Chelsea council, and was in charge of *Community Champions*, had come into the Estate to offer funding around the same time that I had stepped in. While I clearly distinguished my own presence as different from someone who could provide funding or record complaints for the council, I invited Linda for coffee and then we collectively participated in the bird-watching session that I described at the start.

Koch (2016) drew on Catherine Degnen’s (2013) understanding of ‘knowing’ which is more than familiarity or knowledge, and is unevenly enmeshed in the web of relations within a place. In a similar vein, Koch describes what it means to be perceived as “local” within a council estate: ‘to be “local” means being embedded in the estate’s relations of support and care and claiming loyalty to particular individuals and families, as well as to the places they inhabit’ (Koch, 2016; p. 288). Similarly, Gillian Evans (2006) poignantly described her own journey through fieldwork in a Bermondsey estate and what it took to be perceived as a “Bermondsey person”. Despite the fact that she lived in the area for many years, she was seen as “posh”, in contrast to her interlocutors who described themselves as “common”. I was also asked a few questions about where I study (eyebrows raised at the sound of Oxford) and then Jose handed over a broom to me, asking me to join their weekly gardening sessions. Chris showed me his approach to sweeping, and explained that he prefers to go clockwise around the garden, and carry the bin around with him to tip over his collection.



We spoke as I swept all the cigarette butts to one corner, and they began pointing to multiple homes in the estate that were empty. Jose pointed at a few flats, muttering: ‘empty, maybe empty, definitely empty, not yet empty, empty, empty…’ Some of the other residents corrected and contradicted him, leading to a small tussle about whether the blocks were empty because they were uninhabitable or whether the emptiness made them uninhabitable. Sensing my uneasiness about creating tension in the garden, Dorinda chuckled and explained to me that emptiness was less obvious than I made it out to be. She said it was scattered throughout the Estate, and that the Estate was being ‘emptied’ as we spoke. Her descriptions turned emptiness into less of a descriptive category and more of a process that unfolded over time. In the months that followed, I carried out many informal interviews in the garden and the nearby pub, in which various residents described different forms and stages of emptiness to me, and I shuffled between my gardening tools in one hand and my fieldwork diary in the other.

Sutton Estate is a social housing estate holding over 150 empty flats out of a total of 462 affordable rented homes in 15 five-storey blocks. This became my first field site, where I carried out fieldwork from December 2018 to

December 2019. The period coincided with the unfolding and eventual demise of the planning permission to demolish the estate and turn it into a mixed-rent housing development. The permission was lodged by Clarion, the landlord of the estate. Clarion is also the largest housing association[1] in the UK, working with over 170 local authorities,[2] as they invest public and private money into managing and maintaining properties. The mixed-rent housing model that was framed as the end goal of the regeneration project was said to bring together diverse types of housing units, such as apartments, penthouses, and/or single-family homes for people with a range of income levels. Such models carry the risk of depleting the total number of social housing units in an area and substantially transforming the character of an area in ways that make it less inclusive.

My fieldwork was punctuated by Town Hall meetings that debated the 'habitability' of the empty flats and the lifespan of the Estate, and it culminated at the subsequent rejection of the permission on the 18th of December 2019, that was much celebrated on the Estate. On the one hand, 'habitability' was posed as a technical qualification that implicates that a home is either fit or unfit to live in based on an objective set of evaluations decided by the Housing Association.[3] This allows the Housing Association to declare a home as uninhabitable without holding them accountable for these conditions of uninhabitability. The claim of uninhabitability was operationalised by Clarion to hurry the process of "decanting", which is an administrative term denoting the process in which residents are required to move out of their homes to allow for redevelopments of the property. The word "decant" was used by my interlocutors, including the residents of Sutton Estate as well as the council workers who I engaged with in the context of discussing the proposed regeneration.

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[1] Housing Associations or Registered Social Landlords are independent, not-for-profit organizations that provide homes for people in housing need, and in recent years many local councils have transferred their housing stock to RSLs.

[2] Local authorities refer to the councils comprising of locally elected members (councillors) and other council workers who are responsible for social care, schools, housing, and planning and waste collection.

[3] These conversations took place before the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation Act) 2019 was passed that legally places the responsibility to make a home habitable upon the landlord.

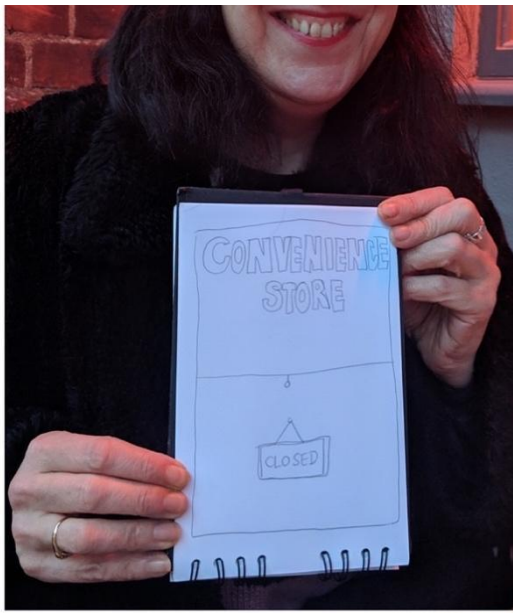
On the other hand, the residents of the Estate asserted that habitability cannot be seen as a static attribute of a place but rather, as a process that unfolds over time in order. This process of uninhabitability, they argued, can be speeded up by the intentional neglect of the Estate by Housing Association. It was in response to these absolute claims of uninhabitability that the weekly garden sessions unfolded, with the aim of 'bringing back life to the Estate', in the words of Dorinda, the head of the gardening sessions. These competing understandings of habitability was the cause of the tussle between the residents in the garden, as emptiness and habitability were both placed along a spectrum, rather than absolute states.

Emptiness took up many shapes and forms in the Borough, which is reputed for holding the highest number of second homes,[4] 'where 10% of homes are listed as "second homes" for Council Tax purposes' (Action for Empty Homes Report 2019). One of the Sutton Estate residents and housing campaigners, Nick, spoke to me about the contrasting forms of emptiness in Chelsea, comparing the dilapidated flats of the Estate to the luxury mansions left empty as investment properties or second homes. He advised me to speak to British Gas, Thames Water and other utility companies, and file a Freedom of Information request on the borough's database to get a sense of number. My calls to the companies garnered little result as most luxury homes, even if empty for most parts of the year, continued to have a regular supply of electricity and water as revealed by my conversations with the Thames Water customer information manager. Next, I looked at the Freedom of Information database and realised that I was not the first person to inquire about emptiness. The system was full of questions and responses regarding the number of empty properties. The latest Freedom of information report in 2018 (Ref: 2018-0552) regarding 'void' properties owned by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea revealed 141 properties, including council flats and other buildings,

[4] A home in addition to a primary residence, often found in the countryside, but in this case, they exist at the heart of a city.

such as schools and police stations, owned by the council, that have been empty for a week to 2145 calendar days at most.

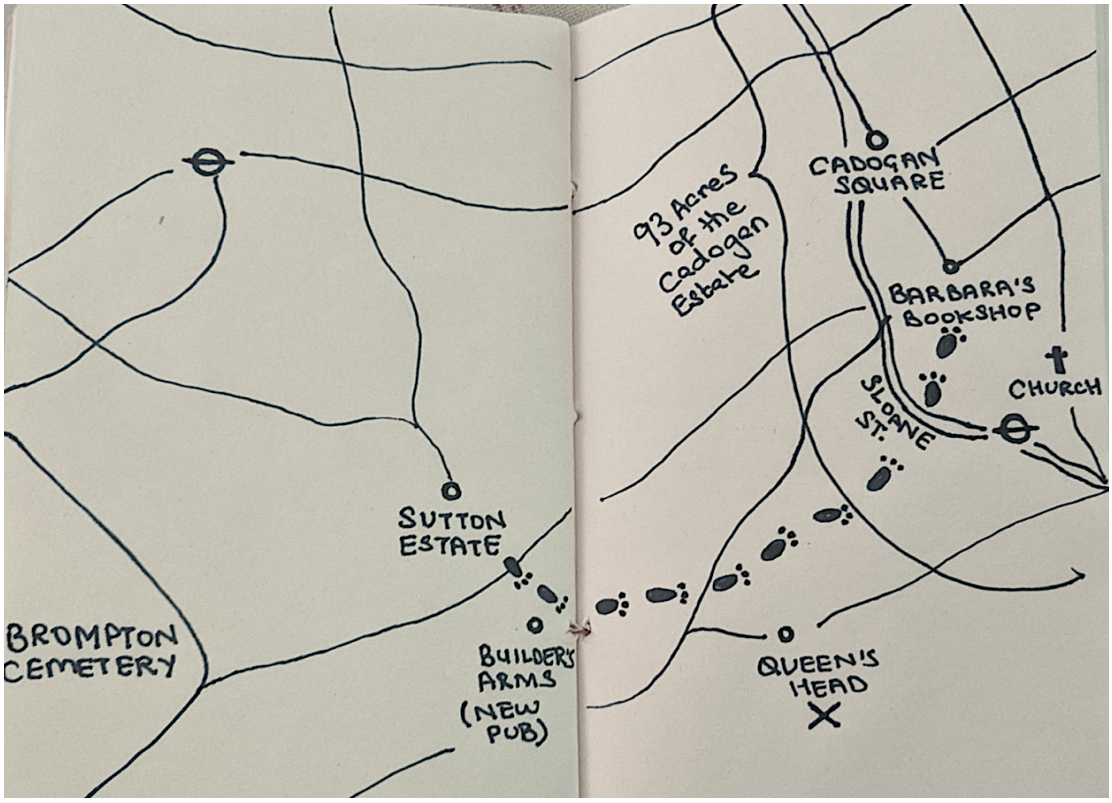
Beds	Calendar days void	Availability Group
0	2145	Available (Works ongoing)
3	2096	Unavailable
3	1389	Unavailable
2	1312	Unavailable
2	1172	Unavailable
2	1123	Unavailable
2	955	Unavailable
0	878	Available (Works ongoing)
1	843	Available (Ready to Let)
0	808	Available (Ready to Let)
2	787	Unavailable
2	766	Available (Ready to Let)
1	745	Unavailable
0	738	Unavailable
0	605	Available (Ready to Let)
0	570	Unavailable
1	542	Available (Ready to Let)
2	451	Available (Works ongoing)
2	451	Unavailable



The above table is from the FOI report, and next to the table is a doodle made by Dorinda to mock the borough's changing trends where all the shops that make up everyday life – the bakers, the butchers, the post office and the convenience store – are all shut down and replaced by "glittery stuff". I walked along the Kings Road to test out Dorinda's hypothesis, and as I reached Sloane Street, I understood what she meant by "glittery stuff". I passed three designer stores that were closed off to the public as they were hosting private auctions and seasonal sales for VIP members. The retail stores in the area operated on seasonal routines of auctions, rather than the everyday shopping model, thereby shaping their own retail models around the cycles of emptiness that defined the area. After fifteen minutes of walking, I came across a travel bookshop called BookHauz, and noticed three cardboard boxes full of books that were up for grabs. I went into the store and asked why the books were being given away. Barbara, the owner of the store, told me that the bookshop was not generating enough revenue to pay the exorbitant lease. Cadogan Estate owned the freehold[5] for the building, amongst many other properties that they owned in the area, and had requested Barbara to hand over the space to

[5] Freehold refers to ownership of land for an indeterminate duration.

another retail company that specialised in diamond-studded leather handbags. Awaiting its new fate, the store-space stood empty for the remaining period of my fieldwork.



Barbara lives in Draycott Avenue, in a mansion block also owned and managed by the Cadogan Estate. The flat below her and the flat above her are both empty for most parts of the year. There are many commercial and residential sites owned by the Cadogan Estate that lie empty in the area, such as the aforementioned bookstore. Cadogan Estate consists of property investment and management companies that are owned by the Cadogan family, which is an aristocratic family that owns over 93 acres of land (Shrubsole, 2019), largely in Chelsea. RBKC reported 74 empty commercial sites owned by the Cadogan Estates, spread across the Cadogan Square, Cadogan Place and Sloane Street, in response to a Freedom of Information request lodged by a resident in 2012. The Cadogan Square, located only a short walk away from the Sutton Estate, holds a very different kind of emptiness in comparison to the empty blocks of flats in the Sutton Estate. The Square became my second field site.

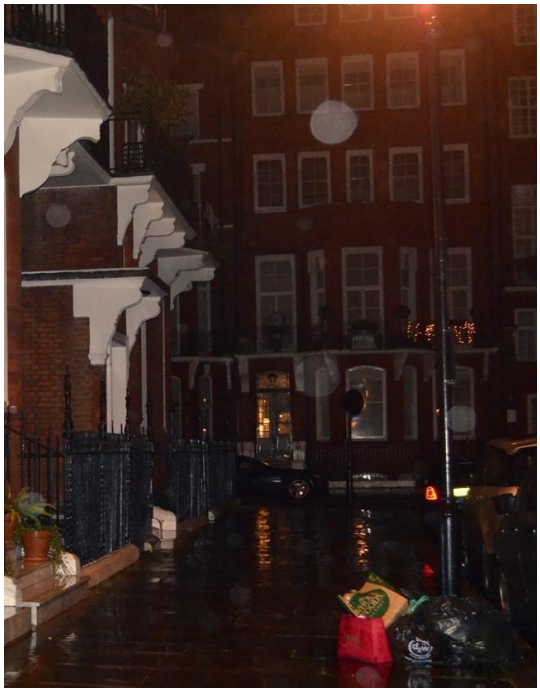
In contrast to the Sutton Estate, where residents are trying to stave off emptying as decanting, an organisation called Action on Empty Homes[6] identified the empty homes in Cadogan Square as "buy-to-leave" properties. Luna Glucksburg (2016; p. 251), as part of an ESRC funded project *Life in the Alpha Territories: London's "Super-Rich" Neighbourhoods*, looked at different kinds of empty homes in London, and defined "buy-to-leave" as consisting of 'mansions bought and left empty to store capital, using London prime real estate literally as a bank'. Many of these homes are often only occupied for a small part of the year, resulting in the title, "ghost squares" (in the *Evening Standard*, 2014; *The Guardian*, 2015), which is often applied to luxury residential squares in the area. The idea of ghosts clings on to the imagination as the Square descends into darkness in the evenings, with the dwindling number of lit windows emphasising the haunting quality of emptiness. The ghosts also capture the anxieties of the remaining residents about the changing demographic composition of the area, the temporary presence of Airbnb guests and the threat of squatters making their way into empty homes.

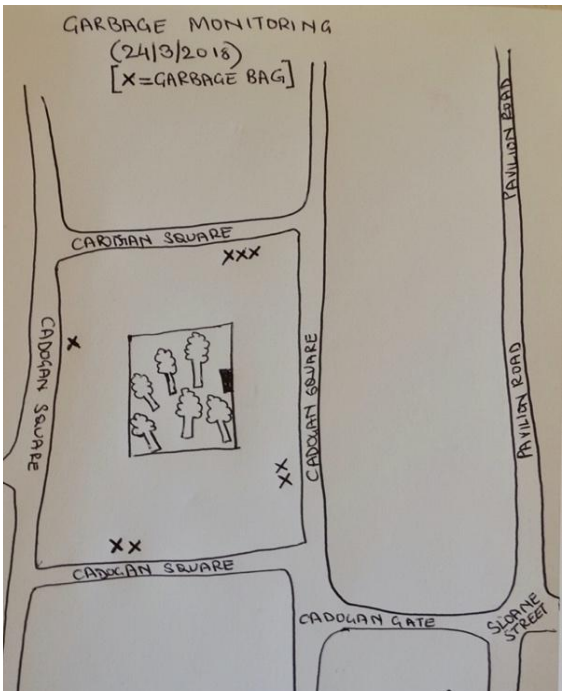
Mapping the emptiness in Cadogan Square was a little less straightforward than my first field site because of three main reasons. The first was the difficulty of directly engaging with the rich homeowners, of whom I only met a few through Barbara and emailed with the others who were residing outside London. Luna Glucksburg faced similar difficulties while reaching out to the wealthiest inhabitants of the neighbourhoods she studied (including Chelsea) and therefore focussed her ethnography on the narratives obtained from service providers in the area. Her rationale behind this methodological decision was that 'their lives were intimately connected to, and affected by, the lives of the people they served, in various capacities, and that their views represented potentially excellent insights into a very difficult world to access for a researcher' (Glucksburg, 2016; p. 241). I also took up a similar approach of

[6] An organisation led by a group of campaigners trying to identify empty units of housing in the UK and bring them back into use.

interviewing those who lived around empty homes and were directly or indirectly impacted by the emptiness.

The other difficulty in mapping the emptiness in the Square was that it did not create a totalising material effect of decay such as the emptied blocks of Sutton Estate. It was produced as a result of second homes and investment properties that were bought and managed by distant/absentee owners. The houses were not rotting in the absence of the owners but were being regularly cleaned, managed by the 24-hour concierge service provided by Cadogan Estate and frequently undergoing extensive renovations that only increased their value. I therefore began thinking about indirect ways in which emptiness could be traced. I started out by monitoring the garbage collection in the Square. The guiding rationale was that while empty homes can have automated lights and cleaners to create the illusion of presence, it is much harder to produce waste in the absence of people. The collections took place on Tuesday mornings at 7am. I arrived an hour before the trucks and walked around the Square, making note of the bags that had been put outside homes. Over the course of many visits, I noted less than ten bags in the entire Square.





Unlike the Estate, where emptying as decanting led to the physical removal of tenants from their homes, the empty homes in the Square were not empty all through the year. This is why some homes were described as more or less empty than other homes, thereby making maps not very useful in themselves. The residents that I met early on, through a poetry event that I jointly hosted with Barbara at her bookshop before its closing, lamented about specific kinds of emptiness. The declaration of a house being empty in these conversations was based on whether the owner was known, whether they were seen to participate in community spaces/events, where and how far their other home was located, and how frequently and punctually did they return. The declaration of emptiness was less an observable fact and more a moral evaluation of what it means to be present and what it means to be absent. While newspaper articles on second homes evoked eerie imageries of unlit windows and the related phenomenon of 'lights-out London'[7] (Glucksburg, 2016; p. 49), my study of empty homes in the Square revealed patterns of emptiness that were predictable, familiar and coordinated. Emptiness operated as both a lens to reveal these moral orders as well as a tool for negotiating with them.

The visit to the Church further helped me situate these varying concerns around empty homes in the Square, and understand why not all empty homes prompted fear/judgement. I met the Rector who expressed strong concerns about empty homes, but his concern was focussed on the type of emptiness that was seen as new and disruptive. While Cadogan Square and similar luxury squares have always held the reputation of consisting of many holiday homes and second homes, this new kind of emptiness was seen as less predictable, reliable and governable. Throughout my fieldwork, the residents across both my field sites disentangled the different types of empty homes, in which some sparked concern whereas the rest were normalised. The most common method of sorting these homes was by dividing them between two broad stages of emptiness – the seasonal emptiness was seen as always being there, whereas the 'other' emptiness was seen as new. The maps I made were more spatial as

[7] The phenomenon of absentee owners who push up property prices without contributing to the local economy.

well as temporal, recording the location as well as the duration, the regularity and occurrence of emptiness.

Even as my two field sites might appear very different from one another, I place them within a shared landscape of financialisation of housing – be it through the proposal of mixed-rent housing in Sutton Estate or the transformation of homes into financial assets in Cadogan Square. I arrived at the topic of empty homes shortly after the Grenfell fire which highlighted the contrasting presence of empty luxury homes and council flats alongside residents of Grenfell who were struggling to be rehoused. In contrast to other studies of emptiness that focused on abandonment/ruins (Stoler, 2009) or the withdrawal of capital and the imagined takeover of empty places by nature (Dzenovska, 2018), my research links emptiness with the concentration of capital. The entry of private investments (through Housing Associations) in the council estate drove the process of regeneration as a way of increasing returns on these investments. Similarly, the buying up of second homes in Cadogan Square resulted in the flow of capital devoid of the flow of people. The recurring rhetoric I heard many times over the course of my fieldwork was that 'money lives inside London homes'. Hence, I do not pose my two sites as two extremes but rather as contrasting sites that emerge against the shared landscape of financialisation of housing in London, which has been defined by Josh Ryan-Collins, Laurie Macfarlane, and Toby Lloyd (2017; p. 139) as 'the penetration and increasing influence of financial markets, motives, institutions and elites into new areas of the state, economy and society'.

Emptiness has multiple forms and, as such, it is a discursive device that connects divergent trajectories into a coherent research problem. The research puzzle that emerged for me was: *how do different kinds of emptiness relate to one another within the spatial dynamics of contemporary urban capitalism?* When I began my fieldwork, I thought my struggle would be to find and locate the empty homes on a map. While pinpointing specific empty homes was indeed a difficult task, especially as the Freedom of Information reports do not provide addresses of empty homes for the fear of burglary and squatting, the more complex task was to define what it meant for a home to be empty. In this

dissertation, I look at the existing practices of identifying empty homes by policy workers, campaigners, residents and newspapers to understand how the language of emptiness appears in popular discourses and in the speech of my interlocutors. Within most of these understandings, emptiness is reduced to the binary of lit windows and unlit windows, presence and absence, empty and full, habitable and uninhabitable, but over the course of my study, I learnt that emptiness was not so much a description of absence, but rather, a description of a disruption to the imagination of a place.

The unlit windows, for instance, stand out because Chelsea is imagined to be the centre of the world, and lights signify "life" in world cities that are reputed for the "affective possibilities" (Conradson and Latham, 2007; p. 235) that they offer to those who travel far and wide to "experience" London. However, this is not to say that emptiness is only a matter of interpretation. Dace Dzenovska (2020; p. 10), in her study of emptiness in rural Latvia, argued that emptiness is at once a material reality, a way of life, and an 'interpretive framework for making sense of the new reality', thereby holding together emptiness as something that can be seen and experienced as well as something that lends tools to tell stories about a particular place. In the context she studied, the representations of emptiness were extremely political as it implicated particular commentaries about Latvia, its past and its futures, thus involving discomfort and disconnection that could themselves be objects of study. She acknowledged that 'living emptiness was not outside the realm of representation' (Dzenovska, 2020; p. 20) and in a similar vein, I am interested in how empty homes are lived with in Chelsea, as well as how they are held within stories that are spun to fill in the missing gaps. I pose emptiness as a process that was being negotiated with and a tool to navigate the changing spatial dynamics of the borough. In order to understand how different forms of emptiness interact with one another and how they are differentially evaluated and cared for, I shifted my focus from the empty homes in themselves to those who lived alongside empty homes.

My thesis therefore begins from the emic category of emptiness – as it emerges in the speech of my interlocutors and the language of newspapers –

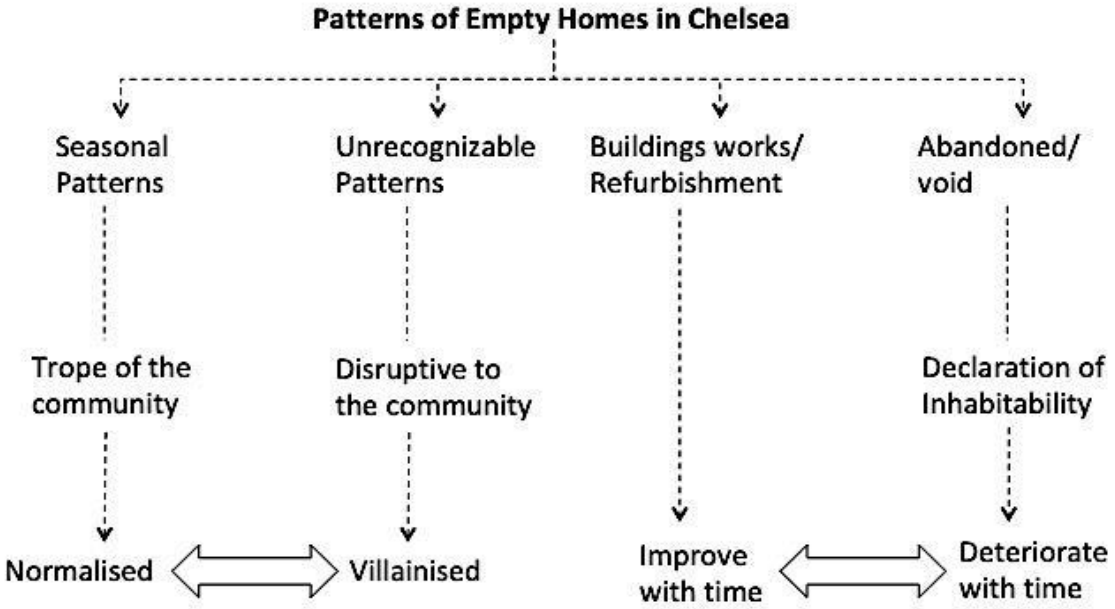
but over time, it becomes a study of the practices that serve to populate emptiness with meaning, explanation and ritual. This is not an unusual divergence for an anthropological project, especially as emptiness transforms in the course of my study into a vocabulary that allows my interlocutors to comment on the various changes in the borough, sort through the different people and groups who occupy the area, discuss with me the historical relevance of the buildings they live in, and envelope me within the fold of everyday practices that are prompted ~~by~~ or heightened by the presence of empty homes. Daniel Miller, in *Comfort of People* (2017; p.1), states on the very first page that even though the book is focused on hospice patients, it is less about death and more about living. In a similar vein, even though my thesis is focused on empty homes across two sites in Chelsea and the "problem" of emptiness as it emerges and is attended to across these sites, emptiness is not the only analytical lens to which everything I study can be attributed ~~to~~. Instead, emptiness functioned as an entry point into conversations that were already taking place in my two sites. And over time, emptiness turned from an object of study into a lens to reveal moral orders along which various changes in the borough were classified, as well as a tool for negotiating with these changes.

Sorting Emptiness

I identify two useful typologies in relation to empty homes in London. The first typology is by Luna Glucksburg (2016), who studied the super-rich of London and their spatial control of the city. She drew out a classification of empty homes based on the rationale behind the actions of the buyers. She named four categories, namely, buy to invest, buy for business, buy for children and buy to leave. The second typology, which is also based on socio-spatial relations is from the report created by Action of Empty Homes that identified over 216,000 empty homes in England in 2019, which included homes owned privately and by the council that have been left empty for more than six months. They identified three broad categories of empty homes in the country – concentrations, clusters and bad teeth. 'Concentration' refers to 'areas where as many as one house in ten and at least one in 50 may be long-term empty' (Action on Empty Homes Report 2019), and these areas are marked by

absentee landlords that poorly manage properties that are leased out to low-income tenants, thereby showing a direct correlation between emptiness and deprivation. A ‘cluster’ refers to areas of empty houses that are located within wider housing economies that may not exhibit the same issues as above. And ‘bad teeth’ denotes empty homes that sit alone in otherwise unremarkable areas, and their presence is marked by overgrown gardens and unkempt exteriors that result in vandalism and squatting.

However, my conversations across my two field sites revealed that the empty homes in these areas do not necessarily fall into these categories, given the dual positioning of Chelsea as both, the ‘centre of the world’ (in terms of its real estate value and its historical value) as well as a site of empty homes. The presence of empty homes impacted the area but not necessarily in the neat ways outlined by the three categories listed above. Moreover, these typologies addressed emptiness as a spatial category while ignoring the temporal trajectories of empty homes. By shifting away from the empty homes in themselves towards those who live alongside empty homes, I identify four categories within which I situate the empty homes of Chelsea and how they relate to one another.



The first category is that of seasonal empty homes that I observed in Cadogan Square. These homes, as per the descriptions of the neighbours, are often populated in certain parts of the year, such as Christmas or summer months, and therefore their emptiness is seen as predictable and dependable. These homes are rarely villainised by the neighbours or by popular media. Some of these owners were identified by the neighbours as English, American and Australian. I draw out my understanding of the seasonality of London's empty homes from three broad sources. The first source is ethnographic, emerging from my interviews with residents, nearby retail store workers and a conservation architect working with luxury homes in the area. The second source is archival/historical, in which I look at various materials I found in the Kensington archives, including Robert Pearman's (1986) book on the Cadogan Estate that helps me understand the museological undertones to the Cadogan homes that are maintained by Cadogan Estate, who retain their status as the freeholder as the leaseholders move in and out of the properties. And the final source comes from other contemporary anthropological works on London housing, namely Luna Glucksburg (2016) and Anna Minton (2017), who look at seasonal elites of London.

In contrast to these acceptable and reliable patterns of emptiness, the second type of empty homes that I identify are the disruptive ones, in which the periods of emptiness and occupancy aren't identifiable as they don't follow the same patterns of seasonality, and cannot be mapped onto a calendar of festivals. It is this group of empty homes that form the focus of gossip that carries racist undertones. Luna Glucksburg (2016; p. 250) also discussed the 'openly racist positions by residents who felt their areas were being invaded by "incoming hordes" of undesirable foreigners"'. Within these categories of "incoming hordes", she pointed to the fact that American and French ex-pats were rarely included, reserving the blame for the "racialised others" (Glucksburg, 2016; p. 250), comprising Russians, Chinese, Indian and Arab buyers.

The third type of empty homes are the temporarily vacant homes that are either undergoing construction, renovation or repairs, and therefore are

justified within acceptable rituals of building work, especially given that the Cadogan Estate requires the homeowners to constantly maintain their properties and maintain a certain standard. This standard is enforced upon various 'listed buildings' in the area, and in the coming chapters, I will explore the process of 'listing' and of historicising Chelsea in ways that I argue makes place for emptiness, or rather, normalise emptiness. Finally, the fourth type are abandoned homes that are seen as dead or dying, and their emptiness is seen as worsening with time. In this final category, I locate the empty flats of the Sutton Estate, wherein emptiness is used to create more emptiness, as the process of decanting becomes a precursor to demolition of a place. As opposed to the 'waiting period' of the Cadogan Square homes that are going through renovation, the homes of the Sutton Estate that await the planning permission decisions gradually lose their value over time.

There are multiple temporalities at play here. In Cadogan Square, the seasonal rhythms of emptiness and fullness of the old aristocratic elites is in contrast to the disruptive occupancies of homes by the newer demographics of buyers, who do not adhere to the seasonal rhythms that have defined upper-class British society. The Cadogan homes are further situated within the long-spanning timeframes of English history that plays out in the conservation of these homes, which requires them to be periodically empty. The timeframes of renewal lie in contrast to the timeframes of decay within which the empty homes of Sutton Estate are made uninhabitable. So, the four temporalities that make up my field sites are seasonality, disruption, decay and renewal. Temporal frameworks are also relevant in the identification and measurement of emptiness as newspapers equate the number of unlit windows with empty homes, pointing to the contrast between the fullness of daytime (made up of workers, shoppers, tourists) with the silence of the night-time. Such a framing, discussed in further detail in chapter 2, serves to map emptiness within the timeframe of a day (24 hours). In contrast, paying attention to relations of landownership entrenched in the freehold-leasehold model maps emptiness within a broader timeframe made up of hundreds of years. In order to

understand these multiple timespaces (Ted Schatzki, 2009; p. 47) that unfold alongside one another, I briefly turn my attention to the anthropology of time.

Nancy Munn (1992; p. 95), in her review of the various anthropological understandings of time and its flow, anchors the debates to Durkheim's (1912) framing of social time as the collective representations or categories, such as days or seasons, which draw upon and 'reflect the varied 'rhythms' of social life'. Captured in Nigel Thrift and Paul Glennie's (2009) statement, 'Not everyone occupies the same now', is the widely accepted framework within anthropology that views time through the lens of multiplicity and heterogeneity. Instead of seeing time as a 'given' or a linear flow, Munn (1992; p. 94) defined it as 'a symbolic process continually being produced in everyday practices'. Disputing its universality (Gel, 1992), time is seen as rooted in everyday practices (Munn, 1992; Thrift and Glennie, 2009). Lefebvre (1992) reiterates the centrality of "rhythm" as an insight into the everyday life of time, which he further divides into linear time and cyclical time, and clock time and lived time. He looks at the contrasting temporal orders of the 'everyday', which is at once composed of diverse, specific rhythms as well as repetitions of social rhythms (Lefebvre and Regulier, 1985; p. 73). His interest in the everyday rhythms of social life was motivated by the underlying fear of capitalism, seen to have its own specific temporality, colonising the everyday life by turning it into a zone of consumption. Similarly, Michael de Certeau (1984) studies everyday life through the rhythms of walking in a city, wherein he poses the practice of walking as holding the subversive potential of breaking free from the imposed rhythms of modern life.

Both Lefebvre and Certeau develop their approaches by way of a Marxist orientation, as they search for spaces and practices not colonised by capitalism. Laura Bear (2014) is skeptical of such a singular conceptualisation of what is meant by capitalist time. She argued that while the present is theorised through ideas of time-space compression, speed or uncertainty, such a conceptualisation is restrictive in its understanding of the dynamicity of the present. She poses two key interventions. One, she challenges the neat break imagined between the past and the present to argue that 'the economic time of

the present is not radically distinct from that of the past' (Bear, 2014; p. 23). Two, through her ethnography of a complex temporal moment in West Bengal – the promise of a factory was withdrawn on the same day as an auspicious festival that marks a cosmological time of the victory of good over evil — Bear looks at the 'dynamic simultaneity' of multiple temporalities that characterises the present. By shifting away from the philosophical underpinnings of time to a more concrete anthropology of time, Bear argues that modern time is not simply a time of uncertainty or lost futures but a set of concrete practices that seek to order, mediate and evaluate different rhythms of time. I build on a similar analytical ground to understand how different rhythms of emptiness are evaluated against different rhythms of temporalities – seasonality, disruption, decay and renewal – and consequently, how these forms of emptiness are either normalised or villainised.

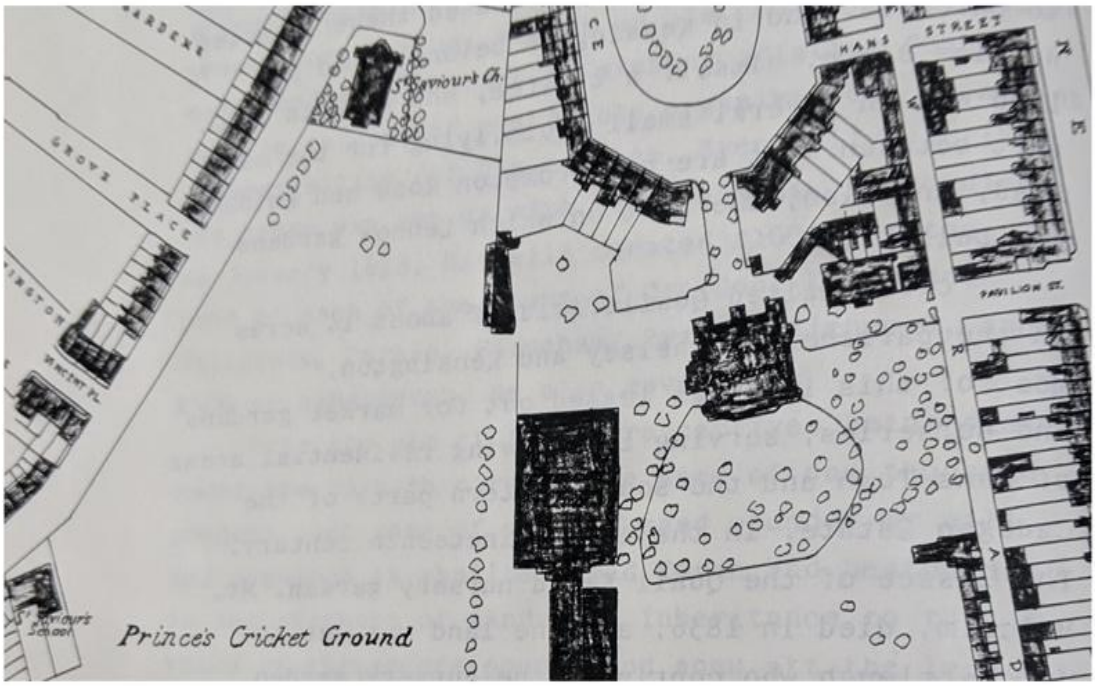
By paying attention to the temporalities of emptiness, the above typology dismantles the static understanding of empty homes and seeks to understand emptiness as it unfolds for those who live alongside empty homes. Instead of the static binaries of empty and full, this typology opens up alternative axes along which emptiness can be understood as a process. The first two categories trace frameworks of seasonality and disruption by looking at the detangling of what is seen as "old" and "new" emptiness. The third and fourth categories – decay and renewal – explore how empty homes are cared for across my two sites, and how the values of empty homes change over time.

Old Emptiness and New Emptiness

Tanvir Hasan, the Deputy Chairwoman of the Donald Insall Associates and a conservation architect, carries out many projects with the Cadogan Estate and the other Great Estates of London, which refer to the landed Aristocratic families that control large parts of the city's residential and commercial properties. She told me that the homes in Chelsea were always conceptualised as seasonal and rarely as the only/permanent homes of those who lived inside them. She further added that 'the homes in Chelsea have always been

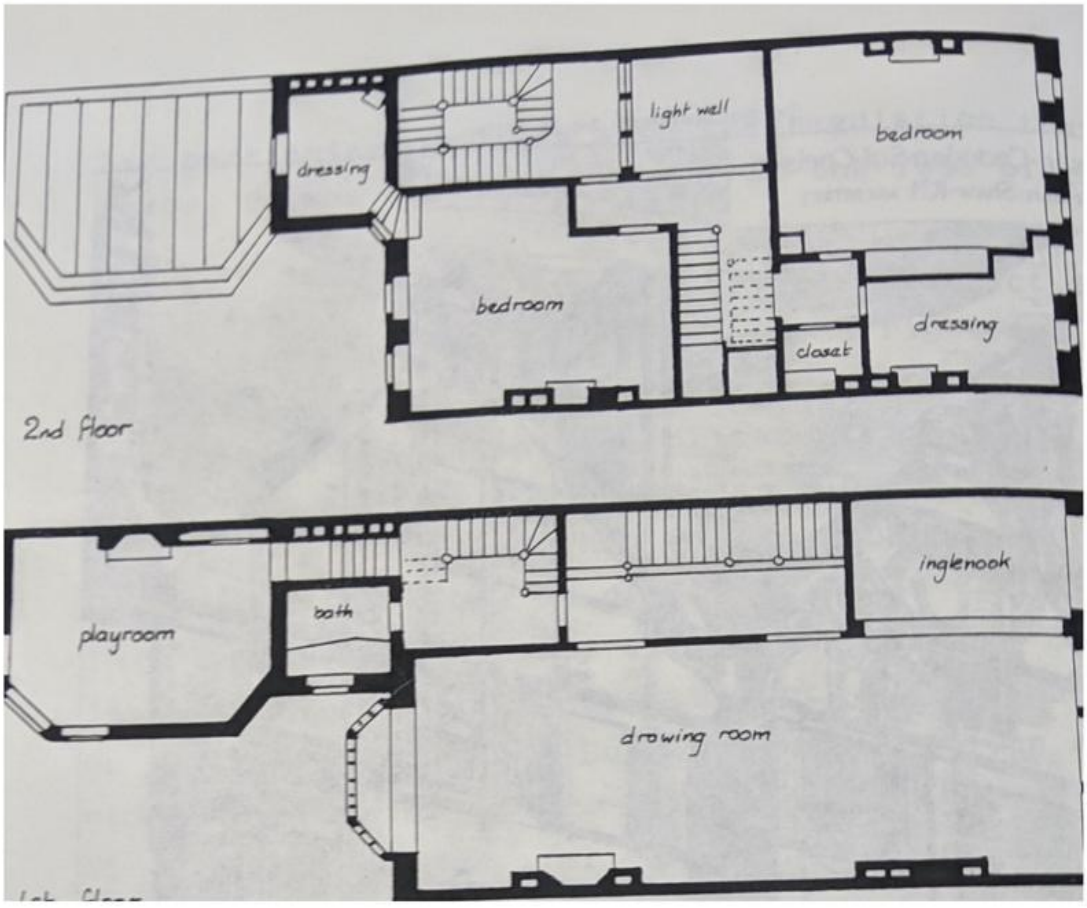
expensive, luxury properties, and operated as summer or winter homes, as the owners moved between their London homes and their second homes in the countryside which provided a retreat from the city'.

Furthermore, she explained to me the ways in which the Great Estates operate in terms of the lands they control and the properties that they distribute through leases. The first step is for the Estate to purchase the land in order to develop it in accordance with the larger vision that is upheld by the Estate. The Cadogan Estate, for instance, purchased the land of the Princes Cricket Ground in 1882, and proposed plans to develop it into what would become Cadogan Square, my field site. In the archives at the Kensington Central Library, I found a picture of the Cricket Grounds taken from the Ordinance Survey in 1862. Next, a master plan is created for the area that the Estate intends to purchase. Below is the photograph, from the Kensington archives, capturing the plan produced by the Cadogan Estate in 1880, in support of their application for a Compulsory Purchase.



Hasan added that the Great Estates draw up master plans of an area as their hold over larger areas of land affords them a "sense of the whole". Along with spatial continuity, many of the residents of the Square also spoke of a

sense of temporal continuity forged by the Cadogan Estate, expressed in comments about the Estate remaining constant amidst changing governments. The Cadogan Estate controls the freehold of the area and its properties, which refers to the ownership of the land and any immovable structures attached to it. This can be seen in contrast to the leaseholds that are owned by most property owners of Cadogan Squares, whose leases are bound within a specific time period, and upon the end of this period, the property reverts to the freeholder. The properties had time-bound leases to ensure that the Estate would be able to periodically renew the properties in accordance to the larger vision, and that this vision requires a certain amount of periodic emptiness.



She explained to me that the conservation work in the Square is facilitated by the seasonal emptiness of these homes, which is not only known to the Cadogan Estate, but also utilised by them to be able to take control of the properties and make the changes they deem necessary. This form of emptiness, which is referred to as ‘old emptiness’, is not only normalised but in

fact embedded in the existence and renewal of these homes. Victor Buchli (2013), in his book *An Anthropology of Architecture*, shifts attention away from the forms of architecture and brings attention to the material form of dwelling and how it is lived in and engaged with. He looks at how continuity is sustained through particular kinds of emptiness, such as the empty homes in Albania that are activated by phones ringing that evoke the extended families in Greece (Dalakoglou, 2010), or the empty rooms in homes of British migrants in Spain as they await visits from grandchildren (Krit, 2013). Buchli also looks at Marcoux's (2001) study of the Montreal rental market that is comparable in some ways to the London property market. Most renters in Montreal are required to renew their contracts annually, similar to the leasehold/freehold model (though these leases are much longer), and Marcoux looked at how the regularity of these cycles of renewal was intricately connected with the periodic renewal of the intimate relations of the householders. The process of detachment facilitated a particular nexus of attachment.

This also means that not all forms of emptiness are framed as a problem. So, when does emptiness become a problem, and how exactly is new emptiness differentiated from old emptiness? I take my cue from Anand Pandian (2012), who is interested in understanding how time is experienced, and he focusses on the question of 'newness', or how something is seen as new/a break from what already exists. His approach to understanding newness is formed not by focusing on what is new, but by paying attention to 'the temporal textures of experience through which newness is encountered in the first place' (Pandian, 2012; p. 548). In the context of my study, the only way to understand new forms of emptiness is by understanding how it is detangled from what is seen as a normal amount of emptiness. This process of detangling the old and the new was revealed to me during my visit to the nearby gun store.

The manager of the gun store vehemently refused the claims of emptiness, citing as his defence the regularity of his customers and the continuity of the community in the area. He argued that his whole business runs on a stable local community. His customers come from a long family lineage of gun owners, and he spoke about these families fondly, citing them as

illustrations against the claim of emptiness and dying communities in the area. As he made a case against emptiness, I realised that he alluded to two very different kinds of empty homes, out of which one kind was socially unacceptable and disruptive, while the other kind was acceptable and well-integrated into the rhythms of the area. The first kind he referred to was the increasing number of empty homes that are bought up by foreign owners, or worse, by anonymous owners, and wherein the erratic pace of construction creates anxieties and discomfort to the neighbouring community. The second kind of emptiness is the emptiness that is barely seen as empty. It's seasonal, rhythmic and familiar. It is a home that fills up during particular times of the year, like Christmas or the months around the hunting season, and stays empty for the rest of the months, awaiting the owners' return. This was the type of empty homes that the manager was fiercely defending against the claims of emptiness. It was a punctual kind of emptiness, and punctuality is profitable, as it slots neatly into various commercial cycles of consumption. Punctuality, and not fullness, was seen as the opposite of emptiness. Luna Glucksburg (2016) studied the seasonal habitation patterns of the British elite to counter the newness attributed to the emptiness in London housing.

There are different kinds of emptiness at play here — one that is part of the hegemonic moral order and one that threatens to break it. While seasonal emptiness was normalised through the infrastructures of cleaning, maintenance and conservation, the problematising of empty homes shines light on the ethnic profiling of the new groups of homeowners who are blamed solely for the empty homes. Different kinds of empty homes were weighed against each another in terms of the regularity of their occupancy, in which the disruptive frenzy of "reckless" buyers (a term used by residents and real estate agents to describe the new demographics of home buyers, who were usually foreign investors) were pitted against the more traditional aristocratic elites who inhabited Chelsea seasonally. In these moral evaluations of empty homes, the residents frequently complained against the Airbnb tenants, who would infrequently occupy these flats. Emptiness was not so much about occupancy but about the appropriate occupancy of a house – legitimacy and predictability were mutually constitutive. Emptiness only became noticeable when the owner/occupier

changed from the traditional seasonal owners who knew the implicit codes of performing presence through light, Christmas decorations or expected kinds of participation in the community, to the newer demographics of owners and occupiers, such as the Airbnb tenants, who disrupted these rhythms.

I also draw on Inge Daniels' (2009) work on seasonality in the context of market practices in Japan. In a similar vein to Bear, Daniels debunks the notion that commodification interrupts and dismantles seasonal rituals, and instead, studies how knowledge about seasonality is used and shaped by companies to tackle specific types of consumption patterns in Japan. Rather than posing seasonality as a rhythm to which the market merely responds, she turns to Moeran and Skov (1997; p. 99) to argue that seasonal change is 'continually articulated and actively staged on the market'. She looks at the discourses around seasonality by Ackerman (1997), who posed seasonality as a device used by the ruling elite to establish 'correct' behaviours linked with specific seasons. Similarly, instead of posing empty homes in an opposition to notions of fullness, I look at how seasonality becomes a tool of the aristocracy that positions itself outside the new class of financiers.

In sum, the division between old and new emptiness creates a moral order along which empty homes are evaluated. Emptiness operates as both a lens to reveal these moral orders as well as a tool for negotiating with them. The preoccupation with lights (unlit windows or Christmas lighting) and their linkages with emptiness serves to singularise empty properties, in which some kinds of emptiness are perceived as "bad", thus indicating concentration of the wrong kind of capital. However, there has always been seasonal emptiness woven into the leases of luxury properties and aristocratic estates that manage them. The processes of sorting through "good" and "bad" emptiness is embedded within various temporal frameworks. Dismantling the binary of empty and full, my typology disentangles the perceptions of emptiness as old and new, and the concomitant moral evaluations attributed to empty homes.

Caring for Emptiness

While the first two categories of my typology look at how empty homes are categorised and evaluated, the third and fourth categories focus on how these empty homes are governed, managed and cared for. I contrast the practices of care across my two sites to argue that while practices of care can fight emptiness and its effects, they can also be used to make space for emptiness. In Sutton Estate, the practices of care are guided by the debates of habitability. While the Housing Association poses the Estate as uninhabitable and further poses this uninhabitability as a permanent condition, the residents engage in practices of gardening, cleaning, repairing and collective grieving to fight this narrative. Michel de Certeau (1984) theorised the ways in which the inhabitants of a city subvert the ordered rhythms imposed from above through their unique practices of occupying places. On one hand, he looked at the "strategies" that organise a space from the top, into neat, governable territories and marked routes. In contrast, he frames the everyday decisions of those subjugated as "tactics", that reorient and disrupt these categories in tactile and spontaneous ways, as walkers change their paces of walking and disrupt the imposed rhythms of the two-dimensional maps. I borrow this framework to approach the question of habitability that featured as a key debate in the Sutton Estate, and served as a primary lens through which the four blocks of empty flats were discussed.

The category of "strategies" is useful to understand the ways in which Clarion, the housing association and landlord of the Sutton Estate, imposed a particular linear temporal order upon the buildings. Not only did they declare it uninhabitable and not fit for living in order to speed up the processes of decanting, they also actively worked towards making the Estate uninhabitable. The residents accused Clarion of neglecting the Estate and its damages to hasten its ageing process in order to justify decanting and demolition. In contrast to these strategies, Certeau's category of "tactics" is useful to explore the practices of care provided by the residents. These comprised of placing buckets beneath unrepaired leaks, gardening, cleaning stains of common

areas, repairing light bulbs in corridors, changing locks to the garden shed in order to take control of the space of the estate.

I define “care” in broad terms, leaning on Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher’s understanding of care as ‘everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair “our world” so that we can live in it as well as possible’ (Tronto, 1993; p. 103). This borrowed definition serves to effectively highlight the interwoven and interdependent elements of care. María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017; p. 5) explores this interdependency through the illustration of soil not as a resource, but as a “living world” that embodies an ecology of care and engagement. This is relevant to my own understanding of care on the Estate as the gardening group tends to the garden in tactile, hands-on ways, using their fingers (often removing their gloves) to sift through the top soil, immerse their entire hand into the depth of the earth and measure moisture to determine whether the soil is alive (it could grow plants) or dead (too dry to sustain life). Certeau’s (1984; p. 97) category of tactics, that he mainly explores through the embodied practice of walking, also contains an element of tactility as he describes each footstep of walking as uncountable because ‘each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation’. The tactile is contrasted against the abstract/imposed narrative of a space.

However, the danger with imposing Certeau’s framework onto the Estate is that it can reproduce the simplistic narrative of opposition between the State and the ‘local community’. Insa Koch (2014), in her ethnography of an English council estate, warns against this opposition by arguing that the languages of care operationalised by the residents did not position the State as an external force, but instead ‘insinuated a more intimate relationship that positioned the council within the moral boundaries of local communities’. Taking Koch’s advice on board, I therefore try to understand the question of ‘habitability’ as enmeshed within the everyday decisions made by the residents around how, and how much, to involve the State within the regimes of care. For instance, the residents engaged in the careful balance of deciding what damages could be reported to the council that would make their homes more habitable versus what damages could risk the declaration of uninhabitability. Hence, the

involvement of the State was not as a simplistic opposition, but a delicate negotiation managed through everyday decisions.

Decay is also a contested category in itself, above and beyond its policy/administrative evaluation. Constance Smith (2018) studied the decaying architecture of a council estate in Nairobi, and argued for the uncoupling of decay and ruins. Instead of implying loss, she explored decay as a process of accumulating resident histories (Smith, 2018; p. 107), distinguishing between “urban decay” as a policy category and as a material process. Also reframing decay as a dynamic process, Ann Laura Stoler (2008) examines ‘ruins’ in the context of colonial legacies to challenge the melancholic gaze that is attached to the concept. She shifts the focus from seeing ruins as memorialised or ‘leftovers’ and sees them as ‘what people are “left with”’ (Stoler, 2008; p. 194), thus reframing ‘remains’ as ‘reconfigurations’. In a similar sense, when the Queen’s Head pub was covered up with plastic sheets in May 2019 and declared ready for demolition, the residents of Sutton Estate took the unused benches from the pub and carried them over to the sunken garden to give it a new life.









While concerns about habitability guided practices of care on the Sutton Estate, the residents in Cadogan Square cared for their buildings in ways that weren't necessarily related to making them more liveable. In my conversations with residents of the Square, I noticed that many of them spoke of their own homes as sites of heritage, and as objects to be treasured and maintained, and not necessarily lived in. Many of the buildings in the Square and the neighbouring areas have a manager who takes care of the building and ~~it's the~~ its common spaces, thereby assisting the residents who live in the building as well as those who occupy the homes seasonally to coordinate annual repairs and maintenance work. Monthly newsletters released by Cadogan Estate hold detailed descriptions of the buildings and their changing needs, allowing distant owners to care for their empty homes from afar. Cleaners frequent the homes at regular intervals, and one of them reported to me that the home she cleans had only one plug point, which made it a big hassle to vacuum the entire house.

The value of the houses in the Square did not emerge from their liveability but rather, from their historical facades, their architectural features, their central location and their "character". Many of the buildings of the Square

were listed, and therefore warranted special kinds of attention. This is what the care was directed towards in the context of Cadogan Square, as reflected by the continuous cycles of renovations and the constant presence of scaffoldings that appeared to be permanent elements of the landscape of the area. Even as the residents in both sites demonstrate practices of care towards their homes, I argue that the regimes of care in the Sutton Estate are guided by the aim of making it more habitable/liveable, whereas the regimes of care within the Square, formalised by the Cadogan Estate, are less about battling emptiness or improving habitability/liveability and more about preserving their value, which is divorced from its liveability, and better managing emptiness.

Creating Belonging in Emptiness

What was common across both my field sites was the evocation of belonging in response to emptiness. The lamentation around emptiness was linked with the disappearance of communities and a sense of change (even though what was thought to "change" was different across the sites). While in Sutton Estate, the community evoked was a local community that was visible and present (participated in gardening, went to pubs, visited the nearby cemetery), the community evoked in the Square was a more abstract community that was tied to the imagined "character" of Chelsea. The empty homes that were singled out were less about physical emptiness and more about how they disrupted the "character" of Chelsea. Upon asking the residents of the Square to describe to me what they meant by the character of Chelsea, the imageries evoked were of an English village, the romance of the simple design of garden squares, the unity of place ensured by the firm hold of the Cadogan family, the handpicked stores on the high street (in contrast to commercial chains), and the celebration of communal spaces like the Chelsea Greens or the Royal Hospital Chelsea that functions as a hospice for retired army pensioners.

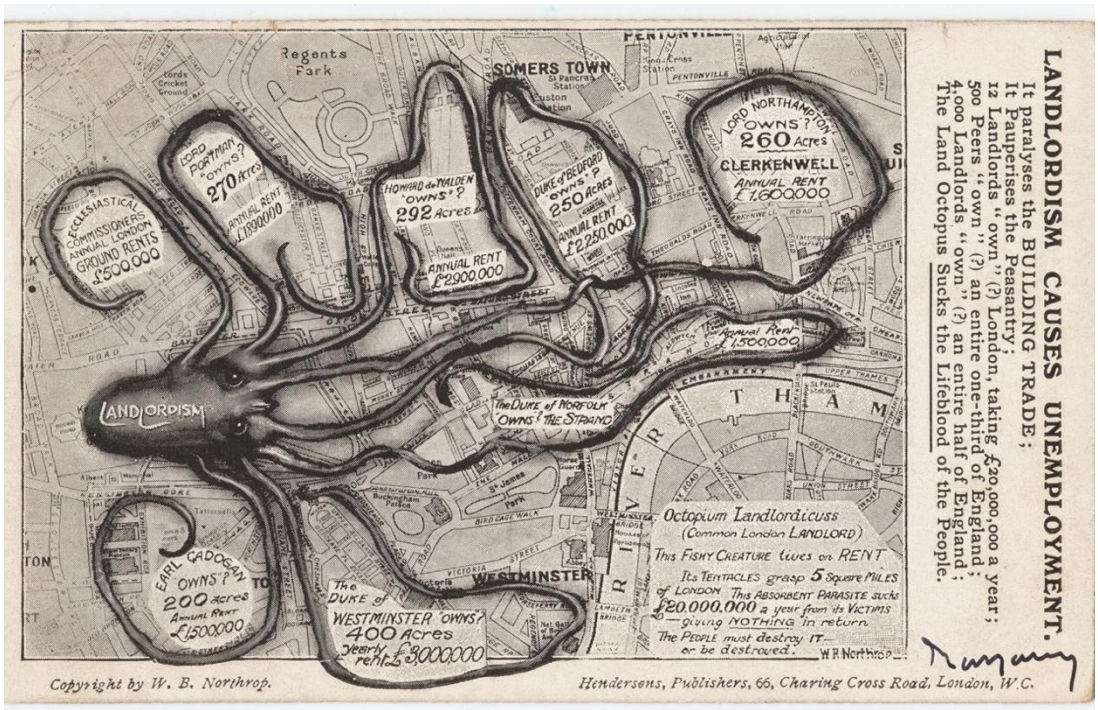
The authenticity of the character of Chelsea was contrasted to the inauthentic/de-personalised forms of consumption that defined the rest of London. Hasan, the conservation architect, praised the Cadogan Estate and other aristocratic estates for not prioritising commercial gains but instead,

investing in the shaping of a unique community that distinguished one borough from another. Daniel Miller (2019), in his study of the English pub, scrutinised this distinction made between sociality and commerce, and asked an important question to anthropologists: 'can we see the drive to particular forms of sociality acting as a counter-force to these commercial forces, or do the two work in tandem?' (Miller, 2019; p. 796). Leaning towards the latter, he looked at how the commercial interests of pub landlords engage with the non-commercial motivations for socialising. In the context of the Square, this dissociation from the commercial played out in the vilification of the tourist – especially the shopping tourism of Knightsbridge that was a recurring complaint amongst the residents (which reportedly led to a decline in sales of properties as per a real estate agent I spoke with). The criticism around tourism – despite the fact that overseas visitors are estimated to spend over £100 per day in the borough[8] – is linked to the idea that commoditisation destroys the authenticity of the local (Cohen, 1979), which has been debunked by recent studies in the anthropology of tourism that focus on multiple authenticities.

The description of the "character" of Chelsea echoes particular kind of Englishness that was embodied by the geography of Chelsea. It played out through street names, memorabilia stores, the gun shop and the Ascot-clothing shops, the textualisation of English history on blue plaques and text panels, the war memorials in the nearby army hospice etc. The seasonal emptiness slotted well within these rhythms of Englishness, given that Chelsea was home to many seasonal events like races, sports matches and flower shows. To care for homes, in the context of the Square, was linked less to actually inhabiting these homes and more to participating in and upholding the character of the area. The homes that are declared empty are not necessarily the ones whose owners are absent, but rather, the ones whose owners are negligent towards these established regimes of care and the established ways of belonging to Chelsea.

[8] As per the Visitor Economy Report (2009), funded by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

While ideas of “character” and “community” are seen as countering emptiness, my dissertation will reflect on how these very notions can make place for emptiness. I will dismantle the romance of the community by critically interrogating how wealthy communities operationalise the currency of the “community” to bypass the decisions of the council. The Estate Surveyor of the Grosvenor Estate (owned by the Duke of Westminster), that controls large chunks of Belgravia and Mayfair, spoke to me about his views on how disruptive emptiness could be battled. Like many people managing large estates, he believed that the “right” investments in developing the community of Belgravia would help fight empty homes in the area. He brought up the Localism Act 2011 that facilitated the devolution of decision-making powers from central government to various individuals and local communities. He was strongly in favour of the shift of powers from the council to the community; in which the community of course implicated an overwhelmingly wealthy community that he admits is usually away during periods of voting in the local elections. The romance of the community further strengthens and justifies the mammoth hold over land by a handful of families, including the Cadogan.



W. B. Northup's iconic postcard titled 'Landlordism Causes Unemployment' consisted of a giant octopus that spreads its tentacles across the map of London, curling around the boundaries of the Great Estates, including Cadogan Square at the bottom left. While the postcard was created in 1925, it continues to hold relevance, as the Cadogan Family still controls over 90 acres of land (Shrubsole, 2019). Whenever empty homes are talked about in newspapers, there is an implicit assumption that we are talking about "properties" – individual properties that have created problems, and that these problems can be solved if these individual properties are filled up. This is the logic behind fighting emptiness through the trope of a community. However, in the course of the thesis, by shifting away from counting empty homes and quantifying emptiness through particular homes, I bring attention to the relationship between land and emptiness. I shift attention from the owners of homes to the owners of land.

Danny Dorling (2014; p. 92) explained that while the prices of housing in the UK have increased sixfold from 1983 to 2007, the prices of land have increased sixteenfold. Similarly, Josh Ryan-Collins, Laurie Macfarlane, and Toby Lloyd (2017; p. 139) argue that the increase in housing prices in UK is not related to building costs but to an increase in the price of land, and that 74% of house price increase between 1950 and 2012 can be directly linked to land prices. They look at the soaring housing prices through the lens of financialisation of land, in which the de-regularisation of the financial sector turned banks into property lenders, thereby separating housing prices from the growth and incomes of the wider economy. Dorling attributed the rising land price to the income polarisation that allowed the rich to use land as a form of safe investment. Furthermore, he looks at the "waiting period",[9] wherein private builders buy up land and wait for a few years before building properties on that land based on the predicted rise and fall of prices. In order to account for this waiting period that contributes to further inflation, I need to reframe the question

[9] This phenomenon, also known as "land banking" was scrutinized by Ed Milliband's election campaign in 2014, as he targeted developers who were holding onto land without building on it, through his slogan: 'Use it or Lose it'.

of emptiness outside of the purview of individual properties and look at emptiness as the relationship between land, time and value.

On one hand, financialisation is a key factor for the emptiness across my sites, as it motivates the logic behind regeneration that leads to emptiness as decanting in Sutton Estate and it turns homes of the Square into financial assets whose value is divorced from its liveability. On the other hand, emptiness cannot be simply attributed to financialisation in an area where one family controls most of the lands. The feudal model of freehold and the paternalistic status of Cadogan Estate needs to be located in the ways in which the Cadogan family positions themselves as the caretakers of Chelsea and operationalises ideas of 'community' to sustain their hold over the area. Along with the axes of financialisation, I therefore also locate the question of empty homes within the trope of the community, its relationship to land and ways of creating belonging in emptiness. I bring together the discourse of the "global city" (Sassen, 2005; Moreno, 2014) that is used to study cities like London that drive the movement of capital, with my focus on the importance of land in Chelsea – be it the ownership of land by the Cadogan family or the land-based connections evoked by the residents of the Sutton Estate to counter the threat of displacement – amidst the global flows of capital.

The relations to land were integral to both my field sites, and these relationships became more pronounced in the context of emptiness. In Sutton Estate, the land-based connections were expressed through practices like planting trees, dwelling on the life-spans of trees, buildings and people, frequent visits to the nearby cemetery, and evoking the dead that lay buried in Chelsea to strengthen their continuing relationship to the area. In Cadogan Square, claims to land were made by the Cadogan family to position themselves as the patrons of the area. Robert Pearman (1986) wrote a book called *The Cadogan Estate: The History of a Landed Family*, addressed to Lord Cadogan, wherein he drew out a detailed overview of the family and their management of the land. He described the estate as stretching from Knightsbridge to Cheyne Walk, comprising 4000 flats, 700 houses, 300 shops and 300,000 sq. feet of office space, as well as a private garden cover that

comprises nearly one sixth of the total area (Pearman, 1986; p. 13). He draws out the family trees of Cadogan and Hans Sloane (that is where Sloane Street gets its name!), revealing the ways in which the branches of these trees entangle with one another, and collectively encircle the area, flooding the place with names and stories emerging from a single family or two families married into one another over two centuries ago.

The practice of drawing out family trees was not restricted to Cadogan Square. In Sutton Estate, many of the residents would describe how rooted they were within Chelsea, and illustrated this rootedness by drawing out their family trees to demonstrate how many of their family members had lived and died in the same soil. Over one of our gardening sessions, Dorinda drew out her family tree with the tip of her finger against the garden table. She argued against the narrative of social cleansing that questions her place in Chelsea, by vividly describing how her family tree branched out over 200 years in the area. Her great grandparents were builders who 'made Chelsea with their hands', while her grandmother wrote in decorative handwriting on envelopes moving in and out of Chelsea, and her father's claim to fame was that he introduced yogurt to Chelsea as he ran a small dairy shop. I also examine how processes of urban regeneration impact on practices of grieving and remembering the dead. In Chapter 3, I look at how the growing ambiguities unleashed by the threat of expulsion results in an entanglement between practices of grieving and claims of belonging.

Finally, the question of access to land in the UK is an important consideration for the ways in which belonging is crafted across my two sites. In both the sites, residents do not directly own their homes. The land where Sutton Estate is built was bought by William Sutton in 1908 with the aim of providing 'model low-rented dwellings for occupation by the poor' (London Metropolitan Archives: City of London, ACC/2983). However, the ownership of the Estate is now divided ambiguously between the Council and the Housing Association that keeps changing (it used to be Affinity Sutton before my fieldwork and then it merged with Clarion Housing). The tenants I spoke with did not own their homes, but were on different forms of leases, ranging from "introductory lease"

that acts like a trial period, secure tenancy (for life) or a flexible tenancy (2-5 years). Tenants were also moved between the different houses/flats of the Sutton Estate if they had reported damage, needed renovations or lost a member of the house. While the residents of the Square did not share this stress of displacement, they also did not directly own their homes. They had timebound leases called leaseholds, which required them to take permission from the Cadogan Estate before making any changes to their homes. In the absence of direct ownership of homes, and given the lack of access to landownership in Britain, the practices of creating belonging do not centre on the home itself but often to the area. Chelsea and its histories were frequently evoked, even as each field site had a different version of this history, ranging from the artists' borough to the English village. The question of belonging, in the context of my fieldwork, rested on the contrast between the transience of the home versus the continuing relationships drawn to an area and its histories.

Emerging Outline

Time emerged as an important lens to map different forms of emptiness and their concomitant different moral evaluations. Debunking a static understanding of empty homes, I situate emptiness within multiple timeframes comprising of cycles of seasonality, disruption, renewal and decay. The uncertainties set in motion by empty homes have to be seen alongside practices of creating stability and order. The eerie silence of the night-time reported by Cadogan Square residents can be seen alongside the rhythmic sounds arising from the never-ending cycles of renovations of empty properties. The ambiguities regarding one's place in Chelsea in the face of gentrification was complemented by regular walks to the nearby cemetery to visit the graves of those who rest peacefully in Chelsea. The shapelessness of the waiting period gave rise to fixed shapes of the histories of the communities, evoked and imagined in response to emptiness.

Dace Dzenovska (2019) looked at the relationship between the emptiness in the Latvian countryside and the imaginations of the futures within the specific historical conjecture: the end of socialism and the subsequent

“transition” to capitalism. Within this context, she draws out the “horizons of expectation” shaped by the conjecture that shapes her respondents’ understandings of emptiness. She contrasts the multiple futures imagined by the locals against their imagination of a recognisable and reliable flow of time abroad, in which life is seen to incrementally improve in a steady and predictable manner. Dzenovska therefore draws out a relationship between the temporal orientations of those who decide to stay in Latvia and those who decide to leave as affected by their contrasting ways of understanding the future, where the former believes that the ‘time in the place they come from no longer flows in a recognisable direction’ (Dzenovska, 2018: p. 16). I draw on her framework to understand how my interlocutors make sense of empty homes by placing them within various temporal orientations (seasonality, disruption, decay and renewal) and what are the new temporal orientations that emerge in response to emptiness (gardening, walking, ageing, dying, grieving, remembering and growing of trees).

By paying attention to these multiple temporalities, I simultaneously place empty homes within the global flows of capital underlying the processes of financialisation of housing, as well as the continuing concerns around land, burial, ancestry and cosmology that are often posed as out-dated within the temporal sequencing of capitalist societies. Prioritising only the former would risk repeating the racialised profiling of singled out empty homes, whereas keeping the two axes together would help me situate emptiness as an ongoing process. My thesis unfolds in two parts. The first part looks at the mechanisms of identification of empty homes – habitability in Sutton Estate (Chapter 1) and light/darkness framework in Cadogan Square (Chapter 2). The second part will look at the contrasting practices of care towards the empty homes across the two sites – grieving and remembering in Sutton Estate (Chapter 3) and turning homes into heritage sites in Cadogan Square (Chapter 4).

I look at empty homes in two different field sites to understand how each site strives to maintain their version of community and emptiness, the threats that they attribute to emptiness and the material practices that emerge in response. In the case of the Cadogan Square, there are at least two forms of

emptiness: one disruptive (rich people buying up homes), one traditional (the seasonal one). In the case of the Sutton Estate, emptiness is more threatening, and takes the form of decanting, and it is resisted through material practices and the sociality of people who actually live there. In the chapters that follow, emptiness is simultaneously posed as a source of disruption, a threat, a breakdown as well as a stabilising process by which people make sense of places, detangle contradictions, create new routines and moral orders, and juggle multiple temporalities that entangle with one another at the heart of London.

‘Brian’s Beans’



After retirement, Brian and his wife, Susan, usually spent their afternoons in the sunken garden with their hot flasks of tea. As he waited for her to come downstairs, he cleaned the pigeon droppings off the surface of the table, and began rolling a cigarette. He looked over the spot where he had planted beans last week but there was still no sign of sprouting. He has planted so many seeds in various corners of the sunken garden but never really kept track of them. Often, he comes across a flower and only after a few moments of quiet admiration does he realise that it was planted by him. The realisation always makes him grin like a man who finds coins in the back pockets of old trousers. He is greeted by Chris and Dorinda, who have just finished gardening, and are now dusting their gardening gloves before packing them up in the shed and making their way to the local pub. Brian still remembers Chris as a little boy whose late mother, Valerie, was one of his good friends in the Sutton Estate. Working as a porter for almost forty years, he knew everyone on the estate. He had come to the rescue of residents who lost their keys or locked themselves out by accident. In the middle of the night, he would have to find a ladder to climb into their windows and help them get into their own homes. He knew the

estate with the precision of a burglar – the heights of the floors, the frames of the windows, the insides of living rooms and the symmetry of bricks.

It has been over eighty years that he's lived in and dearly known the estate and yet, he is overcome with wonder each time he looks at the bricks that make up the estate, and the way they sit in perfect symmetry, as though it was one man who arranged them all in one go without blinking. Brian had heard the rumour that it was, in fact, the German prisoners of war who laid down the bricks, and he knew and believed in almost all the stereotypes that were associated with the Germans, and most of all, with their commitment to precision. Growing up, he was told that people would travel for miles to come to the Sutton estate and admire its design and structure. It lived through both the wars after all. He barely remembers the Second World War except in the shape of the stories that his mother would later recount. He also distinctly remembers the sound of a bomb echoed by the sound of shattering glass and the subsequent cry of Mrs Spelman, who lived a block away on the estate. Brian later learnt that Mrs Spelman had just removed her clothes in preparation for a bath when the sound of the bomb shattered her bathroom window, and a sliver of glass cut through her chest, leading to her instant death. For several weeks after, Brian was haunted by his own vivid imagination of the incident. As he lit up his cigarette, he gazed towards the same window, which now appeared fixed, permanent and still. For the past two years, the house stood empty, after the death of its most recent inhabitants. At least that's what he had heard.

He heard the familiar pace of his wife's limp and looked back. Susan arrived with a flask of tea and a few rolled up newspapers with half-done Sudoku. As he poured out the tea into the paper glasses, he glanced vaguely at the headlines on the front page. She put away the paper and said, 'Sorry to disappoint you but there is no mention of the Sutton estate in the papers today'. He returned her cheeky smile and responded that he no longer looks for that sort of news. All the news these days is about regeneration and he is quite sick of that word and all its other polite synonyms. 'Why should the newspaper tell us what is going to happen to our home? That's not news, that's just bullying', he mumbled under his breath. There were days when Brian loved reading the

local news, and neatly cutting out all the articles about the estate to preserve them. These were mainly articles about the murders in the estate, and he felt like a part of this public spectacle, having seen and heard more than the newspaper possibly knew.

He still remembers the evening when his mum, who worked as a barmaid in the local pub, came back home, locked the door immediately and told him not to answer it at any cost. She had a feeling that she was being followed, and surely, within moments, there was a loud knock on the door. Brian remembers holding onto his mum's dress as she shut the lights in the living room. The knocking continued for several minutes and finally stopped, leaving him and his mum too uneasy to catch any sleep that night. The next day they found out that a woman had been murdered on the estate. Years later, Brian tried to find that local newspaper article that his mum had cut out and stuck on the fridge door. The other piece of news that Brian remembers is the arrest of Reginald Christie that took place right behind the Sutton Estate. He had learnt about his crimes from a boy at school, Peter, who had enjoyed the attention so much that he added several gruesome details to the serial killer's record. Brian was just walking home on the evening of the arrest, in 1953, when he saw a line of police cars and a large group of people who looked equally star-struck and horrified. He found out from one of the boys who was jumping up and down, trying to find a good viewing angle, that Reginald Christie had finally been caught. The next day, Peter lost his spotlight to Brian, who slowly narrated the event of Christie's arrest, with several self-important pauses and needless details of the evening.

Susan had given up on the Sudoku and started rolling a cigarette. She knew how much Brian despised his retirement, and how bored these empty afternoons and evenings felt to him. She recalls the day Brian received a letter saying that his retirement date could be extended by five years. She remembers him going up to the office the next day only to find out that the new administration at the Sutton Estate was not really in need of porters anymore. The new landlord company at the time had brought along their own staff, and Brian was not really needed. She remembers how miserable he was that week. The estate was falling apart, and he felt like he could do nothing about it. In the

last few years, the maintenance work was entirely ignored by the estate in an attempt to drive out the residents and empty out the flats in order to sell them. Susan's friend, Barbara, had been complaining for months about the leakage through her ceiling. She would jokingly tell Brian and Susan that the estate would only take notice once the ceiling comes falling down. And within a week, the ceiling did collapse, and ever since, Barbara has been sleeping in her living room, listening to her bedroom slowly crumble behind the closed door.

As this story went around, several people began complaining about the wet patches that would appear on their ceilings after a night of rain. To distract Brian from agonising over the estate, Susan had given him a packet of beans to grow in the sunken garden. In fact, there was a little banner pinned into the mud that read 'Brian's Beans', marking the exact spot where he planted them. A spot to which his eyes return absentmindedly. For several residents, the garden became a site of growth, care, attention and hope in a dying estate. Even as the walls were invaded by wet patches, and the ceilings were threatening to quit; even as the cobwebs took over the corners of unlit corridors; even as empty homes echoed with the gushing sound of boilers still carrying water long after its users were dead or relocated – the garden continued to blossom.

There was another thing occupying Brian's mind these days. He had recently heard about his uncle, who had passed away thirty or so years ago. While Brian had lost all contact with his uncle, he remembered his visits when he was growing up, and how he always asked the right questions and made him laugh. Then one day he just stopped visiting, and Brian, as a young man with several errands to run and distractions to battle, eventually made peace with it. Several years later, he learnt that his uncle worked as a window-cleaner, and it was while shining up the window on the fourth floor that he fell off and died. Only recently he found out that the uncle was, in fact, buried in the Brompton cemetery that was a short walk from the estate. Brian found the chit of paper in his pocket with his uncle's name scribbled on it. He wasn't entirely sure of the spelling, or the year that he was born and dead. But it still felt like enough information to begin searching with limited hope. As Susan began to pack up, Brian suggested that they go for a walk in the Brompton cemetery to look one

last time for his uncle's grave. She looked up at the sky and realised that the light would only last for another hour or so, and joined Brian on what seemed to her a pointless adventure.

As they reached the cemetery, they saw the scattered monkey-nuts and at once knew that Chris was visiting Valerie. They vaguely browsed through the gravestones, looking for the name of a man they knew very little about. The evening light held together the still and the moving shadows. They found a few names that resembled the name on the chit of paper in Brian's hand, but the engraved years did not match Brian's memory of his uncle. They looked around until it was dark, and then began walking towards the estate with a faint disappointment of unmet expectations that were themselves unclear and elusive. Upon reaching home, Brian stuck the chit of paper on the fridge door; similar to the way his mum would display newspaper articles of murders in the Estate; and lay down on the half-made bed. He looked out of the window and tried to count the number of lit-up windows in the estate, to get a sense of the spreading emptiness that was raiding the estate, and as he counted, in no particular order, sleep gently filled up his eyes.

My Field is a Garden: Notes on Methodology, Mapping and Ethnographic Storytelling



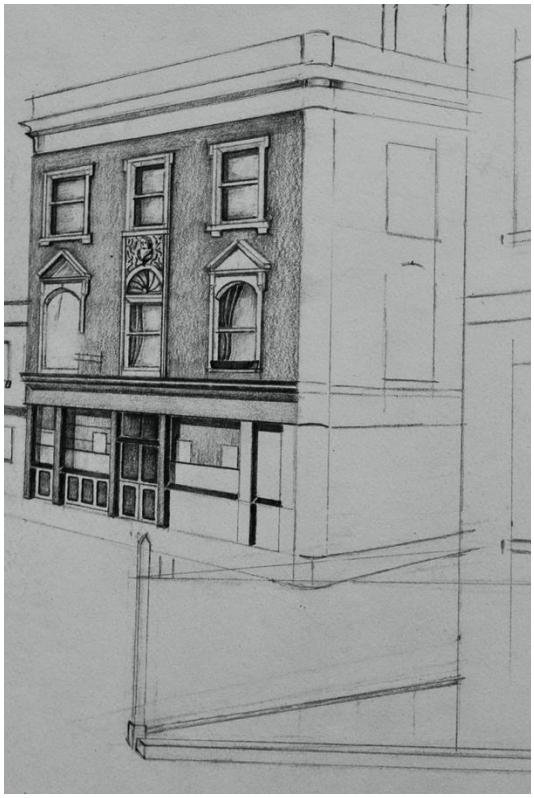
The smell of thyme swept over me like a wave. I looked for the herb all around the garden but it was nowhere to be found. I then noticed a bunch of thyme sticking out of Chris's pocket. He confessed that he had plucked a handful, and reassured me that they will grow back in 'no "thyme" at all', and let out an embarrassed chuckled as he air quoted the pun. He handed me a sprig and asked me to rub it between my palms until I felt fragrant warmth slowly releasing into the winter wind that enveloped us. 'It used to be my mum's favourite smell', he said. We had just concluded my first gardening session at the Sutton Estate, as part of the gardening group that warmly welcomed me into their Wednesday evenings for the rest of the year. Chris packed up the gardening tools in the common shed, and told me that he was on his way to the nearby Brompton cemetery to visit his mum's grave.

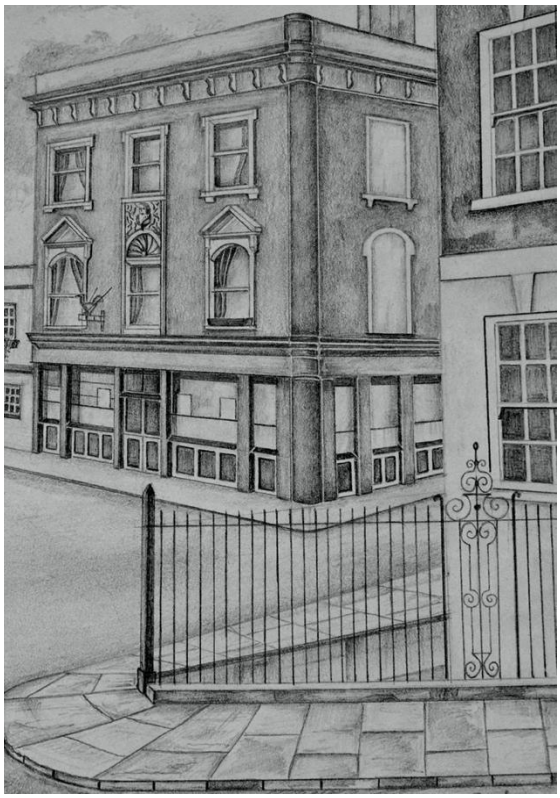
After one of our gardening sessions, I joined Chris for his visit to the cemetery, and upon reaching the grave of his mother, Chris watered the plants around the grave stone and stroked mud off the inscription of his mother's name: 'Valerie'. Sitting by the grave, we spoke about his life growing up on the Estate as we munched on the monkey nuts that Chris had brought along which made us very popular with the squirrels. While visiting the cemetery became one of our rituals alongside gardening, Chris also invited me to his home to see old photographs of Chelsea and the Sutton Estate that gleamed in the background of his childhood photos. He pointed out all the ways in which the Estate has remained the same over time and all the ways in which it has changed. Through the chronology of his childhood photographs, he drew out the lifespan of the Estate.



His living room was full of sketches spread across the table, begging to be completed. He had captured various parts of the Estate and the neighbouring areas in these sketches, with the idea of turning them into postcards for Christmas. Many of the places he captured had changed rapidly over time, and some had entirely disappeared from existence. He took a long time to complete the sketch of the Queen's Head pub that abruptly shut down

three years ago. Over time, he crisscrossed the fence, dotted the windows, shaded the paving stones and punctuated the shadows, thereby tying together the loosely drawn lines into a detailed, completed sketch.





The sketch was made with the help of three points of reference, and each point of reference held onto time with varying grips. The first point of reference was a photograph of the pub taken by one of Chris's friends, and even as it was fading along the edges, it held details of the pub that had gradually disappeared after its closure. The second point of reference were the shifting lines of nostalgia for a place that once used to be buzzing with people watching drag performances, dancing carefree, singing off-key, drinking beer and misplacing lighters. And the third point of reference was the pub itself, which had shed many details over time, as it awaited its contested fate while being suffocated inside a plastic cover.

Looking at the sketch, I realised that empty homes were as much about time as they were about place. Emptiness was not a static attribute of place, but rather a process that unfolded in time. Being empty is not a stagnant state

as I had earlier imagined, but a spectrum along which different kinds of emptiness are slotted and evaluated. While the four locked up blocks of flats visible from Chris's window were rotting behind metal bars, the pub that he sketched changed with time, losing old details and gaining new ones. Emptiness moved alongside timelines of seasonality, disruption, decay and renewal. My methodology needed to be attentive to the element of time (as well as ephemeral and tactile elements like the "smell of thyme"), and how places and their perceptions changed over the course of my fieldwork. In order to do so, I made use of four ethnographic methods, namely, visual ethnographies, moving maps, ethnographic storytelling, and walking, which allowed me to capture the transitional elements that are characteristic to living alongside empty homes.

I carried out these creative methods alongside informal and formal interviews that I conducted in various locations within my field, such as pubs, shops, garden, cemetery and homes of residents. Over the course of the year, I interviewed 35 residents in Sutton Estate, 5 former residents of the Estate who now lived elsewhere and corresponded with me over emails and telephone, and 12 residents who lived in and around Cadogan Square, and most of the residents I spoke with had spent over ten years in the area and therefore were able to draw out the changes in the borough from their own experience and perspective. Along with the residents, I also engaged with the rector of a nearby church, 8 retail workers primarily working in shops on Sloane Street, a postal worker from Royal Mail who distributed post across my field site, 4 cleaners who cleaned homes in Cadogan Square including some homes that were empty for large parts of the year, and specialists in housing ranging from council workers, a housing investor, two architects, a surveyor, 4 real estate workers and a group of activists who are part of an underground group of whistle-blowers.

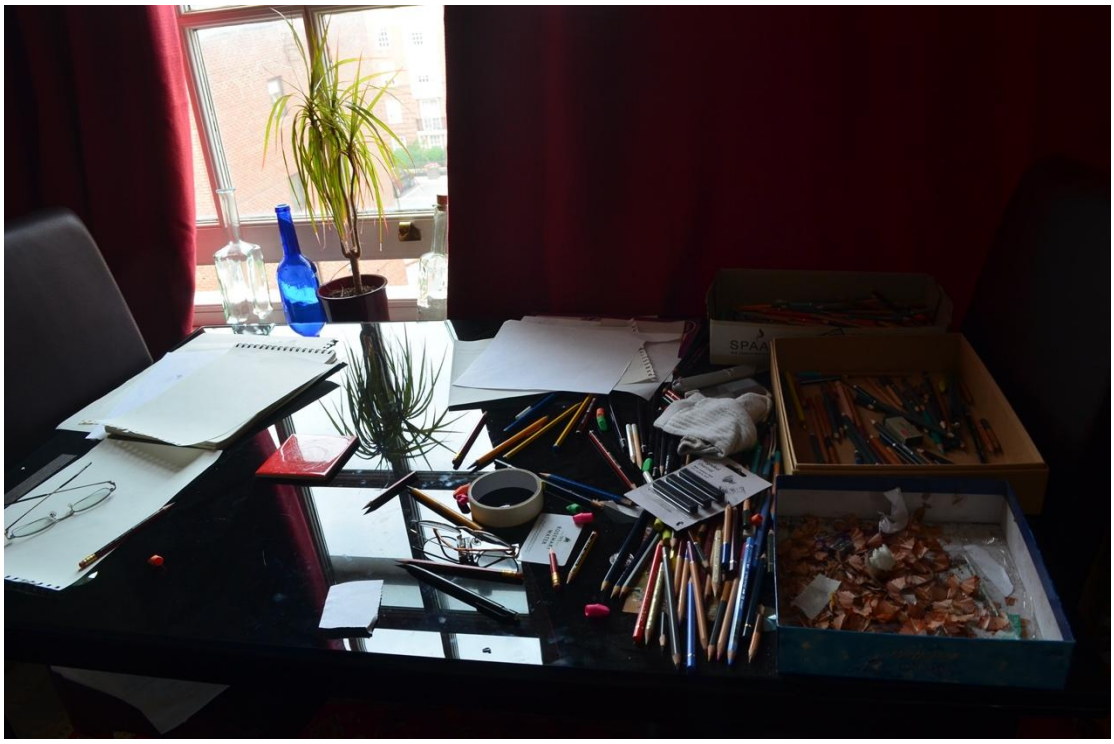
While I met the first set of residents by joining the gardening group in Sutton Estate and organising a poetry event in Cadogan Square, the other residents that I interviewed were introduced to me by the initial group of residents who turned into anchors, pointing me to specific residents and inviting

me to social events that helped me stay plugged into the conversations taking place in the area. Out of these interlocutors, some engagements turned into regular meetings that gave way to meaningful friendships, mainly comprising of the weekly gardening sessions where I met 5-6 residents and interviewed them multiple times over the year and participated in many personal events including birthdays and funerals.

Given that empty homes carry a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, my attempt was to weave together diverse perspectives to arrive at a deeper understanding of what it means to live alongside emptiness. To supplement my ethnographic findings, I also visited the Kensington archives where the receptionist directed me to a floor dedicated to the history of housing in the borough. She also pointed me to old maps of Chelsea, and to specific books written about Cadogan Estate and the rich histories of the homes that the borough was known for. To develop a better understanding of the history of land ownership in London, I also spent many hours in Bookmarks, which is an activist bookshop in central London that holds many books focussed on the question of ownership, distribution and access.

I spoke with people who were specifically concerned with identifying and "solving" the problem of emptiness, while others simply lived alongside empty homes and were affected by emptiness in direct and indirect ways. Out of these residents, some faced direct threats of displacement, in contrast to those who were affected less directly and responded to emptiness through everyday practices that were prompted or strengthened by the presence of empty homes. The creative practices that I follow closely through the thesis – drawing, painting, archiving photographs, carol singing, petitions to scatter ashes in the garden – were not simply a product of empty homes. Rather, they became more rampantly performed against the background of empty homes that were highlighted by newspapers in the case of Cadogan Square, or by the threat of decanting in the context of Sutton Estate. These extreme circumstances that accentuated the presence of empty homes led to a particular emphasis on emotive and creative practices that shaped my methodological approach.

Photographing and Sketching

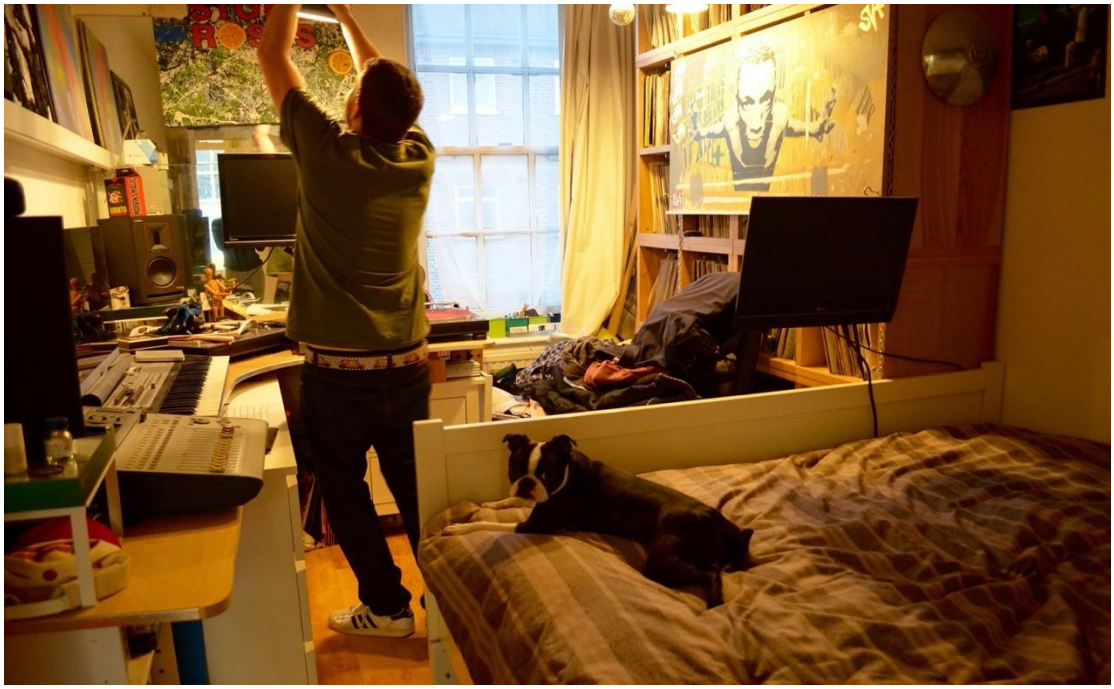


The incomplete drawings sprawled over Chris's desk at once brought to my mind the lens through which anthropologists describe the act of drawing as perpetually unfinished: 'mix raw materials of observation with reverie' (Taussig, 2011; xi) and as 'lines of social life manifest histories of becoming in a world that is never complete but always in progress' (Ingold 2011:220). Echoing Ingold's poetic claim, Chris's incomplete sketch was linked to the process of emptying/decanting that stripped places of their details over time. The incompleteness of drawing, therefore, became an interesting tool to capture the incompleteness of living alongside empty homes. I funded a small art project through the Murray Speight grant that I received in 2018, that allowed a creative collaboration with the residents, and the resulting sketches and drawings serve to illustrate this dissertation.

Chris's desk was not the only one filled with pens and drawings. As I visited some of the other homes, I discovered the rich artistic traditions of the Estate. Many residents drew, painted, sketched, made craft objects and collaborated with one another to present their artworks at the Chelsea Arts Centre and Notting Hill Christmas market. During one of our gardening

sessions, a young student from the nearby design school brought along her canvas to paint in the garden. She realised that she forgot one of her colour tubes and two members of our garden groups brought her their own colours. While Chris sketched parts of Chelsea, Dorinda made papier-mâché sculptures of cats and dogs who used to live on the Estate and have now passed away.

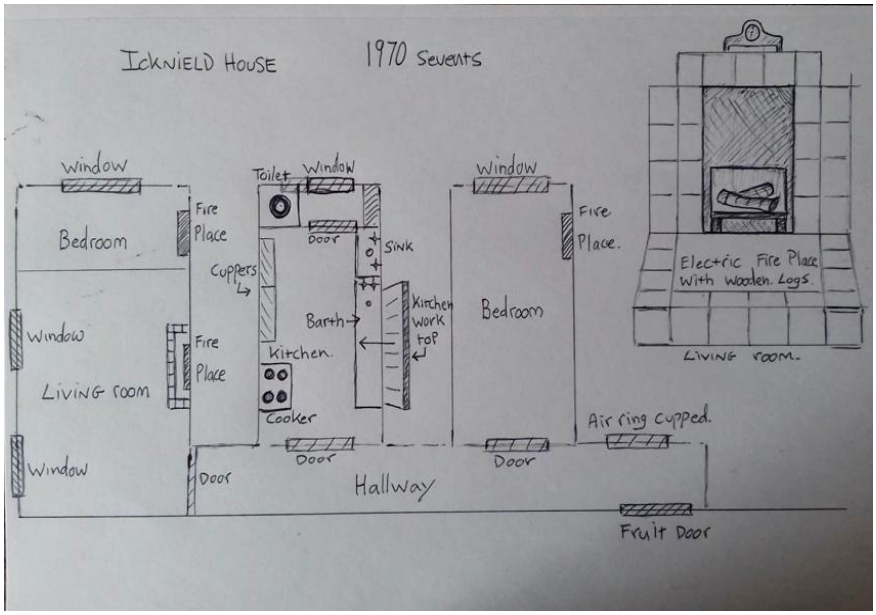


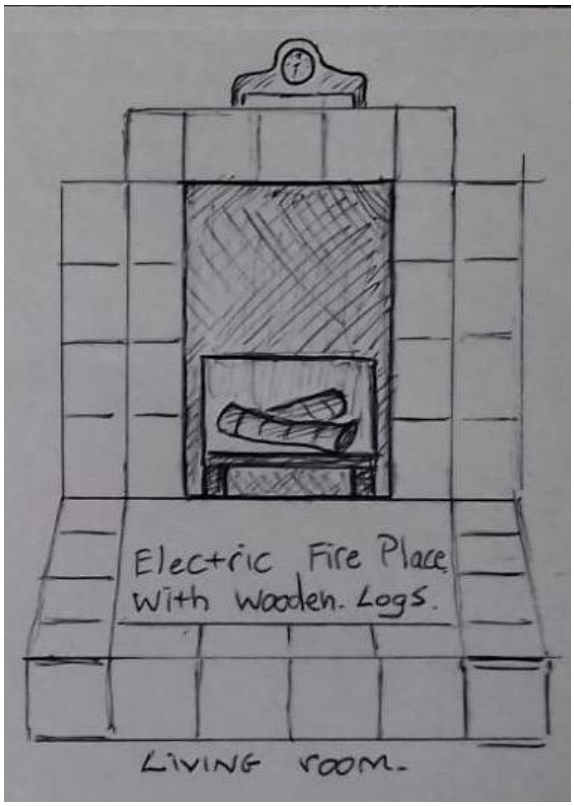


The residents of the Estate invited me over to their homes to see their drawings, and this became an entry point for me into the homes of the Estate that were all decorated with care and creativity. Judit Ferencz (2018), a wonderful illustrator at UCL, also entered her field site, an East London housing estate that was up for demolition, through the medium of drawing. For her, drawing became a tool to get to know people, especially as many of her respondents did not speak in English. In her conversation with Sanders Holsgens, Ferencz (2018) discussed her methodology of creating sketches of the insides of homes, capturing everyday chores and play, to emphasise the lived-in-ness of a housing estate and counter the narratives of planners and politicians who see council estates as sites of improvement. I draw inspiration from her work as I look at the debates around habitability of homes in the Sutton Estate. While the Housing Association spoke of habitability as an objective, technical and fixed standard, the tenants described it as a process. The 1980s redevelopments of Sutton Estate brought new kitchens, moved the baths from the kitchens to bathrooms, created balconies and demolished a block to make place for the light to enter. These redevelopments had many tactile and intimate effects on people's everyday lives, prompting them to rearrange furniture, redecorate, and build new ideas of comfort and safety.

Being an untrained drawer myself, I asked the residents to draw out the maps of their former homes before the developments to get a better sense of what it means to live in homes that were only scrutinised through the lens of betterment. In Chris's drawing of his former home, Icknield House, he added a detailed drawing of his fire place with wooden logs. He pointed towards it and said that the warmth of the fireplace was a memory that he associated with that house as he remembered returning home from the cold weather and just covering himself in a blanket while sitting in front of the fireplace with his mum. In the first chapter, I dwell on these sensorial experiences of what makes a home habitable and relate my discussion to Catherine Fennell's (2011) study of an urban regeneration program in Chicago that privatised heating of homes and how it impacted the relationship between public housing and its occupants. Ferencz also compares the different temporalities and scales at play at a housing estate through the medium of drawing. By capturing the pace of

everyday activities like cooking, cleaning and eating, she counters the grand-narratives paraded by large-scale development projects. She uses drawings to draw attention to the multiplicity of lifespans of a building through the varying temporal frameworks of those who occupy it. This is what prompted me to turn my attention to how different forms of media allow the residents of the Estate to capture their surroundings within varying temporal frameworks.





A photograph allowed for a more precise encounter with a moment of time that can be labelled and chronologically arranged in photo albums as Chris did, or archived in folders as Brian did. But Elizabeth Edwards (2005) challenges this assumed temporality of photography by shifting attention away from the content of photographs to their materialities that have their own lifespans and cycles of renewal. She studied the embodied engagement with photographs in an Australian aboriginal community and focussed on the physical circulation of the photographs and the oral traditions within which they are enmeshed. By bringing attention to the way photographs are held, described, and spoken of, Edwards offer a more tactile and dynamic methodology of dealing with photographs as ethnographic objects. This prompted me to shift my focus away from the ways in which the Estate was captured in the photographs that Brian brought along to the garden, and pay more attention to how he placed the photographs on the garden table. While he placed some photos in an order of chronology, he arranged other photos in relation to one another like puzzle pieces of a larger whole that was the Estate.



Drawing, in contrast to photographs, allows time to pass from the moment of its beginning to the moment of its completion. Taussig (2011; p. 21)

compares a photograph to a drawing by arguing that ‘photograph is a taking, the drawing a making’ and that ‘photograph stops time, while drawing encompasses it’. On one hand, the division seems too simplistic, given that photographs have many timeframes once their material life is taken into consideration (Edwards, 2005) and that many of my participant-drawers used photographs as references for their sketches, breaking the binary between the two media. On the other hand, there is a resonance of this argument in the ways in which drawing as a process took place within my field site. Drawing was an uneven process, interrupted by distractions, breaks for a smoke or conversations about the drawing itself. The bird-watching event that I mention at the start of my dissertation was captured by Chris in his notebook, and as he drew the birds, his points of reference kept shifting. By the time he finished drawing a bird, it had already flown away. Drawings stretch out through time as they can be added to and modified. Chris sharpened details of his sketches using references from photographs he took on his phone. For instance, he looked at the sketch of Brompton cemetery and with a sense of disappointment said, ‘it looks dead’. He added: ‘the cemetery is full of life and animals even though it is a cemetery’, and with that, he decided to add a drawing of a squirrel.



Throughout the thesis, I juxtapose different types of visuals, ranging from photographs, sketches, doodles, forms and newspaper reports. I employ the collage technique, which has been defined by Sophie Woodward (2020; p. 70) as the 'practice of cutting and altering images/different materials and combining them with other images/materials'. This practice relies upon the element of "discovery" sparked by placing two images side by side that could reveal similarities and contrasts, and "jar" people into thinking about familiar objects in new ways. The juxtaposition allowed me to compare how two different media (photograph and drawing) can capture the same scene in profoundly different ways. Woodward (2020) outlines a range of ethnographic methods to push the boundaries of researching the material world. She suggests 'play' as an important tool to engage with research participants in active and inclusive ways, citing examples of Mannay and Edwards' (2013, 2014; in Woodward, 2020) use of sand play therapy that encouraged participants to model worlds out of sand in a tray. Play also becomes useful in contexts that hold many ambiguities as it allows for an understanding of how people fill in missing pieces of the puzzle, not necessarily through facts but also through guesswork, gossip, intuitions and hearsay.

There is also an element of 'play' in the display formats of the visuals in this dissertation as I purposely leave out captions. Instead of naming and dating the visuals, I use juxtaposition to draw out affect in ways that do not rely on textual description, but allow images to speak for themselves and to one another. Hariman and Lucaites (2007), in their book *No Captions Needed,* discuss the strategy of eliminating captions as a way of preventing text from framing an image. For instance, I place sketches of places next to photographs of those place, or photographs of the same site but from different angles of magnification, as a way of giving the reader the opportunity to put together pieces and "make sense" of emptiness in the same way that my respondents do. Inge Daniels' (2010) book on the Japanese House also makes use of images without in-text captions as a way of avoiding 'captions under photographs fixing the meanings' (Woodward, 2020; p.167). Such a format allows the reader to 'play' with their own changing interpretations of what they see and what they read.

Moving Maps

Given the disproportionate power of the uber-wealthy, termed by Danny Dorling (2014) as the 'stratospheric apex of the 1 per cent', there are very few ethnographies that study them (Burrows, 2013). Roger Burrows (2013) argued that the few ethnographies of the uber-rich that do exist tend to borrow tools from the long tradition of Elite Studies, and while he recognises the relevance of these frameworks, he argues that they need to be reworked to allow for an understanding of cities like London that is 'home to a disproportionate number of the world's billionaires'. Understanding this phenomenon requires the study of the super-rich to be approached geographically, leading to what he refers to as the "spatialisation of social class" (Savage, Butler and Burrows, 2013). While the spatial study of class can be seen in studies of gentrification, there are far fewer studies focussed on the spaces dominated by the uber-wealthy. The ESRC project titled 'Life in the Alpha Territories: London's "Super-Rich" Neighbourhoods' (Burrows, Knowles, Atkinson, Butler and Webber, 2013) brought attention to such spaces, and identified a series of terms that help map out places of the uber-wealthy; these included "alpha-territory" (where the super-rich of London reside or buy up homes as investments/second homes) and "prime London" (Glucksburg, 2016).

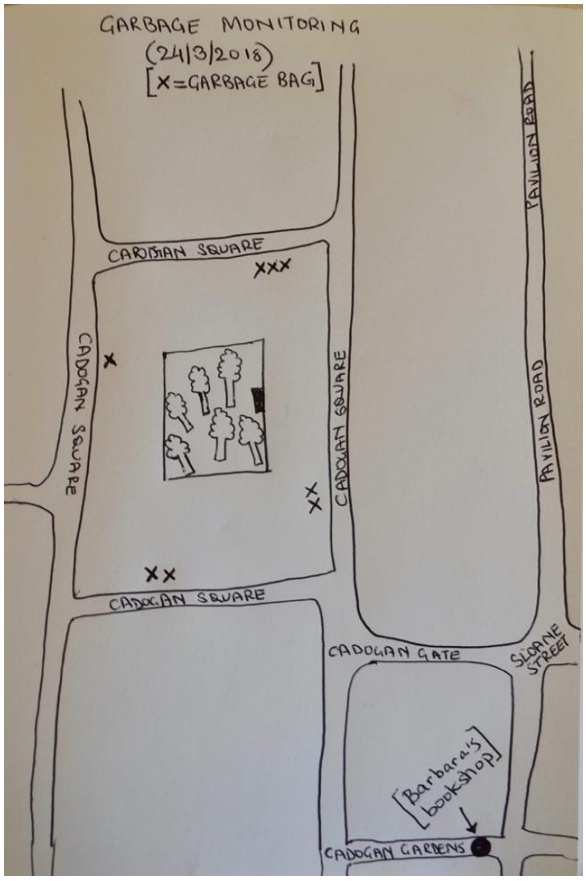
While these spatial categories apply to my field site as Chelsea is framed as "prime" location by the real estate agents, and yet, plotting emptiness on a fixed map would obscure the different textures of emptiness that I want to bring attention to. Seeing emptiness as a process requires my maps to be flexible and mobile. This is why I call my own approach "moving maps". On one hand, I draw on Tim Ingold's (2007) idea of wayfaring, that he distinguished from mapping, arguing that the former is a way of inhabiting a space while the latter is a way of asserting control through occupation (hinting at the colonial origins of mapping). He compared modern practices of mapping to the exercise of joining dots, whereas wayfaring comprises of "lines" that move, grow, and change with time, and he described these lines as "trails along which life is lived" (Ingold, 2007; p. 47). In my own methodology, as I walk through Chelsea with my interlocutors, I approach storytelling, sketching and walking as mutually

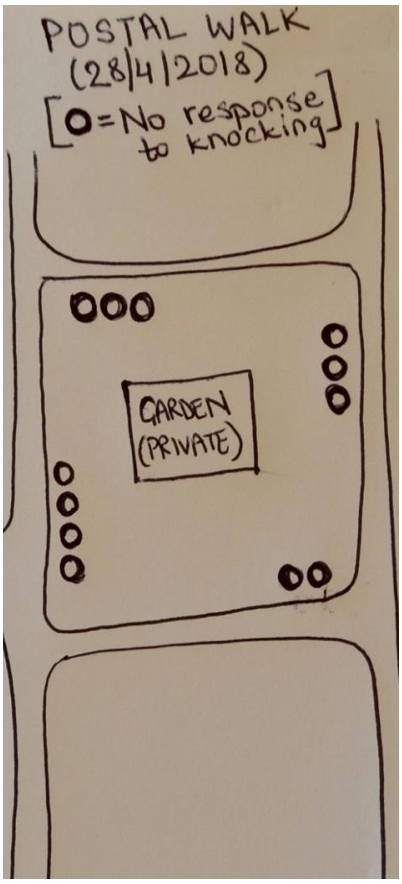
constitutive processes. Ingold drew maps of his own walks, and argued that the process of drawing maps is embedded in storytelling, which is why walking through spaces and knowing spaces are intertwined with one another, unlike modern practices of mapmaking which presume the act of knowing as categorically independent from the act of moving. In contrast, he describes the simultaneity contained in wayfaring through the phrase 'knows as he goes' (Ingold, 2007; p. 50).

My second inspiration came from Danny Dorling and Carl Lee (2016) as they re-imagine map-making as a narrative exercise, which allows maps to tell stories about the places they hold. They draw out maps that play with proportionality, changing relative sizes of places based on population, consumption, movement and waste. Similarly, I collected multiple forms of data about emptiness and soon realised that I could not plot them onto a single map. While the newspapers used unlit windows as visual signifiers of emptiness, I tried to bring in other forms of data from my informal interviews with cleaners, residents, workers and neighbours to plot empty homes on multiple maps. I started working with an organisation called Concrete Action, which is a group of anonymous architects that provide data and information about various housing developments and urban regeneration plans to housing activists. They taught me techniques for capturing real estate data from websites such as Zoopla and Rightmove, and plotting the figures onto a map and, thereby, tracing the duration of emptiness of various homes in the square. This mapping exercise further revealed to me that emptiness is as much about space as it is about time.

Most maps in my notebooks emerged out of daily routes of my interlocutors – the bus-ride from the cleaner's home to the home she cleans, the shortest walk to the cemetery or the longest walk if the sun is out, the walk between the garden and the nearest pub, the walk from the Church to the Square, the morning route of the postal lady who delivers mail in Chelsea. Along with my interlocutors, objects were moved along these routes as well, as the postwoman carried letters from one home to another, Chris carried herbs from the garden to the cemetery and as discarded benches were moved from

the now-closed Queen's Head pub to the sunken garden. I also placed maps side by side to see how emptiness was measured differently by different objects. For instance, I placed a map that emerged from my walk with the postal lady, Loida, alongside a map that looked at garbage bags in the Square on the morning of their scheduled collection.

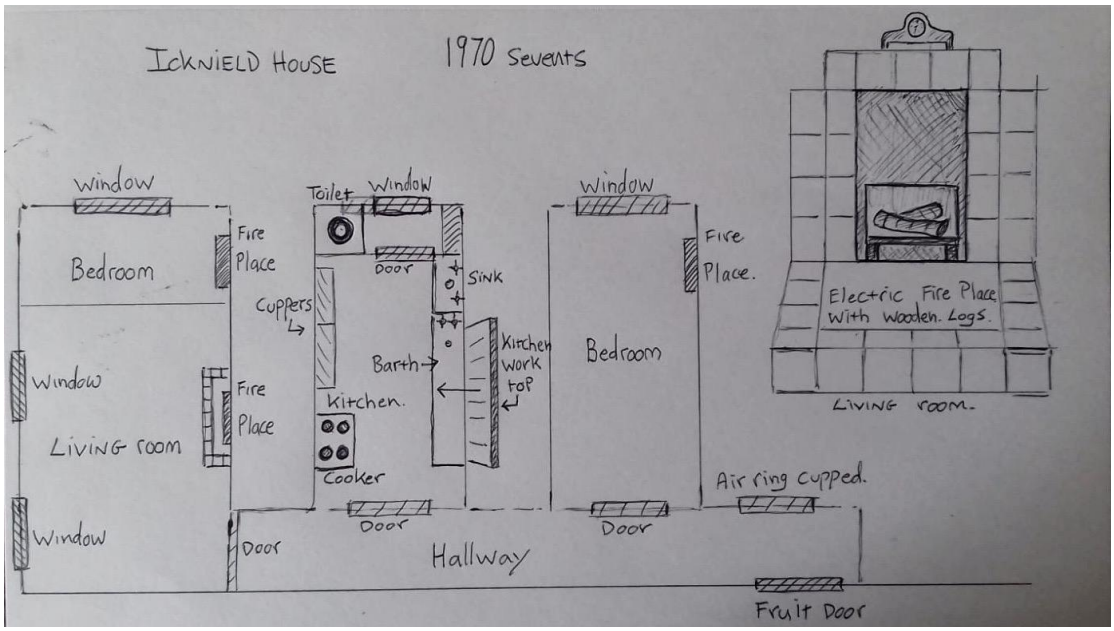


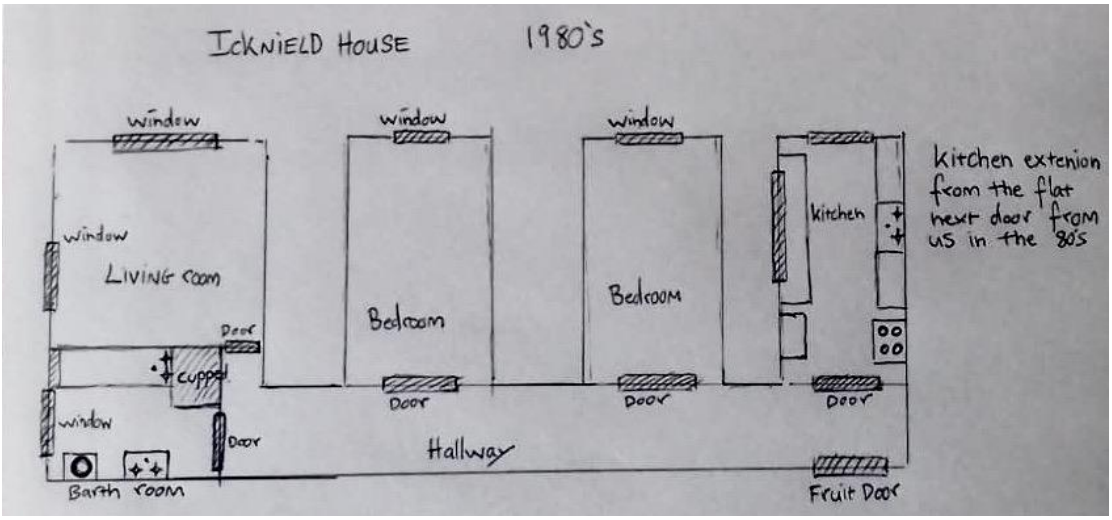


I met the postal lady, Loida, while waiting at a bus stop. She worked in Royal Mail and delivered letters in the area for the past twenty years. After having lunch together, she allowed me to accompany her on some of her morning sessions, distributing post across the Square and neighbouring areas. I made maps in my notebook as she pointed out homes to me that never respond to doorbells. She spoke to me about the changing contents of the post over the years. Instead of letters and parcels with handwritten addresses, a large part of her delivery consists of Harrods newsletters and subscriptions, which reduced the sorting time at the Royal Mail office from one hour to half hour. This could be read as a comment on both, the changing forms of

communication as well as the changing occupancy of homes. I also interviewed four cleaners who specifically cleaned empty homes and were paid through direct debit and rarely met the owners of the homes they cleaned. I marked out the homes they pointed out on a map as well, and compared the maps of different forms of labour – cleaning, collecting garbage and delivering letters.

Placing maps side by side also helped understand changes in the area as well the insides of homes over time. Chris drew two maps of Icknield house in the Sutton Estate and placed them side by side to point to the changes during the 1980's redevelopment works. One of the major changes was the separation of the kitchen and the bath, which used to be part of the kitchen and covered with a kitchen work top for the cutting of vegetables. The kitchen extension swallowed up the next door flat, making the house bigger, and the separation from the bathroom meant that the smells of the bathroom and kitchen were no longer enmeshed as they used to be – a strong sensorial memory that Chris had from his childhood days. Maps like these are helpful in understanding council estates as lived-in spaces, as Ferencz explains, and reimagine large scale betterment projects through their effect on everyday domestic lives of the tenants.

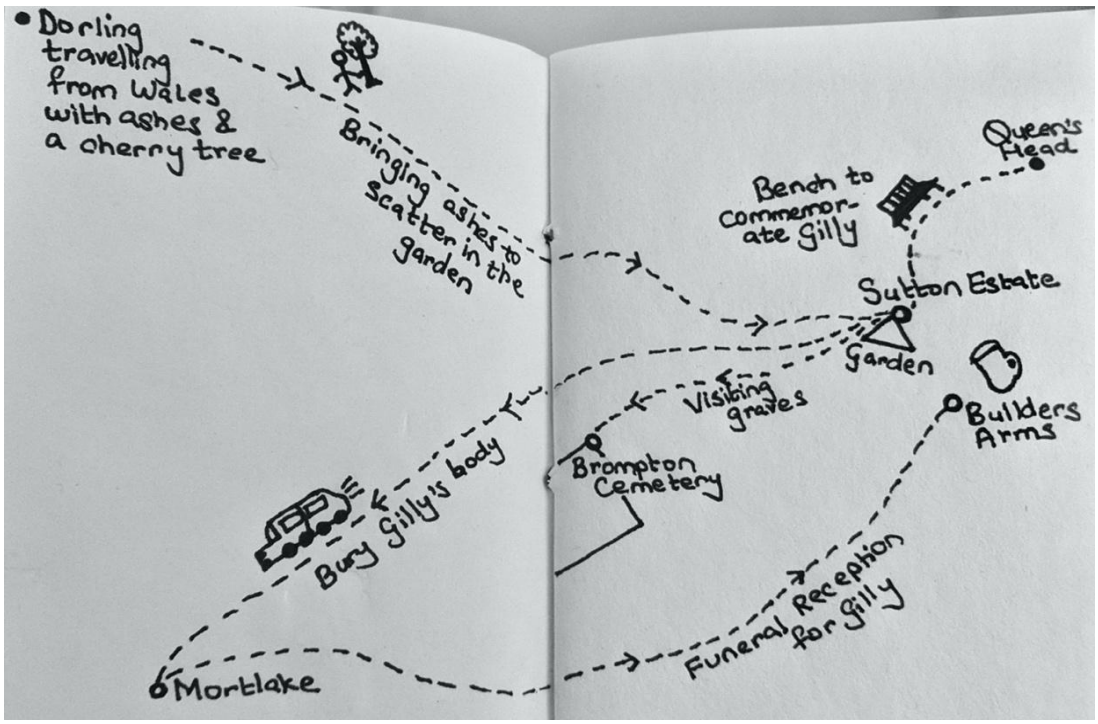




My fieldwork diary is full of maps set to varying scales. Some maps cover the entire city of London, while some maps cover the living rooms of homes in my two field sites, some look at the arrangement of furniture and some trace the placing of objects inside a cabinet. Chris's cabinet functions as a map of his relationship to his mum, captured by the objects they bought for one another, as well as a map of the UK through the postcards of places he travelled to with his mum. Some of my maps emerged from the stories told by residents. Even as these stories did not serve to firmly locate emptiness in particular homes, they helped me reframe the focus of my research to look at how people describe and discuss the emptiness that surrounds them. I looked at common metaphors used by the residents across my field sites, which included echoes, silence and imageries of dying, which broadened my map of emptiness to include the nearby cemetery which served as an important location in my research. I focus on the imageries of dying in my third chapter that expands my field site to include the nearby Brompton cemetery, which holds the buried relatives and friends of some of the Sutton Estate residents and is also a popular walking destination.

I draw on Prendergast, Hockey and Hallam's (2006) multiple-sited ethnographic study of contemporary practices of disposing human remains in in the UK, that asks whether the mobility of ashes and the flexibility of cremation regulations in the UK reduce or heighten the significance of 'place'. I also borrow their methodological framework of multiple-sited fieldwork for my

method of ‘moving maps’, which they relate to the materiality of their subject of study. They look at the materiality of ashes, focusing mainly on their dryness (as opposed to the wetness of corpses), which gives them two distinctive attributes – mobility and divisibility. These two material attributes lend themselves easily into the framework of multiplicity of place. Prendergast et al connect their methodological decisions to these material attributes of their subject. Similarly, I focus on the practices of grieving on the Estate to look at how the decisions around the placing of the remains of the dead were intertwined with claims of belonging. The movability of the ashes heightens the significance of place, as argued by Prendergast et al, thereby allowing me to trace the grieving process on a map. The map below marks out the multiple journeys built around grief. The first path covers the trip made by a former resident, John Dorling, to scatter his aunt’s ashes in Sutton estate where she had grown up in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Other dotted lines indicate the visits to the nearby cemetery and the more recent death of a resident, Gilly, whose funeral I attended at the Mortlake cemetery. The funeral ended with drinks at our local pub, The Builder’s, where we decided to commemorate Gilly’s life through an engraved bench to be placed in the garden where she tended the flowers in her final months of battling cancer. Taking cue from Prendergast et al, I see the grieving process as a moving process between sites of significance.



Writing and Telling Stories

Every time I mentioned my research to someone in London – be it on the tube,[10] in a pub, or while waiting for a bus – I was offered a story. Stories came in different shapes and sizes, and with different levels of insistence on factual accuracy. Some stories were shaped as complaints about increasing rents or the ignored repairs. Other stories were shaped as threats and worries about new developments. And yet others were rumours about ghosts that live in empty mansions. The haunted stories consisted of many sensory dimensions of emptiness, including aspects of sounds, smell and imageries of rotting. I started scribbling these stories in my diary. Stories[11] became a way of recording information as well as recognising the narrative devices through which people related to their homes and made sense of their surrounding landscapes. I usually met the residents across both sites in their homes or the nearby pub for these sessions where they would draw out a narrative of their lives, moving in a chronological way (some would be very specific about dates) or meandering between significant events that shaped their lives. Anat Hetch (2001; p. 129), in her study of a woman's intimacy with her childhood home in London, also used a similar methodology called "autobiographical narration" that she defined as 'a core means of constructing, developing and maintaining a sense of identity, woven out of memories and experience'.

Matt Jacobson and Soren C. Larsen (2014) explore the possibilities opened up by "ethnographic fiction" within the field of Cultural Geography. They argue that the genre itself emerges from the 'recognition that all cultural representations are crafted and, in this sense, fictional; they are partial truths structured by relationships of power and history' (Jacobson and Larsen, 2014; p. 180). Turning to cultural anthropologists, they draw on Hecht's (2006) and Denzin's (1997) understanding in which ethnographic fiction is seen as a means of evoking social life. Jenny Ingridsdotter and Kim Silow Kallenberg (2018; p. 57) similarly centre imagination and empathy at the core of the

[10] Fieldwork tip: the London tube becomes uncharacteristically chatty during off-peak.

[11] Around the same time, I started volunteering at Advice4Renters, a housing advocacy group based in Brent, where I conducted story-telling workshops for tenants with complex housing situations.

process of ethnographic writing. Kallenberg (2016) conducted fieldwork in a compulsory care facility in Sweden, where she worked with young men who were incarcerated. She carried out participation fieldwork and, over the course of her research, developed a close friendship with one of the young men called Issa, who later died in gang violence. Deeply affected by this event, Kallenberg experimented with different styles of writing to capture affective elements that could not be contained within traditional scholarly writing. She developed a short story, which was part ethnographic accounts of Issa's life as well as the lyrics from a song by a Swedish R&B singer, that helped her in her grieving process. Through the story, Issa becomes a fictional character and yet his story becomes "more real" (Kallenberg, 2016; p. 71).

Similarly, my stories allowed intimate details of people's lives to be knitted into a story that unfolded on a fictional day. Here, I draw on Daniel Miller's (2017) 'Comfort of People' approach to writing. He looked at the lives of patients with terminal illness in an English Hospice, and in his stories, he combined materials from different individuals' lives into coherent narratives. However, he clarified that his methodology should not be conflated with fiction writing, 'since everything it contains is designed to convey that which was actually observed or said' (Miller, 2017; p. 18). He used this style also as a way of anonymising people without censoring negative content, which would have led to misrepresentation, and instead, altered a few details that were not significant and would still allow for the story to be told. In fact, one of his stories discusses the harm done to hospice patients due to the preoccupations with confidentiality. Similarly, in my own process of writing, I discovered that while some characters preferred to remain anonymised, others were quite excited about being named. I therefore have used the actual names of all the people who were happy to be named, and for the ones who preferred to stay anonymous, I have not used fake names but simply stated their role in the fieldsite – resident, retail workers, architect etc – to allow the reader to locate their place vis-à-vis empty homes.

The question of anonymity was not strictly a technical one that could be ticked or unticked on my CUREC form. Instead, anonymity or lack of anonymity

became a point of discussion as well as a source of empathy towards shared experiences. My process of storytelling is both written as well as oral. Over time, it turned into a more structured/routine practice as Dorinda started inviting more and more residents for my storytelling sessions. We moved to the nearby pub, and my gradually increasing audience would interrupt the stories to ask me to “go slower” or ask me “who really was the anonymised protagonist of a particular story” or even debate the specific details of the stories. The reception of the stories was as important as the writing of the stories, helping me understand how stories change with each iteration, gaining more context, and lead to more stories. The element of anonymity helped me gain trust of the residents who shared intimate experiences, and it also helped build coherent narratives that many others on the estate could empathise with, resulting in many stories spinning out of a single story. The stories developed a visual element, as Dorinda often illustrated some of the themes we discussed in her pocket-sized “doodle-diary”, and Chris made beautiful sketches of the Estate and nearby places that feature prominently in this dissertation. Drawing opened up another creative medium through which anonymity could be imagined as a creative tool that captures the ambiguities of living alongside empty homes.



Even as I had initially turned to stories as a device to document anonymous narratives, the process of storytelling transformed into a practice of collaboration and creative engagement with people in my field sites. The collaboration allowed me to explore the radical possibilities of participant observation, which has been defined by Alpa Shah (2017) as a "potentially revolutionary praxis" along which anthropology and activism align. Shah situated this revolutionary capacity of ethnographic participation in the element of "surprise", which she defined as 'reaching knowledge not prefigured in one's starting paradigm' (Willis, 1980; in Shah, 2017; p. 48). Here, she drew on Paul Willis's (1978) study of the choices made by working class "lads", which were based not on the capabilities assumed by the sociologists of the time, but instead on unequal opportunities as well as a resistance to linear notions of meritocratic progress. It was only by participating in the field, Shah argued, that Willis was able to discover the everyday realities of a group of individuals who had been stigmatised with a singular narrative up until that point. This is where Shah locates the revolutionary possibility of participant ethnography in contesting grand narratives.

The emergence of stories within social sciences can be contextualised within the phenomenological emphasis on engaged ethnography (Jackson, 2009; p. 13), the rising interest in everyday life (Certeau, 1980), the shrinking conceptual and geographical gap between home and field (Wilk, 2011), praxis of participant observation (Shah, 2017), and the "affective turn" that brought emotions and embodied experiences to the forefront. Kathleen Stewart (2007; p. 2) described affect as 'the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of continual motion'. In her book titled *The Space on the Side of the Road*, Stewart (1996) made use of multiple stories from the spatial and metaphorical margins of America in order to contest the master narratives about a place that often flatten complexities and naturalise divisions. I was also drawn in by Stewart's description of her own fieldwork as she attempted to piece together bits of her interviews, phone calls, photographs, postcards and memories into coherent narratives. Over a period of time, she came to recognise 'patterns in the modes of telling' (Stewart, 1996; p. 8) and started making use of the recurring words and expressions in her own

writing. While Stewart's writing pays close attention to the realm of emotion in understanding inequality and exclusion, Matthew Desmond's (2016) *Evicted* uses storytelling as a way of drawing out an ethnographic portrait of a specific process – eviction. Instead of a phenomenological focus, Desmond's stories keep together the sensorial and material elements, as he intimately describes the daily realities of moving between houses, along with descriptions of objects that were forcibly moved outside homes and left on the street during eviction.

Many of the residents of Sutton Estate brought along domestic and archival objects for me to see, and these objects became part of the process of recalling stories of themselves and the Estate. Alongside my notes and photographs of ethnographic objects that were shared with me, I read Daniel Miller's *Comfort of Things* (2008), in which he looks at thirty households on a street in London. Each story in the book focuses on a particular home by looking at the things that matter most to those who occupy these homes. The objects are seen as the means by which people express who they are. While I drew on Miller's focus on materiality and the centrality of material objects in his stories, I did not want to read too much into the objects that the residents brought me (or brought photographs of). In Miller's first story, titled 'Empty' (which caught my eye for obvious reasons), he tries to relate the bareness of the character's house to other attributes of his life. Hege Leivestad (2017), in her research into mobility, is critical of reading objects like texts, which has been referred to by Inge Daniels (2010) as the "narrative approach", in which chosen objects play leading roles in life stories of individuals. Such an approach centres agency and intention, and ignores other parts of a story, such as atmospheres (Daniels, 2010), negotiations, boredom and accidents. Taking this caution on board, my ethnographic stories take up a third-person speech in order to shift the focus away from introspection and instead, look at everyday life, including mundane activities and half-known realities.

Conversations in Motion

Most of my informal interviews took place between places. Conversations unfolded as I walked around the Estate, moving tools from the shed to the

garden, accompanying the residents to the nearby pub, or walking beside Chris during his weekly visits to his mum's grave in the nearby cemetery. In Cadogan Square, my conversations with the cleaners and the postal lady matched the pace of our walking. We walked around the Square and the neighbourhood areas multiple times as we ate our sandwich and our flow would be interrupted only to vaguely point at homes that were suspected to be empty. Michel de Certeau (1980; p. 97) renders the practice of walking an enunciative function, as it allows the walker to navigate and appropriate a space while also positioning it as an act of everyday resistance against top-down impositions of spatial definitions. Sceptical of representational modes of thinking, Nigel Thrift (2004; p. 43) criticises parallels drawn between enunciative procedures in the field of language and other forms of social practices, arguing that Certeau assumes 'that language is the main resource of social life'. However, I see walking less as a linguistic practice and more as a material practice, taking place through and between material spaces. The practice allowed my respondents to chart out paths most familiar to them, inside and between my field sites, thereby reshaping my field itself. It also allowed them to point to specific sites of relevance and describe how these material spaces orient their movements while also having altered over time.

Lee and Ingold (2006) discuss the practice of walking as a crucial part of ethnographic fieldwork. They begin with an interesting anecdote about Clifford Geertz and his wife from their fieldwork days in Bali. Geertz wrote about how they were ignored by the villagers until the day of the cockfight that was followed by a police raid. Instead of identifying themselves as foreigners, Geertz and his wife ran from the police, along with the rest of the villagers, and this completely transformed the attitudes of the villagers towards them. Instead of posing walking as itself an experience of embodiment, Lee and Ingold argue that walking serves to ground the movements of the ethnographer and the respondents within shared circumstances. They draw out resonances between walking and fieldwork, pointing to the fact that they are both practices that unfold close to the ground, create a shared rhythm with those around us, and entail a movement as well as the charting out of routes.

These resonances echo in the course of my fieldwork. In fact, my first few weeks of fieldwork in the Sutton Estate involved a very close relationship to the physical ground upon which I stood. The process of gardening required me to not just be in touch with the ground with my feet, but also bend down and get my hands dirty. I helped with the tilling of the soil, the picking up of cigarette butts and the sweeping of dead leaves. During one of the gardening sessions, Dorinda made me take off my shoes and socks, and walk barefoot on the soil to teach me the distinction between 'good' soil and 'bad' soil. She also taught me how I could shove a sharp stick at a particular angle into the ground to check the level of moisture of the inside layers of the soil. So, not only was I 'attuned to the environment' (Lee and Ingold, 2006; p. 68) and in a multisensory engagement with the physical surface of my field, I was actively upturning the ground and learning about the physical and metaphorical layers of the Estate from the residents who provided a running commentary about the Estate.

My engagement with place was multi-layered – methodologically as well as physically. While windows and skylines made up many of the conversations about emptiness in London, I also looked at the physical attributes of a building, such as altitude and depth, to understand the ways in which leaks, echoes and mould populated spaces left empty by humans. My research also went below ground level, as I looked at the planting of trees, scattering of ashes, and visits to and conversations with graves in the nearby cemetery, to understand the topographical layers of belonging created by those who feared displacement. The conversations about the underground were also significant due to the geographical properties of council estate. The sunken garden was grown within a concrete pit, and underneath, according to Brian's suspicions, lay an underground laundry that was in use during the wars. Now, it was filled in with concrete and covered with many layers of soil. Even in Cadogan Square, the level below the ground level was of significance, as it is the caretaker's flat. These caretakers are key to the maintenance of largely empty flats and to the upkeep of the historical spectacle performed by the exteriors of these hollow homes. Walking through my field sites with my interlocutors, helped me to understand the unevenness and layered-ness of the ground.

Drawing on Wallace's (1999) study of the cultural and literary importance of walking in nineteenth-century England, Lee and Ingold (2006; p. 69) point to the significance of walking within the Romantic tradition, in which it has been 'associated with a closeness to nature and attention to detail in the environment that are seen to be otherwise lost in modern life'. Nigel Thrift (2004) provides a critique of the privileged place of walking within Certeau's analysis. Alongside the practice of walking, Thrift looks at the practice of driving, which, he argues, has sunk into our "technological unconscious". He argues that this particular mode of spatial engagement 'constitutes a radically different set of spatial practisings of the city which do not easily conform to Certeau's strictures on space and place' (Thrift, 2004; p. 41). He also suggests that most of walking in the contemporary world requires a car-travel, thereby cautioning against the simplistic linking up of walking to a more authentic experience of a place. Even as I agree with Thrift's stance of not holding 'walking' as a purer form of spatial engagement, yet, in the course of my fieldwork, the romance of the walk is an important characteristic of the ways in which people relate to emptiness along the way. While walking with the residents of both my field sites, many of the conversations we had carry a hint of romantic nostalgia for the places that we pass by – places that have shut down, been abandoned or replaced by something alien. I do recognise the dangers of giving in to these romanticised notions of place, which are premised on 'the expectation of a singular authenticity beyond the surface of social reality' (Theodossopoulos, 2013; p. 337), and yet, I cannot deny its power as evoked by my respondents. How can I resolve these two conflicting stances – of not romanticising walking on one hand, and of acknowledging the romance that was expressed and operationalised by my respondents while walking alongside empty/emptying places on the other?

In the UK, the romance attached to walking itself carries immense political currency as walking becomes closely associated to a sense of commitment to the local, which is operationalised by politicians to gain popular appeal. Walking as a physical and symbolic act becomes a demonstration of being in touch with the city. Recently, Rory Stewart, an ex-Tory member who is currently running for Mayor of London in the upcoming election, embarked on

a walk through the boroughs of London as a way of getting back in touch with the city and hearing people's concerns. As with members of the Conservative party, Stewart went to an elite preparatory school, Dragon School, followed by Eton and then to Oxford, thereby positioning him as far removed from the realities of the country. Insa Koch (2017), in her study of voter withdrawal in council estates, attributed the trend not to a disinterest in politics or an increasing individualisation, as suggested by some, but rather to the 'constitution of personhood' in the council estate, within which the politician is seen as the antithesis of local socialities and juxtaposed against a "locally useful person". To counter this, Stewart's campaign involved a walk through the city's boroughs, as he recently tweeted: 'The way that mayors get to know their cities is by literally walking through every one of the 31 boroughs, being in other people's shoes, seeing things through their eyes, staying in their houses'. Even if I am sceptical of relying on the romantic associations of 'walking' and the authenticity of place, I cannot underestimate its relevance.

Sarah Pink (2018) takes up a collaborative approach to the practice of walking and its documentation. She studied the development of the Cittaslow (Slow City) movement in the UK, which is a form of indirect activism to improve qualities of urban life, and collaborated with her participants to produce audio-visual media of the routes. Taking cue from Pink, I looked at a Facebook album of photos, taken by one of the other residents, of the graffiti on the street signs in response to the gentrification of Chelsea. The street signs had been edited with a black marker to highlight the anti-poor attitude of the borough and express outrage towards the constant cycles of demolition and displacement. The next day, when Dorinda and I went for a walk to her school, she pointed to the signboards that stood corrected. Photo-projects like this one become important to my understanding of how people not only make places and routes, as Lee and Ingold suggest, but that they also unmake these places and routes by creatively manipulating the objects of orientation. Instead of facilitating movement, these street signs forced people to stop and read, thereby shifting away from the romance attributed to the act of walking that is associated with moving and 'discovering' (Ingold, 2006) places, and instead, allowing the places to talk back to its walkers.


The ROTTEN Borough of Kensington
and Chelsea
LANCASTER
ROAD, W.11.


RESIST
TORIES
murderers OUT
BRIDGE
CLOSE, W.10.

Infrastructure and Metaphor

There were many surprises in the Sutton Estate. I would walk into the Estate on some evenings and it would be empty as a graveyard (though the nearby graveyard was usually quite full of visitors), and on other evenings, the garden was bustling with people reading, chatting, sketching, complaining and fixing things. During one of my visits, I noticed a bright blue bucket placed right below a leak in the wall. The bucket was not full enough for the cat that tried to poke her face into it before Dorinda shoed her away. She looked at me and said, 'Maybe the leak is hard to notice, but there is no excuse for not noticing this bright blue bucket – that should catch their eye!' The Estate, as I was told multiple times by the residents, was going through a 'managed decline', curated by the housing association in order to vacate the blocks rapidly. This led to many creative ways of either seeking attention of the association and the Council. The association had also distributed surveys that I look at in more detail in the first chapter, in which they asked the residents about their wishes for the Estate. In response, the residents ripped apart some of the forms with the vigour of their pens, as their words tumbled outside the assigned boxes, and exclamation marks held together their scattered sentences.

Through blue buckets, red pens or the "splash of green" (as the garden group describe the garden and its role in the Estate), the residents interrogate the drab narrative of the council estate. I looked at these creative interventions made by the residents through two lenses. The first lens emerges from the anthropology of infrastructure, with a focus on the newer approaches to repair (Anand, 2011; Thrift, 2013; Jackson, 2015) that propose a shift from languages of fixing to languages of care. The second lens relates to the use of metaphors. It is not difficult for emptiness and conditions of emptiness to lend themselves to the realm of the metaphorical. As a short story writer, I had to exercise tremendous restraint in not turning the leaking of walls, the dryness of soil, or the fading of bricks into poetic expressions of disintegration and abandonment. Instead, I looked at them as material practices of care towards a place. And yet, as suggested above, I was interested in the ways in which the residents

themselves used these metaphorical categories in strategic ways. I see my two lenses as interrelated.

Larkin (2008) and Kockelman (2010) argue that the anthropology of infrastructure allows for a deeper understanding of the role of breakdown and the various forms of life and sociality to which the breakdown gives rise. This definition can risk romanticisation of breakdowns. Instead of turning breakdown into a metaphor, I see how those in my field site instrumentalise metaphors of disrepair and inattention in order to fight the naturalisation of emptiness and decay. While teaching me how to test the moisture of the soil, one of the garden group members drew parallels between the soil that crumbled out of inattention and the state of her Estate. Similarly, many of the older residents draw parallels between their own ageing bodies and the ageing buildings of the Estate, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter three. However, I see these metaphors not as divorced from materiality, but instead as material metaphors. They emerge from an embodied engagement with material spaces, be it through gardening, repairing, observing, reporting or even ignoring. These metaphors become ways of making sense of ambiguous phenomena in the same way that Christopher Tilley (1999) described the role of metaphors as "mediators" between the abstract and the concrete, through which 'a poorly understood domain is translated into metaphorical terms'.

I steer clear of poetic metaphors exemplified by Ingold's (2010; p. 8) approach to leakages, which he describes as the 'opposite of capture and containment', and within which one can 'discover the life of things'. By contrast, I have been influenced by Nikhil Anand's (2015) approach in his study of the water shortage in southern Bombay, India, in which he focuses on the political, metaphorical and physical senses of the word 'pressure'. He locates leakages not as shortcomings of a system, but within the context of ongoing, active negotiations and informal technologies of repair. He follows the water flow through the pipes of homes, and discovers how the fall in pressure prevents the upstairs families from accessing water. Furthermore, those who occupied the homes on the top came from marginalised communities. Anand therefore

draws out an ethnographic relationship between height, pressure, flow and marginality, thereby keeping together the metaphor and the material.

For instance, across my two sites, one of the common descriptors of empty homes that emerged was the “echo”, which was at once sensorially and metaphorically linked to emptiness. In Cadogan Square, the echo was heard by the carol singing group during Christmas in 2018, as the silent reception of their carols triggered discomfort. In Sutton Estate, the echo emerged from the sound of boilers that could be heard reverberating in empty flats. However, an echo is not an abstract metaphor but produced within specific material conditions. By looking at the echo as a material metaphor, I was able to contrast the echoes across my two sites. The echoing sounds of the boiler emerged from the emptiness of a recently decanted flat whose tenants had been relocated, but the boiler had not been turned off and therefore reverberated in the empty space, reiterating that emptiness is always a process that unfolds unevenly. The echoes of carol-singing were not limited to a particular home but, in fact, related to a larger, spread-out phenomenon of ghost squares in London, in which the silence during the month of Christmas signified a more disruptive emptiness, as opposed to the seasonal absences that do not create the same panic.

Living alongside empty homes led to many deductions and inferences. Not having direct access to many of the owners of empty homes, much of my own ethnographic methodology relied on these inferences drawn by my interlocutors, in which I was interested in both, the inference itself as well as the process by which these inferences were drawn and presented to me with varying insistence on accuracy. In the course of my dissertation, I explore these interferences through material metaphors (echo, age, death, decay), sensory descriptors (silence, stillness, darkness), imageries used by newspapers (unlit windows), gossip and stories that were repeated to me over and over again. By keeping together the material, metaphorical and sensorial, I hope to explore the richness of life that emerges in response to emptiness.

Building a Network

Housing in London has been widely studied, and not just by academics. Housing is discussed and theorised by housing activists, think tanks, creative collectives, non-profit organisations and private companies. While some of the organisations approach housing through the lens of investment, others approach it as a design-problem that could be creatively resolved. The newspapers had their own data on empty homes and housing prices that they served with their own hot takes. Even within investment, there are companies, such as Social Finance, that work with housing organisations and private funders in the UK to align social and financial returns, thereby producing a complicated relationship between public and private organisations. Housing in Britain cannot be understood purely through the lens of private ownership, given that the aristocratic estate owns many of the homes in Cadogan Square and the homes in Sutton Estate are owned by the housing association that functions as Registered Social Landlords. Therefore, the map of stakeholders is a messy and shifting map.

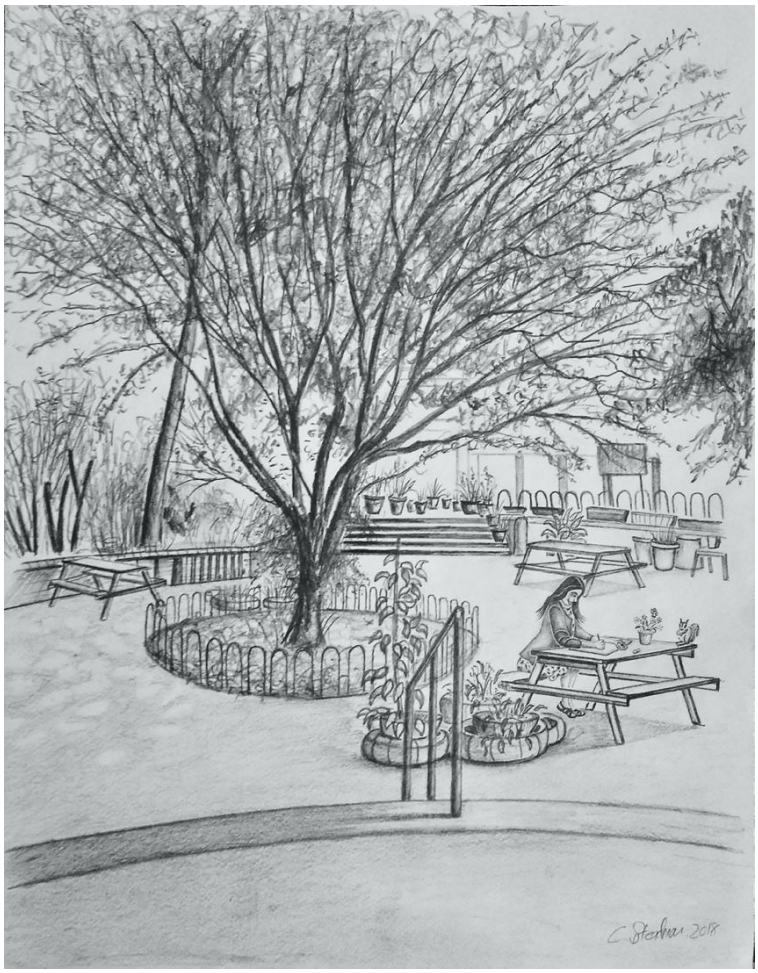
In order to work through this map, I arranged interviews with members of the housing board of Social Finance, managers at the Cadogan and Grosvenor Estate, architects and members of housing activist groups. Through these conversations, I realised that it was not just the residents of my two field sites who were confused about who was in control. The residents in the Sutton Estate were frustrated with the neglect towards the Estate but were not entirely sure who the object of their frustration was. Was it the Council, the Housing Association, the Management team that was from a private company to whom the care of the Estate had been outsourced? Similarly, the residents of Cadogan Square often expressed to me the complexities of the freehold/leasehold structure, and even as some of them owned the freehold of their homes, they had to coordinate with the other members of the building (who were on leaseholds) to arrange for repairs and carry out maintenance work. This shared confusion opened up the possibilities of collectively exploring and navigating the structures of power across my field sites. To do so, I would sit down with the residents in both sites and draw out maps and tables to clarify

which parts of housing were controlled by which bodies. Pablo Sendra and Daniel Fitzpatrick (2020) recently brought out a book drawing on various community-led struggles against demolition to produce a toolkit for residents and planners, and support sustained resistance against top-down planning.

I also interviewed those who specialise in the field of housing. These interviews ranged from conversations around the housing market, different forms of investment in housing, legislature around habitability, and concerns around and impact of empty homes in London. When it comes to housing, it is difficult to draw a clear line between a specialist analysis and a personal narrative. Many of the experts in housing would often start or end their analysis by drawing an example from their own lives or lives of people they knew. Similarly, my interviews with the residents across the sites would constantly meander between extremely personal experiences on one hand and detailed analysis of the housing market, the history of the area and the infrastructure of their own homes, on the other. In my second chapter, I explore how houses turn into objects of history, objects of analysis, and objects of care in these conversations. The house/home binary therefore crumbles as these objects are posed as material, affective and historical by those who live inside them.

I also locate these conversations within the larger contexts of the city as well as the recent debates on the future of the country itself. As a large number of my respondents were above the age of 50, they frequently brought up the narratives around Brexit. Some of the Sutton Estate residents firmly distanced themselves from “those Brexit voters”, which I reflect on in more detail in the third chapter. A few of the residents described the artistic and unconventional histories of the Borough in order to distinguish themselves from the stereotypes about working class estates. They spoke about the cultural and linguistic richness of the Borough, and listed the talks and exhibitions that they had visited in groups in the past year. The idea of the community had stretched outside its conventional imaginations in my own head, as I began to draw out a broader and more inclusive sense of a community in the Estate that had welcomed me into their homes with warmth.

Even as my thesis is about empty homes, my fieldwork was made possible by spaces and moments of sociality. I was invited for dinners, walks and picnics, and I made my way for Thursday morning Eucharist and Wednesday evening gardening sessions. My fieldwork unfolded in line with rituals and routines, many of which arose in response to the emptiness, and over time, I became woven into these routines. For instance, one evening I arrived earlier than usual and as I waited for the gardening group, I took out my diary and started writing one of my ethnographic stories. Chris called out to me from his window, and as I looked up, he asked if he could sketch me as part of the sunken garden. As I nodded with a smile, I realised that I was not the only one watching, listening and making notes. My methodological approach unfolded as a collaborative process of understanding what emptiness means – a question that I was not the only one asking.



‘No Details in Emptiness’



Ben used his mobile phone torch to light up the staircase leading up to his home. Ever since the first two floors became empty, the corridor bulbs haven’t been replaced. While some of them had burnt out with time, the others were supposedly stolen by the woman on the first floor right before she disappeared. Her disappearance, like wet clay, was moulded into different stories. Some stories were shaped as moral lessons about what to do and what not to do in the Estate. The general plot of these stories revolved around the woman ignoring the rules and regulations of the Estate, sub-letting her apartment, and eventually, getting caught and removed from her home.

Other stories were shaped as suspicions regarding the ongoing process of ‘decanting’ wherein residents were being moved out to make place for regeneration. He bumped into a cardboard box and felt annoyed that the

second-floor man had still not collected his parcel. Ever since the Irish neighbour passed away, the building has been nearly half empty, allowing the residents to leave their doors open for ventilation and their deliveries unattended, confident that nobody would steal them. Ben reached his front door, and could hear his dog's intuitive squeals. He made his way to the bedroom, and sat next to the bed, placing his hand on his father's knee. In the shadow held by the evening light, he noticed how the frame of his father's body had changed over the years.

Ben's father registered his son's presence and smiled through his unfocussed eyes. He asked the same questions that he always does – about the weather, the birdfeed in the garden and the faulty bulbs of the building. Ben gave out a deep sigh, which consisted of, in equal parts, an annoyance towards the repetition that shaped their interactions these days, and a sense of relief that all these little bits of information were still not eaten up by his father's Alzheimer's. He dug out his sketchbook and began sharpening his colour pencils and browsing through his sketchbook. Most pages in the sketchbook held various parts of the estate. The dark red bricks that formed the background of all his childhood escapades were now covered in spider webs and leakages. Several places held together so tenderly by the pencil lines were now slowly disappearing. The Queen's Head was recently shut down and Ben's old school was slowly being torn down just down the street.

As he turns the page, he finds an old sketch of the block of flats framed by his bedroom window. The sketch was highly detailed – clothes drying on a railing, a sleeping cat, mismatched sculptures and artificial flowers arranged in the hallways, and a boy being summoned to play by his group of restless friends. Ben and his father look outside their window to stare at the same flats that now lie empty. 'There are no details in emptiness', Ben whispers. His father nods, as he struggles to remember the insides of these flats. His memory, much like the flats, battles with an ever-growing emptiness. Working as a plumber, there was a time when he knew these flats inside out. Today, the flats, much like his memory, have slowly lost their details. They were declared

uninhabitable a few years ago, and all the occupants were removed and relocated.

In the past few months, carrying his father up and down the staircase, especially in the dark, was becoming more and more strenuous. Last week, when his father said he wanted to sit in the garden and feed the birds, Ben made up an excuse. Even in his condition, the father could somehow sense his reluctance, and ever since, has stopped asking his son to carry him downstairs. Through the narrow opening of the English window, the father watches the changing lights cast upon the city that was denied to him for a reason he didn't quite know. Ben doesn't know how to tell his father that the reason he doesn't want to carry him downstairs has less to do with the physical inconvenience of the act and more to do with the fear of his father being seen and reported. He is scared that they would receive a notice from the housing association stating that they can no longer live in a single bedroom flat on the fourth floor due to reasons of health and safety. He's stopped inviting guests over, or interacting with too many neighbours. And when he walks his dog, he keeps his conversations with other dog-walkers short and to the point. He is terrified of questions about his home and his father.

Brushing aside his thoughts, he looked around vaguely for inspiration for his sketch when he suddenly caught his father's face staring longingly at the garden outside the window, and Ben knew at once what he wanted to sketch. Since he couldn't take his father downstairs, he decided to capture all the details of the garden in a sketch to hang by the bedside table. He collected his colour pencils and rushed downstairs. He spared not a single flower or a bird, and used the side of his pencils to capture the fading evening light. He sat for an hour and a half and drew the outlines of all the people who visited the garden for a chat, a quick smoke or to pluck out the dead flowers and brush away the dried leaves. Once the light began to disappear, he packed up all his colours, and went back upstairs, fumbling through the dark, kicking the same delivery package on the second floor, and muttering curses.

He found his father half asleep on the bed. He gently patted his shoulder. When his father awoke, Ben showed him the sketch. He stared at it for several minutes, looking over the different textures caught in the changing light, and smiled at his son in silence. Ben realised that his father could not recognise the sketch. He could not recall the garden, or the bench, or even the birdfeed that he had once made with his own hands many years ago. But he said he liked the sketch very much. He placed it on the bedside table and went back to sleep. He looked at it for many mornings that followed – sometimes with familiar longing and sometimes with confused wonder.

Chapter One

‘State’ of Housing: Measuring Habitability of Empty Flats in a Council Estate



In August 2019, a teenager was stabbed near St Luke’s Church (Maighna Nanu, *MyLondon*, 14th August 2019) in Chelsea, not far from my two field sites. As the roads were cordoned off by the police, the teenager and his friends were in search of a place to take refuge. While Chelsea is full of green spaces, most of them are only accessible to rich residents who have a key to unlock the garden gate. Many locked up gardens sit empty, bordered by second homes on all four sides. The group ultimately found shelter in the Sunken Garden at the Sutton Estate, which welcomed them with an open gate into its safe sanctuary. The head of the garden club, Dorinda Montgomery, said to the journalist that she was happy to know that the garden was seen as a place of solace and safety. When asked about her motivations behind starting the garden group, she recalled her favourite saying: ‘plant a garden if you believe in tomorrow. If you do plant something you can’t get depressed because you’re waiting every day to let it grow’. The ‘belief in tomorrow’ becomes a poignant way of fighting the narrative of drabness and uninhabitability that was being weaponised by the Housing Association to empty out the Estate and demolish

it. The ‘belief in tomorrow’ becomes a way of reclaiming a future that is being denied by the threat of emptiness.

Clarion Housing, the Housing Association running the Estate, was ‘decanting’ the Estate through systematic negligence in order to make a case for regeneration, which would come with the expulsion of current residents and a shift away from social housing towards private housing. This is not a new story. The urban regeneration projects in London have facilitated social gentrification as the poor have been forced out of the city, and especially out of wealthy boroughs like Kensington and Chelsea, where 10% of the homes are listed as second homes (Action on Empty Homes Report 2019), but which cannot find the space to house its less wealthy residents due to its perennial shortage in social housing. Loretta Lees (2019), a human geographer and a specialist on gentrification in the UK, created a database as part of an ongoing ESRC project that lists the growing number of council housing lost through urban regeneration plans. According to the database, in the past two decades, over 54,263 units have either been demolished or scheduled for demolition (Lees and White, 2019).

Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2011) theory of zones of social abandonment forms a good basis to understand the underlying logic of urban regeneration. She studied the ways in which social abandonment is justified and normalised within late liberal imagination. For abandonment to be justified, she argued, harm is framed as a sacrifice in the present for the promise of a better future. Within such a logic, decanting and demolition become default recourses for decaying buildings. Abandonment is not necessarily an active event but rather, ‘a lack of an event’, by which Povinelli alludes to the ‘the routine, mundane, unnoticed, slow process of decay’ (Povinelli 2011; in Li, 2013; p. 703). A similar accusation was made by the residents against the Housing Association for its strategic negligence in the management of the Estate. This was described by the residents as “managed decline”, in which the maintenance of the Estate was intentionally neglected as a means of justifying its demolition. The language of decline assumes a linear trajectory of material decay, as also

discussed by Constance Smith (2018) in the context of a council estate in Nairobi.

Tania Murray Li (2013), in a similar vein to Povinelli, sought to examine the rationale of improvement schemes in the highlands of Central Sulawesi in Indonesia. However, she is critical of Povinelli's emphasis on 'endurance' of individuals against oppressive systems and instead of assuming a hidden agenda behind policies of improvement, she situates the tension between the technical discourses of improvement and 'conditions under which expert discourse is punctured by a challenge it cannot contain' (Li, 2013; p. 11). She distinguished between two realms – the practice of government and the practice of politics. While the former frames the concept of improvement as a technical and static goal, the latter pokes holes in the linear imagination of progress. Taking up what Sherry Ortner called the "ethnographic stance", Li is wary of posing people at the receiving end of these improvement programs as heroes contesting power. Instead, she looked at the ways in which people at the receiving end engage in evaluations of costs and benefits of improvement schemes, and how these negotiations reveal the targets of these improvement schemes as "prickly subjects" (McClure, in Li, 2013; p. 22).

In order to not fall for the same trap of attributing too much significance to 'endurance' and positioning residents as heroes championing rights, I study the debates around habitability as an ongoing negotiation between the material and the legal, between policy and practice, and between acknowledging decay and ignoring it. For instance, many of the residents were nervous about reporting damages with the fear of their flat being declared uninhabitable, inadvertently contributing to the overall decay of the estate. Ignoring became a way of caring for a place. The tension that forms the crux of this chapter is not so much between the residents and the Housing Association, between caring and neglecting, between habitability and uninhabitability. Instead, much like Tanya Murray Li's two realms of analysis — the practice of government and the practice of politics – the tension in my field site emerges out of the conflicting definitions of habitability. The first definition poses habitability as a technical, quantifiable measure (laid out by policies like the Decent Homes Standards

2000[12]), and the other definition poses it as a dynamic relationship between people and their homes.

While Li's ethnography was set in Sulawesi, Nayanika Mathur (2008) discusses the larger relevance of her work, which brings together two lenses of analysis that are often kept apart. The first lens is the analysis of government interventions and the second lens is the study of 'what happens when those interventions become entangled with the processes they would regulate and improve' (Li, 2007; in, Mathur, 2008; p. 83). This is precisely the methodological approach that I wish to borrow from Li for this chapter, as I follow the trajectory of the planning permission, which spans the course of my fieldwork. Like Li, I will keep together the study of the bill itself, which includes all the documents circulated in the Estate, the minutes of the Townhall meetings and the wording of the permission, alongside the study of the reception of these debates within the Estate and the practices carried out by the residents in response to the claims of uninhabitability.

The debates in the townhall commenced at the start of my fieldwork and the permission got rejected on the 18th of December 2018, which marked the end of my fieldwork. This chapter is, therefore, divided into four sections that correspond to the four stages in the journey of a planning permission. The first stage is the proposal. Clarion Housing Group, the landlord of the Estate, proposed redevelopments that sought to demolish 383 flats on the Estate and replace them with 343 new homes, including 106 for market sale. The second stage is collecting feedback, in which the Housing Association distributed forms among the residents seeking their thoughts about the proposed redevelopments. The third stage is fixing, as the residents take it upon themselves to make the Estate more habitable in the face of managed decline and strategic neglect. This involved everyday decisions of reporting or not reporting damages, creating makeshift solutions to leaks and moulds, participating in gardening and other material practices of care towards the Estate. The last stage is the decision making. The Planning Inspector rejected

[12] One out of five homes in the UK fail the decent homes standards (English Housing Survey, 2019).

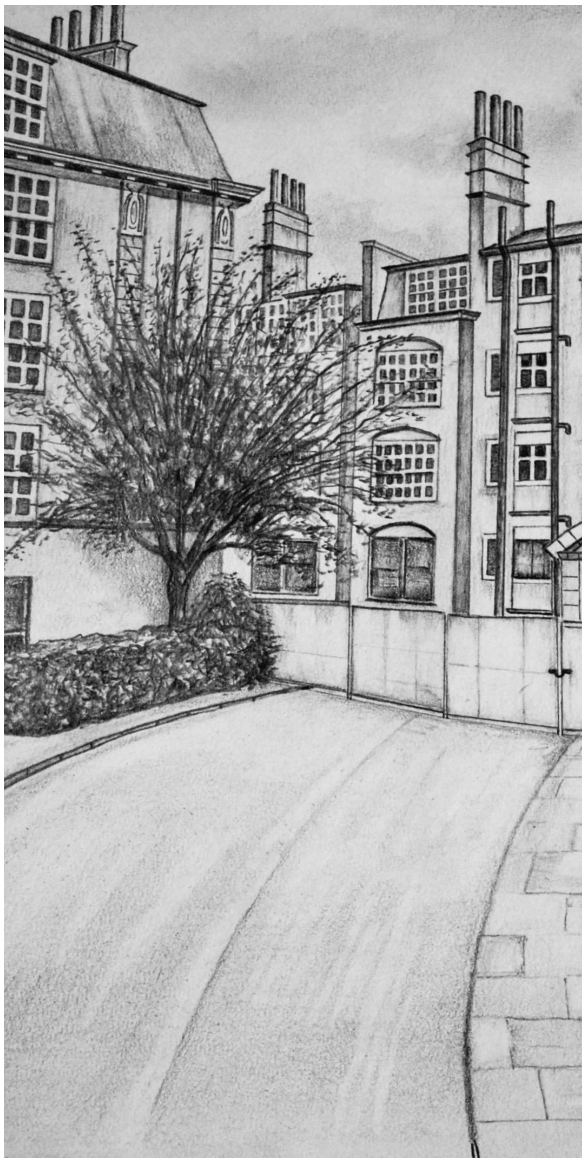
the permission and announced that the flats will not be demolished. The end of my fieldwork thereby coincided with the celebration by the residents, as they began reporting damages and unabashedly making their homes more liveable without the fear of being decanted.

I will also borrow from Catherine Fennell (2011) who studied a similar process of urban regeneration in the context of a public housing project in Chicago that was demolished and transformed into a mixed-income neighbourhood. She looked at welfare reform as a kind of 'sensory politics' by focussing on the changing relationship between the tenants and heat, which was individually regulated and paid for in the new development, resulting in a reconfiguration of subjective sense of comfort of the residents. The individualised control over heating led to the transformation of the residents "from entitlements-bearing subjects" to "risks-bearing subjects" (Fennell, 2011; p. 42). Managing one's own heat is connected to the larger neoliberal project of self-management and self-sufficiency (Fennell, 2011; p. 51). Fennell's focus on sensory yearnings challenged previous theories of contestation within social movements of vulnerable groups, and shifts the focus from survival to negotiation.

Similarly, I look at how the risks surrounding habitability and uninhabitability were calculated, managed and negotiated by the residents, the council, and the Housing Association. As per the title of the chapter, I focus on the 'state' of housing in order to locate the question of habitability at the intersection of the material/affective state of housing and the legal/administrative State. At the heart of the debates in Sutton Estate, there was one guiding question: was uninhabitability a cause of emptiness or a product of it? To untangle this question, I look at the ways in which the 'state' of housing was debated across two contrasting spaces – the garden, which emerged as a form of resistance against the narrative of uninhabitability, and the town hall, where the planning permission requesting demolition of the Estate was being debated. In both these sites, the question of habitability was contested and negotiated. However, in the former, the *state* of housing was interpreted as the material conditions of a place, thereby posing habitability as

a process and a negotiation, rather than a fixed attribute of a place. In the latter, the *state* of housing was interpreted in a more technical sense, as the material state came into dialogue with the administrative/legal State, which comprised of the council and other housing authorities that determine the minimum standards of living. While the garden consisted primarily of non-verbal, embodied engagements with place, the Town Hall was overwhelmingly flooded with words and terms. I had been invited to the hearings at the town hall, located north of the borough, by Ian Sanders, who ran the 'Save Our Sutton' campaign. I waved out to him in the crowd as I reached, with my diary and pen, sitting alongside journalists from various news channels. As I saw some of the residents scrunching their eyes at the long-drawn planning permissions and legal clauses that were being read out by the inspector, I realised that I was not the only one who was confused.

On the second day of the planning enquiry hearing, I was clearer about the key terms upon which the arguments unfolded in the Town Hall. The two opposing parties sitting on either side of the room consisted of council representatives, resident groups, and other organisations that argued against the demolition of the empty flats in the Sutton Estate, and on the other side were the representatives from the Clarion Group that argued for redevelopment of the Estate into a mix of social and private housing. While the Clarion Group, who is the current landlord of the Estate, argued that the four blocks of empty flats are uninhabitable in their current state, Ian, the leader of the Save Our Sutton group, argued that the uninhabitable state of housing is, in fact, a result of the emptiness and not the other way around. While these four empty flats stand as a visual emblem of decay and uninhabitability, Ian had managed to invite a group of architects to see the insides of these homes. The architects considered the homes perfectly habitable once they were cleaned, fixed and attended to with care. Ian, along with the architects he had invited into the empty flats, did not see the homes as immediately habitable, but saw habitability as something that could be brought about. This is where the tension emerges as the Housing Association posed habitability as something that a place either is or is not, whereas the campaigners of the Estate saw habitability as a process that unfolds in time.



Proposal

'… The demolition of the existing estate (Blocks A-K, N and O) and ancillary office; delivery of 343 new residential homes comprising of 334 apartments and 9 mews within buildings of 4-6 storeys; provision of Class D1 community floor space with associated café; new Class A1-A5 and B1 floor space; creation of new adopted public highway between Cale Street and Marlborough Street; new vehicular access from Ixworth Place; creation of new basement for car parking, cycle parking and storage; new energy centre fuelled by CHP, and works to adjacent pavement.'

(Application ref: PP/15/04878, 13 July 2015)

The above excerpt is from the Planning Permission[13] lodged by Clarion in 2015, which came under questioning by the residents of the Estate at the onset of my fieldwork, resulting in a public inquiry hearing at the Kensington Town Hall between the 9th to the 18th of May 2018. The Sutton Estate is made up of 14 residential buildings in Chelsea, outlined by a red brick wall and dotted with bare trees. This Edwardian estate was designed by E.C.P. Monson, and built on the lands purchased and cleared in 1908 by the William Sutton Trust, that was established with the aim of providing 'model low-rented dwellings for

[13] Planning Permission is a permission required to build, alter or demolish an existing building, and it requires the approval of the Local Planning Authority, which falls under the purview of the local council.

occupation by the poor' (London Metropolitan Archives: City of London, ACC/2983). William Richard Sutton, the founder and primary donor of the trust, is spoken of as a legend by several residents, especially in the light of the activities carried out by Clarion Housing Group, the current landlord of the Estate, which has been 'decanting' the Estate over the past few years in order to make way for regeneration. The groups advocating against the regeneration plans often contrasted the activities carried out by Clarion and Affinity (the previous landlord) with the vision of William Sutton.

Clarion's representatives in the Town Hall made their case against the habitability of the empty flats as well as the overall material conditions and design of the Estate that they did not deem fit for living. Their definition of habitability was connected less to the actual liveability of the Estate, which I see as a more dynamic negotiation between people and place, and more out of a fixed imagination of what makes a place habitable. This included qualities like entry of sunlight, the accessibility of the buildings, the ability to build an elevator and the layout of the homes. Furthermore, their proposed plans envisaged demolishing the Estate and the creating of mixed-rent housing. This move needs to be contextualised within the overall loss of social housing in the borough. In order to understand this phenomenon, I will briefly outline the changing role of Housing Associations in the UK by looking at the gradual withdrawal of state funding for housing, and the shift towards the model of investment. It is within this process of financialisation of housing and outsourcing of its management to private companies that the move away from social housing can be situated.

Housing Associations are independent, non-profit organisations governed by voluntary boards to provide rented housing at below market rents. Housing associations are however difficult to fit within a single definition. David Mullins (2007), Professor of Housing Policy at the University of Birmingham, provides a comprehensive typology of housing associations, which consists of organised, private, or separate from the government, non-profit distributing, self-governing and, voluntary housing associations. He explains that all of these bodies function as Social Landlords (under the Housing Act 1996), which allows

them to apply for capital subsidies[14] and in turn, subjects them to regulation. The logic of these subsidies is motivated by the fact that the market would not generate sufficient capital for these industries, as the prospects of profit in social housing are scarce.

The critical factor shaping this hybrid model of housing in London can be attributed to the exclusion of housing associations from borrowing money from public expenditure. This exclusion led to an increased reliance on the ability to source private capital and an increased pressure on housing associations to build more homes for less public subsidy, resulting in a move away from social housing towards 'affordable housing'. Affordable housing, unlike social housing, is built on a fixed amount calculated from the abstract median earning of the population (80% of market rent), thereby ignoring all other factors of inequality and exclusion. Concrete Action, a housing activist group that I worked with on a mapping project, often attributed the shrinking number of social housing estates in London to the conflation between social housing and affordable housing. One of the older residents, Greta, who lives on the Estate, described this move from social to affordable housing in the following manner:

'Affordable housing is what everyone goes on about as if it is some celebration. I see it as the final wave of cleansing Chelsea of all its diversity. They first came for the butchers and the bakers, and then for the pubs, and now they want to uproot social housing that William Sutton built specifically for people like me. I remember a time when I used to take my daughter to play in the park and meet the other mothers. A few years later, I only met the nannies, and they only spoke to each other in their own languages. Now it's my turn to be kicked out.'

In 2000, the Labour government passed a law that required local authorities to 'identify homes that did not meet the "decent homes standard", a minimum standard that all social housing was required to meet by 2010'

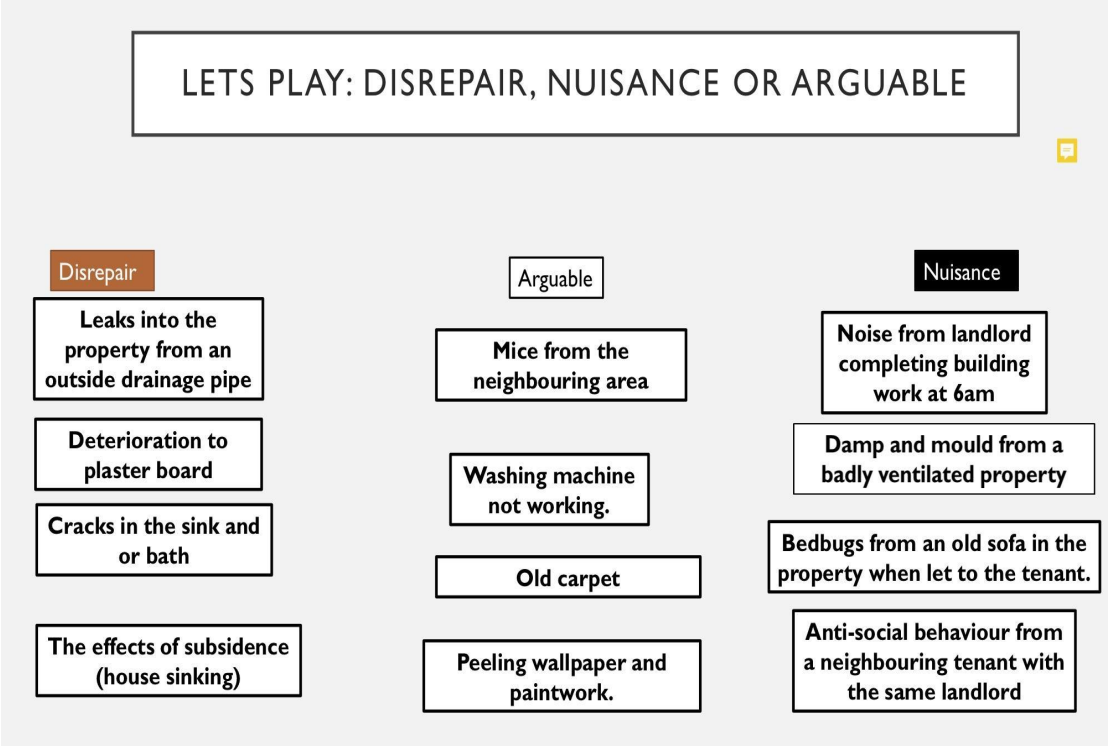
[14] Capital subsidies can be understood as preferential treatment in the form of grants or easy credit provided by the government to chosen industries that are considered to benefit society as a whole if they prosper.

(Mullins, 2010; p. 10), and provide necessary resources to make these homes more habitable. In order to ensure that these standards are met, management was delegated to the newly formed semi-autonomous organisation known as Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), that worked alongside Housing Associations. Furthermore, in 2008, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) was set up to play a regulatory role by conducting consultation sessions with the residents, which were known as the 'big conversation' (Mullins, 2010; p. 34) as a way of involving residents in the processes of decision making. However, the residents at the Sutton Estate have often mocked these 'big conversations' as 'shadow consultations', arguing that they are simply tactics used by the authority to justify their plans of regeneration.

The process of quantifying habitability is not a straightforward measure; it unfolds at the intersection of the material, the legal/administrative and an affective level. Towards the end of my fieldwork, a new law came into place. It is called the Homes (Fitness for Habitation) Act 2018, which applies to all new or renewed tenancies from 20th March 2019. It imposes a duty on all social and private landlords to ensure that all properties to rent must be free from defects posing a serious risk to the health and safety of occupiers, and to maintain properties in that state throughout the tenancy. However, the specificities around habitability are still riddled with ambiguities that emerge from the process of sorting/categorising housing issues. For instance, Advice4Renters, a housing advocacy group that I volunteer for, described two categories within which tenants are required to classify the issues they face, namely Disrepairs and Nuisance. 'Disrepair' refers to the poor condition of a building or structure due to neglect, while 'Nuisance' refers to elements causing a substantial and unreasonable interference with a person's land or his/her use or enjoyment of that land. During one of my training sessions at Advice4Renters, the housing lawyer invited us to play a game, which involved classifying a series of housing problems into three categories, namely, disrepair, nuisance and arguable.[15]

[15] When tenants report damages to a landlord or the council (in case the landlord is unresponsive), they have to sort out each issue into these three categories, and supplement their complaints with visual evidence and detailed descriptions.

The difficulties of the game revealed the fluidity of the categories as well as the multi-sensorial properties of housing problems.

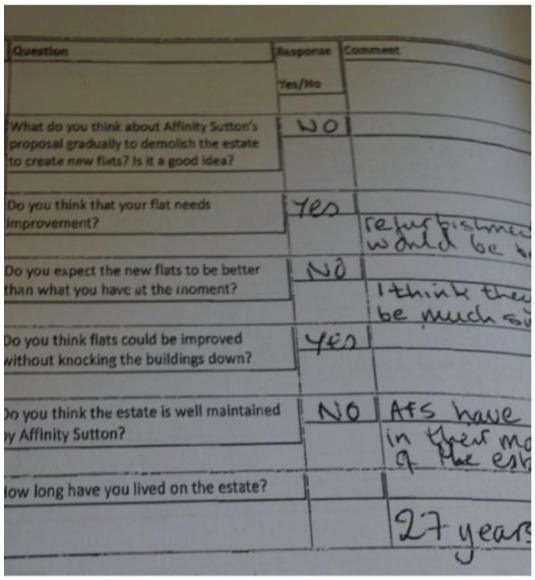


The model of Investment Partnering arose in response to recession, and it thrives on the fading boundaries between the State and the private sector. The aim of this model was to 'concentrate public subsidy on a small number of the "best performing associations"' (Mullins, 2010; p. 11), incentivising various housing associations to merge and form larger and less well-defined organisations that became increasingly complicated to interrogate. This is precisely how the previous landlord of the Sutton Estate, known as Affinity Sutton, merged with the current landlord of the Estate, Clarion Housing Group, to form a large conglomerate. These conglomerates apply for various forms of grants, which became an umbrella term for very different forms of capital that moved in and out of the housing market. As part of this competition, housing associations were encouraged to release annual efficiency statements and fill up their "efficiency scorecards" based on their estimated return on investment (Mullins, 2010; p. 45), which form the crux of the neoliberal governance machinery within which the question of habitability is quantified and assessed. The lack of accountability translated into many residents of the Estate

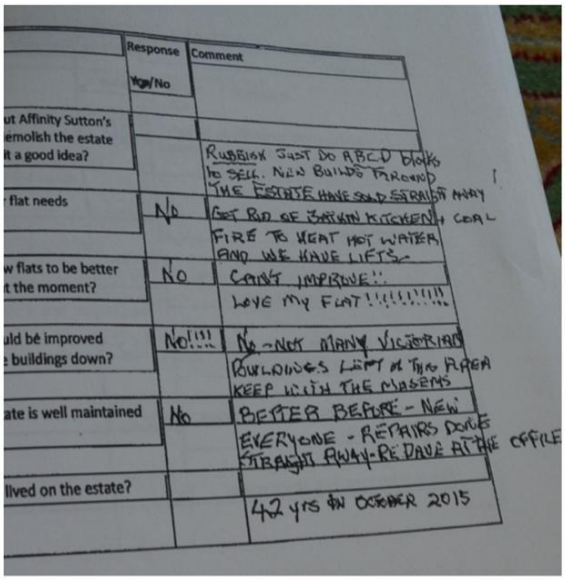
complaining about not knowing who could be held responsible for their state of housing, and who to direct their disappointment towards.

Steven Gregory (1999), in his book *Black Corona,* looked at the complex structures of decentralised city governance in New York that made political participation by neighbourhood activist groups more tedious and less convenient. He posed this convoluted organisation of power as both a way of restricting political participation through unclear and uncoordinated meeting schedules, thereby fuelling the myth of the "unorganized poor", and a tactic to obscure the link between neighbourhood problems and broader structures of exclusion through a manufactured fragmentation (Gregory, 1999; p. 114). He draws from Charles Valentine, an anthropologist who wrote during the Black Panthers movement, to offer an ethnographic critique of the notion of the social disorganisation of the urban poor, linking this stereotype to the stigmatisation of poverty and a failure to recognise community action as an organised movement. This confusion is not a product of ignorance but, in fact, a common anxiety shared by several residents of social housing in London. The anxiety is produced by the machinery of neoliberal governance, in which public and private entities are awkwardly entangled in their promise of providing key resources. Borrowing from David Harvey (2005, p. 47), neoliberal city governance can be defined as a shift from social democratic government to a more entrepreneurial model of urban governance that relies on public-private partnerships. In the context of Britain, housing associations emerged as a middle path between socialist redistribution and capitalism redevelopment. However, there is plenty of confusion about the transparency of these bodies and their status as public or private, profiting or not-for-profit, thereby forging opacity of the *imagined reader* on the other side of the complaints.

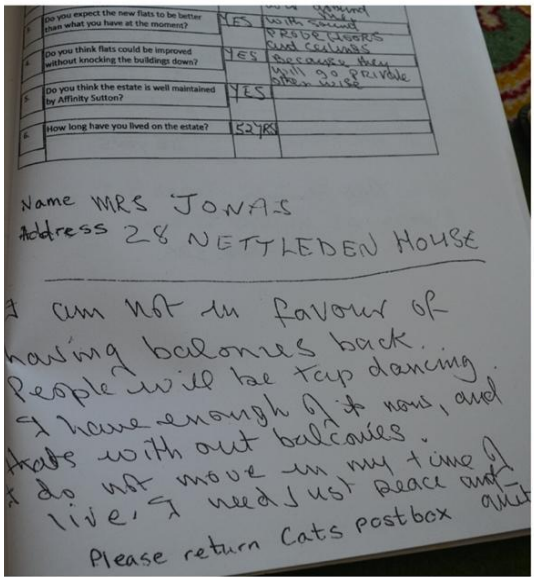
Feedback



Question	Response Yes/No	Comment
What do you think about Affinity Sutton's proposal gradually to demolish the estate to create new flats? Is it a good idea?	NO	
Do you think that your flat needs improvement?	Yes	refurbishment would be
Do you expect the new flats to be better than what you have at the moment?	NO	I think they be much
Do you think flats could be improved without knocking the buildings down?	Yes	
Do you think the estate is well maintained by Affinity Sutton?	NO	AFS have in their m of the est
How long have you lived on the estate?		27 years



	Response Yes/No	Comment
ut Affinity Sutton's emolish the estate it a good idea?		RUBBISH JUST DO ABCD BLOCKS TO SELL. NEW BUILDS AROUND THE ESTATE HAVE SOLD STRAIGHT AWAY
flat needs	No	GET RID OF BRITAIN KITCHENS COAL FIRE TO HEAT HOT WATER AND WE HAVE LIFTS.
w flats to be better t the moment?	No	CANT IMPROVE!! LOVE MY FLAT!!!!!!!!!
uld be improved buildings down?	No!!!!	NO - NOT MANY VICTORIAN BUILDINGS LEFT IN THE AREA KEEP WITH THE MASSES
ate is well maintained	No	BETTER BEFORE - NEW EVERYONE - REPAIRS DONE STRAIGHT AWAY - RE DAVE AT THE OFFICE
lived on the estate?		42 YRS IN OCTOBER 2015

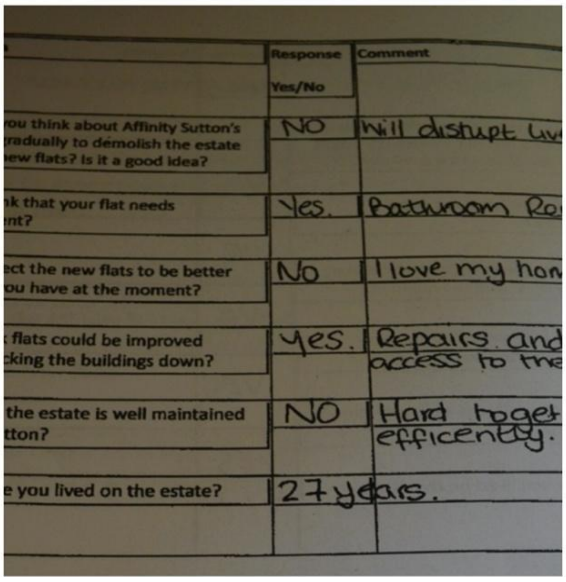


Do you expect the new flats to be better than what you have at the moment?	YES	WITH SOME PROBLEMS
Do you think flats could be improved without knocking the buildings down?	YES	JUST CEILINGS BECAUSE THEY LOOK SO PRIVATE OTHER WISE
Do you think the estate is well maintained by Affinity Sutton?	YES	
How long have you lived on the estate?	52 YRS	

Name MRS JONAS
Address 28 NETTLEDEN HOUSE

I am not in favour of having balconies back. People will be tap dancing. I have enough of it now, and flats with out balconies. I do not move in my time of life, I need just peace and quiet

Please return Cats postbox



	Response Yes/No	Comment
ou think about Affinity Sutton's radually to demolish the estate ew flats? Is it a good idea?	NO	Will disrupt liv
k that your flat needs nt?	Yes.	Bathroom Ro
ct the new flats to be better ou have at the moment?	No	I love my hom
flats could be improved cking the buildings down?	yes.	Repairs and access to the
the estate is well maintained tton?	NO	Hard toget efficently.
e you lived on the estate?	27 years.	

Questions asked in the above survey circulated by CATS (Chelsea Association of Tenants):

- What do you think of Affinity Sutton's policy of gradually demolishing the Estate and creating new flats? Is it a good idea?
- Do you think your flat needs improvement?
- Do you expect the new flats to be better than the ones you have at the moment?
- Do you think flats could be improved without knocking the building down?
- Do you think the estate is well-maintained by Affinity Sutton?
- How long have you lived on the estate?

Housing associations and resident welfare bodies carry out regular consultations as a means of measuring and quantifying the satisfaction of the residents. Many forms were circulated amongst the residents to receive their feedback on the proposed redevelopments. The objective of the consultation was to garner support from the residents by asking them questions related to the current conditions of their homes. Several residents expressed to me the frustration upon receiving fragmented series of forms, manuals and proposals, with each one outlining a slightly different version of the promised future. Tessa, a younger resident who has recently moved into the Estate, complained that the excess of questions posed by these repetitive surveys was 'nothing but an attempt to confuse and tire out residents from really seeking any answers'. By turning the question of improvement into a statistical inquiry, the forms serve to depoliticise the issues emerging from regeneration, while also stifling the possibilities of imagination into binary dualities of yesses and noes.

Bureaucratic documents, Bruno Latour (1990: 54) said, can be considered "the most despised of ethnographic objects". Despite the overwhelming presence of documents in everyday life, Anneline Riles (2006) argues that they go unnoticed and understudied. Even as I was sorting through my ethnographic materials gathered from Sutton Estate, I subconsciously made two piles. Pile A consisted of all the photographs, postcards, sketches, doodles and personal letters written by the residents about the Estate. Pile B consisted of the minutes from resident's meetings, electricity and gas bills that had circled out increase in prices, circulars distributed about events in the garden, forms collected by the Housing Association, petition letters and statements. My logic of sorting was derived from a rudimentary division between more affective objects that carried symbolic meanings and material lives, and the dead bureaucratic stuff that looked dry and boring. However, discovering the feedback forms challenged this classificatory scheme.

The forms consisted of three categories – question, response and comment. The residents' expressiveness often seeped out of the contours of bureaucratic imagination. Their evocativeness refused to yield to the format of the document – the form of forms. Breaking out of the limited duality of the

response column, residents often used exclamation points or capital letters to bring out different shades of agreement and disagreement. Some of the answers express anger against the current state of management of the Estate, while some of them focus on specific aspects of the present and of the imagined future that annoy them. For instance, one of the residents (bottom left image in the collage) wrote about her annoyance with the prospect of balconies:

'I am not in favour of having balconies back. People will be tap dancing. I have enough of it now, and that's without balconies. I do not move in my time of life. I just need peace and quiet'.

The comments are emotive and linger outside the marked box, and sometimes, fill up the entire page in a shrieking attempt to catch the attention of the *imagined reader*. The *imagined reader* varies across residents in the Estate. While some of the residents imagine communicating with the council or the State, the others address their concerns to the housing association, which in this case is Clarion Housing Group. This confusion was yet another product of the ambiguous nature of public-private partnerships within the housing sector.

Just as the responses of the residents refused to quietly sit inside the boxes provided by the forms, these forms similarly refused to sit quietly within my Pile B. These forms had affective and material lives, much like the stories, sketches and photographs in Pile A. Matthew S. Hull (2012) studied the material forms of bureaucracy in contemporary Pakistan to show how the political economy of paper gives shape to ephemeral encounters between documents and people, and reveals governance as a material practice. Rather than posing documents as instruments of bureaucracy, he argues that they are 'constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, even the organisations themselves' (Hull, 2012; p. 252). However, the forms that I study in this section do not rise out of bureaucracy, but rather, out of neoliberal forms of governance that arise precisely in reaction to conventional forms of bureaucracy.

David Graeber (2015) argued that even as market reforms are introduced as a way of reducing red tape, they result in an increase of regulations, accompanied by an increase in paperwork and management staff. Similarly, housing being managed by non-State bodies results in an explosion of paperwork, from evaluation forms to performance reviews to habitability checklists. Despite the insistence of the neoliberal regimes that capitalist solutions can solve delays and inefficiencies of a public system, Graeber argued that the present moment marks an unprecedented number of hours that people spend on paperwork. He defined paperwork in terms of their design that filters complexities into an unending build-up of simplified elements juxtaposed against each other. It is within this understanding that I situate Tessa's complaint of being overwhelmed by seemingly repetitive consultation processes that break down habitability into so many tiny, disconnected fragments that the concept risks losing meaning. Graeber (2015; p. 27) argues that within these audit cultures, 'nothing is real that cannot be quantified, tabulated, or entered into some interface or quarterly report'. Habitability is reduced into quantifiable measurements that can be operationalised to make a case for or against demolition.

Even as I agree with Graeber's argument about the flooding of documents that marks the neoliberal management of housing, his analysis risks turning forms and other documents emerging out of this regime of management into symbols devoid of materiality. Matthew Hull (2012; p. 253) discusses the neglect of materiality not as a discursive oversight but rather as part of the "politics of immediation" (Mazzarella, 2006), in which the dematerialisation of documents is linked to claims of transparency and objectivity of the authority of power. He also points to the phenomenological quality of mediators that lets them evaporate in the act of mediation. To counter this, he draws on Latour's (2005; p. 39) understanding of documentary mediators as things that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour 2005, p. 39), thereby highlighting the generative capacities of documents.

By acknowledging the materiality of documents, Hull enlists three approaches towards documents that are relevant for my own analysis of the forms arising from the consultation processes at the Estate. The first approach is the aesthetic approach, which is encapsulated by Annelise Riles (2006) as she looks at the aesthetic rules that govern the production and completion of forms. Riles focusses on spatial arrangements of columns and rows in a form to understand how these attributes play an active role in the experience built around the document. This is useful for my own understanding of the tabular structure of the forms that provide an outlined space for responses to nudge people into thinking in terms of 'yes' and 'no', rather than acknowledge the lived experiences of their material homes. The second approach focusses on the affective encounter between the document and the individual. While Weber (1978) had argued that documents can hold more power by minimising emotions, the affective powers of bureaucratic documents has been widely accepted, especially in the context of identification documents (Navarro-Yashin, 2007).

The second approach, which adopts an affective lens, is demonstrated by Navarro-Yashin's (2007) study of the material documents forged by Turkish-Cypriots in Britain. She is critical of the aesthetic approach's tendency to scrutinise documents under a technical lens, focussing on the form of forms, resulting in the sterilisation of these ethnographic objects. Instead, drawing on her ethnography, Navarro-Yashin urges for a deeper understanding of the "affective undersides" of bureaucratic documents. She is interested in 'the documents' messy and excessive potentialities, the multiple and contingent affects which they engender in their holders and transactors' (Navarro-Yashin, 2007; p. 94). I take up this approach to examine the reception of feedback forms at the Estate. The "affective encounter" between the feedback forms and the Sutton Estate was dominated by two factors – a sense of excess (captured in comments like: "too many forms" and "they all ask for the same thing") and a sense of futility (captured in comments like: "they do not mean much").

The third approach outlined by Hull breaks the division between the first two – aesthetic and affective – to look at the interplay between form and

content. By reflecting on the “semiotic modalities of documents”, Don Brenneis (2008) argued that forms have “careers” as they move through and animate the bureaucratic process. Bringing together form and affect, he looks at the temporal lives of these documents, in which he traces the multiple “presents” – the moment of being read and the moment of being evaluated. I also pose the forms of consultations obtained from the Sutton Estate as living documents that have temporal as well as material trajectories. There is a finite period of time presented to the residents to decide the future of their homes by filling in their opinions into finite spaces. While in some cases, the forms were crumpled into balls and tossed into bins, in other cases, the use of red ink, capital letters and exclamation points served to exceed the limits of communications stringently defined by the Housing Association.

I therefore make use of all three approaches – aesthetic, affective and temporal – to make sense of my ethnographic data: a pile of feedback forms, which are, by definition, documents created for engagement. They are not still/stagnant, but are kept alive through circulation. They require the reader to be active but often in defined ways, and it is this tension between the empowering and restricting roles of feedback documents that I am interested in. To meaningfully understand this tension, I make use of all three approaches highlighted in this section: (a) the aesthetic approach helps me focus on the layout of the forms that dictate the rules of engagement; (b) the affective approach helps me understand how the forms are received/perceived by the residents; (c) the temporal approach helps me situate these documents in motion through the physical space of the Estate and against the passage of time that ticks at the pace of the regeneration timeline.

Fixing

The residents of the Estate complained to me about the water patches gradually spreading throughout the Estate. Lisa, one of the older residents, spoke to me about the trap that she often finds herself in while dealing with leakages in her home. She said that each time she steps into her flat, she finds herself immersed inside a cloud of moisture, with the smell of dampness and the

constant dripping sound from the kitchen overwhelming her senses. However, she is scared to complain about the issue to the management, as she suspects that they are constantly on the lookout for dissatisfied residents in order to find a good excuse to relocate them elsewhere and empty out the Estate for the regeneration. Unable to repair the leakage in her bedroom wall, she locked up the bedroom and began sleeping in the living room. Over the past few months, she shifted all her clothes into the cupboards of the living room, and still hesitates before unlocking the door to the bedroom, fearing that the room may collapse onto her. She complained about not being able to invite friends over to her place the way she used to before she turned her living room into a bedroom. 'It feels too intimate to invite friends or neighbours to sit on one's unmade bed', she smirked. Larkin (2008) and Kockelman (2010) argue that the anthropology of infrastructure allows for a deeper understanding of the role of breakdown and the various forms of life and sociality to which the breakdown gives rise. In Lisa's case, the infrastructural breakdown had a profound role on her spheres of sociality, making her home less hospitable, and thereby, less 'habitable'. Habitability is, therefore, not a fixed property of a space but rather, a series of negotiations between people and the places they occupy.

Christina Schwenkel (2015), during her fieldwork in Vinh City, where she looked at water infrastructures in Socialist Vietnam, faced a problem quite similar to Lisa's. After ignoring a leak for a week, she found her hallway flooded with water. Dismantling the Heideggerian notion that infrastructures are only made visible in moments of breakdown, Schwenkel (2015; p. 520) reframed breakdowns not as a condition of crisis but as 'part of a routine, fractal "always-almost-falling-apart" world in which the residents lived'. She looked at the ways in which breakdowns act as catalysts for a collective ethos of maintenance, thereby reframing infrastructures as 'learned arrangements that constitute membership in particular communities of practice' (Schwenkel, 2015; p. 530). Repair works were not just about fixing but about knowing when to ignore, when to act and when to shift responsibility away from oneself. Criticising the romantic association of maintenance and improvisation (Graham and Thrift, 2007; p. 2), Schwenkel connected repair to 'practices of evasion and circumvention'

(Schwenkel, 2015; p. 531), thereby subverting the hero narrative underlying studies of community participation.

Instead of posing leakages as pathologies of underdeveloped infrastructures or as breakdowns of a system, Nikhil Anand (2015), in his study of water leakage in Mumbai, located them within the context of everyday negotiations and informal technologies of repair. He argued that 'approximately 30 per cent of New York city water is estimated to be leaking' (Murley, 2011; in Anand, 2015: p. 308), and yet the repair works only began twenty years after the leaks were detected. He related this time lag to the difficulties of measuring leakages as well as the management of ignorance. Anand draws on Adriana Petryna's (2002) ethnography of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown, wherein she looked at the ways in which the officials refused and obfuscated the effects of the disaster through a strategic management of ignorance. Petryna (2002: p. 29) posed ignorance as a "praxis" that is not born out of a lack of knowledge, but in fact actively participates in the production of knowledge. Anand followed the city water engineers who were appointed to repair the water infrastructure, and noted that 'their authority over the hydraulic network was based on knowing both how to repair leakages and when to ignore them' (Anand, 2015: p. 308). Anand focused on the ways in which ignorance is operationalised by the engineers to retain authority over the machinery of water management and by those living in settlements who have been traditionally excluded from the formal water connections. Similarly, in the context of the habitability debate in the Estate, I look at the tactics used by the residents to create makeshift solutions for problems along with knowing when to ignore them as a means of claiming control over the narrative of habitability of the Estate.

As I briefly described in the introduction, Michel de Certeau's (1984) competing categories of placemaking, namely, 'strategies' and 'tactics', are relevant for my study. While strategies denote a top-down planning of a place, tactics constitute the spontaneous engagement with place. These categories operate on the distinctions drawn by Certeau between "the city" as a proper name, which provides 'a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties' (Certeau,

1984; p. 94), and ways in which people in the city dismantle this stationary order to render it “habitable”. Habitability is therefore posed by De Certeau as something active and dynamic, unlike the stagnant/fixed notions of habitability outlined by Clarion’s wording in the planning permission. Imagining habitability as a process brings attention to the ways in which this process is speeded and how it is resisted.

Like Lisa, many other residents also complained to me about the water patches that gradually spread throughout the Estate, revealing neglect and age in visible ways. Some residents blamed the landlord for the ‘managed decline’ of the Estate, arguing that they ignored repair works in order to make the Estate uninhabitable. Other residents argue that the water damages spread throughout the Estate due to the lack of complaints by the residents who are afraid of their complaint feeding into the narrative of uninhabitability. Along with fixing damages, many residents are engaged in daily processes of decision-making around the infrastructural problems arising inside their homes and in the Estate, at large. Like Lisa, many of them decide to not report repairs in order to prevent their homes from being declared ‘uninhabitable’, even as in the processes, the homes in fact become more and more uninhabitable. There is a delicate balance that is constantly strived for by the residents, of treating ‘uninhabitability’ as a momentary disruption rather than a perennial state, as posed by the housing association desperate to decant the premises. De Certeau’s framework is thus useful to understand these competing understandings of habitability on the Estate: as a condition versus a process.

Another framework that is useful in my understanding of habitability is the study of repair within anthropology. While Latour’s (1984) Actor-Network-Theory approaches repair through the relationship between human and non-human agents, Sormani, Bovet and Strebel (2018) critique ANT’s tendency to turn empirical investigations of the situated practices of repair into theoretical extrapolations about ‘social order’ and ‘breakdown’, thereby ignoring local contingencies of these practices and instead, seeing them as metaphors of larger social phenomena. Such heuristic potential, they argue, is exploited in the classical ethnographies of repair. They focus on Douglas Harper’s ‘Working

Knowledge' (1987), wherein he dwells on a nostalgic appreciation for repair and sets up a simplistic juxtaposition between disappearing manual skills in the face of industrial forms of work. Their critique stems from the fact that Harper romanticises the practices of repair to draw out larger narratives of social change within which skills become metaphors of a foregone time.

Similarly, Christopher Henke (2000; p. 56) studied repair in the context of the workplace, wherein he argued that 'when a workplace breaks down, 'people repair' goes hand-in-hand with the repair of things'. He viewed repair less as a practice and more as a lens to gain insights into social relations. He posed the workplace as a "negotiated order" shaped through the interactions between caretakers and users, and argued that the processes of repair allow invisible practices to move from the backstage to the front stage (Henke, 2000; p. 74). Breaking these theoretical binaries between foregone times of manual repair versus industrial forms of work, and between caretakers and users, my fieldwork focussed on residents like Brian, who used to be caretakers of the Estate before these labours were outsourced to private companies. These residents are therefore equipped to often fix their leaking taps or detect/ignore the signs of damage. Their complaints about the Estate fluctuated between technical precision and feigned ignorance.

I reframe the question of habitability outside of a singular process of ageing and decaying of infrastructures, and instead, as the dynamic lifespans of buildings that are constantly negotiated through the strategies by those in power and the tactics of those subjugated. I further pose habitability within the framework of the vulnerability of material objects that Dennis and Pontille (2015) proposed in their study of the installation and maintenance of Paris subway signs. They argue that these signs are both a 'stabilisation and ordering device as well as a fragile object' (Dennis and Pontille, 2015; p. 340). They argued that the vulnerability of objects cannot be understood by reducing them to properties of solidity and durability but instead, by understanding the profound relationship between fragility and stability. Through my ethnographic study of empty homes, I follow a similar shift, in which habitability cannot be reduced to durability but needs to be understood within the everyday

negotiations between fragility and stability, between noticing and not noticing, between telling and not telling, between reporting and whispering, between acknowledging and ignoring. Dennis and Pontille (2015; p. 355) defined maintenance work as a care practice, thereby posing 'vulnerability as a "natural" state of things and not as a temporary deviation from a healthy normality', dismantling the duality between habitability and uninhabitability.

Celebration

On the 18th of December 2018, The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government dismissed Clarion's appeal and rejected their planning permission to regenerate the Sutton Estate. Phillip J G Ware, the inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government refused the AS (Appeal Scheme) on the primary grounds that it fails to comply with the 'no net loss' requirement of the Policies CH4 and LP3.14 of the development plan, which requires all proposed plans of regeneration to not decrease the net amount of social housing units. The inquiry also consisted of a surprise visit to the Estate, which revealed that Blocks A – D, comprising 159 units, are entirely vacant, and the remaining blocks further hold 39 vacant units. The council and the residents held Clarion responsible for the vacant social housing units that could have been used to accommodate several families.

Clarion twisted the accusations out of shape, and attempted to turn the emptiness into an advantage. They tried to subvert the 'no net loss' policy by leaving out the vacant units from the calculation, and therefore arguing that their proposed plans of redevelopment in fact hold the same number of social housing units. Their plea for redevelopment capitalised on the empty houses, which further aggravated the residents present in the Town Hall, who believed that Clarion played a pivotal role in decanting the flats in order to balance their calculations. The entire procedure revealed the contrasting ways of mapping emptiness as well as habitability – as a quantifiable unit versus as a transitory, living and irregular category. Clarion had not only turned habitability into a fixed unit of measurement, but also weaponised this quantifiability to subvert the no-net loss policy.

The rejection of the bill was celebrated across the Estate. I got a message from one of the gardening club members saying: 'All good – Clarion's permission rejected and the Estate won't be demolished…for now at least'. As I met up with some of the residents at the pub to celebrate, Dorinda told me that she did not read about the decision on the news. Instead, she heard the good news in the shape of the sounds of repair that hammered its way into her sleep. The neighbours were rejoicing the decision of the court by fixing broken bits in their homes. The sound of the tenants repairing the small damages in their flats was therefore both, a recognition that they will continue to occupy their homes without being hassled, as well as a relief that the damages do not need to be hidden anymore. Appel, Anand and Gupta (2018) argued that the material lives of infrastructure disrupt larger narratives about progress by revealing a fragile relationship between people, things and institutions of governance. In the case of the Sutton Estate, the sounds of repair – be it in the literal sense of drilling and fixing, or in the larger sense of calling and complaining and acknowledging damages – puncture the simplistic narratives of habitability and uninhabitability. Instead, these sounds reveal the ongoing process of the making and unmaking of a home as a habitable place. The sound of celebration in the Sutton Estate was therefore in the sound of repairs.

Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell (2014) argue against the linear imagination at the heart of practices of homemaking. Shifting away from this linear path, they argue that a home is simultaneously made and unmade. They look at Burrell, Read and Arrigoitia's work (2014) on how the threat of demolition in poor neighbourhoods affects practices of homemaking and unmaking. Similar to my own study, Arrigoitia (2014; in Baxter and Brickell, 2014; p. 140) looks at the ways in which 'material deterioration of shared spaces is accompanied by residents still making home in their houses and flats'. Habitability and uninhabitability are also not mutually opposed states but rather, they co-exist, as homes are made and unmade on the Estate. Baxter and Brickell (2014; p. 135) critique the approach of exploring the biographies of buildings as it turns homemaking into a one-directional process in which 'unmaking demarks the end of one historical phase and enables the beginning

of a new one'. Instead, they see these phases as unfolding in the same time, such that 'unmaking can also work symbiotically with the recovery or remaking of home' (Baxter and Brickell, 2014; p. 135). For example, they look at how slum dwellers in India divided up their homes before demolition in order to claim more units in the new houses that they are transferred to.

Conclusion

During one of our gardening sessions, Brian, one of the oldest members of the Estate, brought along a grocery bag full of old photographs of the Estate. The photographs prompted the residents to recall stories about the Estate, as they all competed over who knew the Estate better, recalling random facts about the area with a boastful precision, and gradually, they all gathered around the table after putting away their muddy gloves. In their descriptions of the Estate, they spoke about dark alleyways that were replaced by brightly lit, broad and sunlit areas during the 1980s-redevelopment project in the Estate. While some of them complained of the earlier overcrowding of buildings and spoke joyfully about the opening up of green spaces after the demolition of blocks Oatwell and Pavesham, Chris pointed to the highest point of the tree, which filtered the light of the sun into leaf-shaped shadows, and said, 'Right there, that was the home I grew up in. I grew up watching the block where I live in today from my balcony back then, and now I look out of my balcony to see a tree where my home used to be, it's funny'. His flat had been demolished as part of the 1980's redevelopment of the Estate that sought to create more green spaces and unobstructed entry of the sun into the Estate to make it more 'habitable'.

Brian, in a similar vein, started reminiscing about the narrow, dark alleys, which served as a sanctuary of hiding spots during his childhood games of hide and seek, and later, during his teenage, became a hot spot for murders and other crimes that featured heavily in his storytelling. He recalled the arrest of Reginald Christie around the Estate, and several other robberies and murders on the Estate, which made the Estate the headline of local newspapers. Over the years, Brian had cut out several such news clippings and attached them to his fridge with a magnet, following the practice his mum had started when Brian

was a little boy in order to scare him from staying out too late at night. With a suppressed smile, Brian referred to that particular time as the ‘good old days’. Such a classification was in stark contrast to my notes from the Town Hall hearing, wherein redevelopments were justified with the argument that assumed the yearning for sunlight, openness and safety as an unquestionable desire.

My focus in this chapter is not to declare whether or not the flats of the Estate are habitable, but instead, to understand the different ways in which people imagine habitability, as well as the ways in which they make places habitable for themselves, independent of the categories appointed by the authorities. Imagining habitability as a process makes it harder to equate it to the static notion of “improvement” (Li, 2013) that underlines the urban regeneration projects in London. While the housing association fiercely argued in the Town Hall about the out-datedness of the Estate, Brian boasted about the Estate living through both the World Wars and having a longer breadth of memory than any nearby building. Brian challenged me to find a single brick that did not fit perfectly with the rest, and he gave credit to the German Bricklayers whose precision and attentiveness made him proud each time he admired the Estate.

“Decant” is a technical word that refers to the process of moving residents ‘from one property to another property because we have to carry out repairs which cannot be completed with residents staying at the property, or in cases wherein demolition is necessary due to the property condition’ (Octavia Housing Decant Policy). The residents also make use of this word to mock the idea that they are expected to simply move out of their homes. The technical word lends itself to a metaphor of resistance-free movement. Prior to my fieldwork, I had only heard the word decant in relation to emptying out red wine from an open bottle into a decanter. In the context of Sutton Estate, the lack of friction or resistance captured in the word decant is of significance due to the fact that the residents are on state benefits, and their homes are seen as ‘given’ by the state. The ease of movement into and out of these homes is related to the lack of agency and history granted to the residents.

In opposition to decanting, the residents of the Estate imagine a very embodied, materially rich and historically embedded community, as they make references to the two World Wars and other historic incidents, or to the specific artists and writers who lived in Chelsea and now rest buried in the nearby cemetery. The residents of the garden club often described the neglect faced by the Estate through metaphors emerging from the soil of the garden itself. For instance, Dorinda, the head of the garden club, during one of the gardening sessions that I had become a regular member of, said to me: 'when the soil is dry all the plants that live in it die, which is similar to this Estate that is given no attention or care'. The physicality of the community evoked along with the material metaphors of ageing, growing, dying, rootedness and belonging are used to counter the immateriality of the "decant" metaphor that serves to flatten out the frictions of a lived community and its experiences. I locate the debates around habitability within this tension.

The question of habitability is also fiercely political. The claim of "uninhabitability" was being used against the residents to convince them that their homes are not suitable for them, question their own ideas of "habitability", and force them to move out for better homes to be built wherein they may or may not be able to stay. The conversation becomes even more charged in the context of a social housing block, as people living on benefits are often accused of not maintaining their homes. The questions around *habitability* are also entangled with classist concerns around health, hygiene and safety, which assume that people from certain classes might not know what's best for them. Tess Lea and Paul Pholeros (2010) look at the narrative of blame in Australia wherein concerns around bad designs of indigenous housing are overshadowed by concerns around the habits of indigenous people that are believed to be incompatible with settled living. They look at the large number of *houses-that-are-not-housing* spread across Australia, built with public money, as the rhetoric of "build more houses" makes its rounds, inviting public criticism about the "ungrateful householder".

Such a narrative is also replicated in the UK with the introduction of the "Bedroom Tax",[16] that penalised the poor for empty rooms, while empty second homes were on a steady rise (Dorling, 2014). Insa Koch (2018) looks at the language of 'anti-social behaviour' invoked by Social Housing authorities in the UK to transfer the blame from poor environmental conditions onto the ability of residents to act in socially accepted ways. This shift in narrative stems from the separation, as Lea and Pholeros note, between the "design", which is posed as objective and unquestionable, and "usage", which becomes the site of culpability. Similarly, the questions posed around the habitability of the Estate range from questioning the design and layouts of the homes to the everyday practices of those who occupy these homes.

The question of what constitutes habitability becomes even more charged in times of COVID-19. Humanity has arguably spent more time staying indoors than being out under the blue for the first time in history. And so, the relationship between people and their homes has become more intimate than ever, and homes have been intimately linked to staying safe through the ongoing rhetoric of "stay safe by staying at home". Reports about an increase in loneliness, mental health issues and domestic abuse under lockdown soon contested any romanticised notion of the home as an innate sanctuary. However, much less has been said about how decades of neoliberal reforms coupled with austerity policies led to deregulation and a decline in infrastructural investments and maintenance, that have transformed many urban homes into precarious spaces.

While COVID-19 is termed by some as an "equalizer", affecting individuals irrespective of class or race, the lockdown is far from equal. Even as we are in this situation together, it is evident that we are not isolating and social distancing equally. It has already prompted many new housing measures and proposals; evictions are temporarily halted, the bedroom tax has been challenged, and

[16] This was the dubbed name for the 'Under Occupancy Penalty' introduced in 2012, in which tenants in social housing have their benefits reduced by 14% if they have a spare bedroom or 25% if they have two or more.

council tax suspensions have been petitioned for. Post-pandemic, local governments, housing associations and private landlords throughout the UK will face challenges in developing novel and affordable solutions to provide safe and comfortable homes for all. As the emptiness of the lockdown shines new light on the emptiness of dilapidated council flats in the city, the present moment might offer a real opportunity to reimagine not only what a home is, but also how it could be improved to make it a safe place for all in the future.

‘For Nobody in Particular’



Barbara left her home in a hurry. As she patted the bottom of her bag to hear the keys chuckle at her paranoia, she was greeted by the man who sweeps the streets that outline the various houses in the Cadogan Square. He gave her a puzzled look, and raised his arms over his head. Over the years, they had come up with a sign language to communicate. He never let his muteness get in the way of his morning conversations with the handful of residents who still lived in the area. He was familiar with most of their morning routes and routines. He knew that Barbara did not have her swimming sessions on Thursday mornings, and that her bookshop was in the other direction. Within moments, she realised what he was saying, gave him an embarrassed half-smile, and began walking in the direction of her bookshop. She stood outside the bookshop for a while, calculating how long it would take to empty it out. She had never before thought of books in terms of their volume and weight. Never before did she wonder how many words could fit inside a medium-sized cardboard box. She unlocked the

door and vaguely browsed through the official letters that informed her of the various plans for the space once it was emptied and undone.

Barbara knew very well that books needed people, and that there were no people left in the area, and yet, her heart felt heavy with the thought of her bookshop closing down. She had lived in the area for twenty years, and watched it change slowly and silently, as though a team of robbers raided the homes, emptied their insides, but were somehow uninterested in the money. The money kept growing within these empty homes, stretching them into different shapes and sizes, through a constant chain of renovations and repairs for nobody in particular. Nobody lived inside these homes. And nobody really lived around these homes to admire them from the outside, say, while walking their dogs, or while preparing for barbeques in the park. The roads were quiet and the park was empty. Over the years, she watched the gradual disappearance of several spaces that held together a community. There is no longer a bakery, a newsagent, a parish hall, a soup kitchen or even a post office within walking distance. Everyone is assumed to be mobile, and handwritten letters are perhaps considered a thing of the past. Barbara sighed as she looked outside the window and realised that it had been almost two hours and she hadn't seen a single person. The silence of books was broken occasionally by the distant sounds of expensive cars racing up and down Sloane Street. There was a time, she recalled, when it was so difficult to find a parking spot in the area, and now she rarely faces any issue with space. Except of course, the issue of too much space. Too much space inside the locked-up park, inside the church, inside stores with almost-smiling mannequins, inside the back windows of her neighbours' homes that are often covered in dust and pigeon droppings.

Some homes in the area are so empty that they are barely three-dimensional. All they really have are their outsides, and behind the facade of polished red bricks, carved wooden doors and ornate windows, there lies a vast expanse of nothingness. There are no switchboards with thumbprints, no shelves holding objects conveying the peculiarities that make up a person, and no furniture casting shadows that map out a home. Barbara often joked about the houses in the area having split personalities, constantly living out two lives. The

appearance of fullness was important to keep away rumours and squatters. For lunch, she decided to take a walk to make the most of the sunny afternoon. At a distance, she saw the Rector of the nearby church that she frequently attends, and waved to him. He walked up to her and they briefly discussed the book that she had lent to him the previous week. He told her that he was on his way to a meeting, and also added how much he dreaded going in for the meeting that had been called to address the increase in begging and shoplifting in the area. He said he wondered why people just didn't realise the simple fact that one cannot live in a world full of honey pots and expect the bees to keep away. 'The number of empty honey pots keep growing', Barbara retorted. He smiled at her, and they recalled the event that had shaped many of their conversations ever since that evening.

The event took place in December, in the days leading up to Christmas. The parishioner of the nearby church led a group of carol-singers to sing in and around the Cadogan Square to generate communal excitement for the festivities that mark the month. A couple of torches were distributed amongst the group. Barbara was the first to notice how dark the evening felt, and how clearly the stars offered themselves in the absence of lit windows. As they began singing, only a couple of windows lit up, but there was no peeping or cheering. Each time they stopped singing, the silence that followed was piercing. They could all hear their own breath catching itself. Father light-heartedly assured the group that the lack of audience had nothing to do with their musical abilities. As they went around the square and sang at various corners and alleyways, there was only one door that opened, and the mother of a newly born baby rushed out to seek the blessings of the group. They looked around the area and saw a few more heads popping out of windows, giving them a vague applause, but as the evening came to an end, they all headed home with a strange and uncomfortable feeling inside their stomachs. They tried to reason with the feeling by telling themselves that several families must be away on holiday but they knew it was more than that.

As they recalled the evening, the parishioner jokingly said to Barbara, 'It's not so much that there is no room at the Inn, but that there was nobody at the Inn

after all'. She laughed, but felt lost in a faraway thought. She was halfway through her sandwich, and he realised that it was time for him to head to the meeting. He said goodbye to Barbara and told her that he looked forward to seeing her at the service in the evening. She began walking back to the bookshop, and on her way, noticed the yawning security guard outside a luxury shop with no customers. She felt a simultaneous sense of pity and resentment. She knew that each item in the shop could pay for a week's rent, and therefore, the owner could rely on sporadic purchases by tourists who come in with their swanky cameras and foreign currencies. Unlike a bookshop, these places did not need a community of returning customers. They thrived despite the emptiness, holding numerous objects made for very few people. Barbara did know a young designer who owned a boutique in the area, and recalled an amusing conversation that they had the last time they saw each other. She told Barbara about the clashes in the aesthetic sense of her two prime customer bases, namely the Arab and the Russian buyers. 'While the former wanted to add sleeves to all my dresses, the latter wanted the sleeves off, along with the backs and often, the shoulders', she told her with a snigger. These were the same groups of people that featured as central characters in most of the rumours about the empty homes in the area.

A similar rumour was associated with the empty building next to Barbara's home. She had reported it to the head of the council during the period when the Grenfell victims were being rehoused. But even after repeated reminders, the building continues to stand empty, and its nameless owners remain entangled within imprecise webs of gossip. The afternoon in the bookshop passed slowly with only two people popping in to browse through the travel books. One of them picked up a book on Istanbul and carefully looked at all the photographs with audible admiration but left the shop without buying anything. Eventually, Barbara locked up the bookshop and headed for church service, where the sermon nearly moved her to tears. On her way home, she picked up vegetables for a soup. As she stirred the vegetables in a large pot of boiling water, she heard a sound from the empty building next door, and immediately rushed to her window. She couldn't really see any shadowed outlines through the grills, and concluded that it was perhaps being renovated yet again, cleaned and

beautified for nobody in particular. She looked around the square and noticed the blinking red and yellow lights that were part of the security systems installed in most of the homes. She wondered if security companies were in fact the greatest beneficiaries of empty homes. They had built an intricate infrastructure to govern and guard emptiness.

She absentmindedly stared at the streetlamps that held within its dim light the criss-crossed shadow of the scaffoldings. There were so many renovation projects that took place in the area that the scaffoldings had become a permanent element of the landscape. Barbara still remembers the horrific incident that took place in Cadogan Square a few years ago. Two Polish workers were carrying an expensive sofa into the second floor of an empty home when one of them slipped. She corrected her own memory of the event. He didn't slip, as the later newspaper reports confirmed, but fell through the cheaply built scaffolding, with the weight of the sofa crushing his body through the piercing grills. He died on the spot. Barbara remembers being away on the day that the event had taken place. She in fact heard about the event only from the newspapers, even though it took place only a few steps away from her home. The square was empty, the neighbouring homes were empty, and the home being renovated was empty as well. Barbara still tears up at the thought of a man dying while renovating a house in which nobody lived.

She felt overwhelmed even as she was staring at a still, silent and empty landscape. She could smell the warm carrots that announced their own readiness. As she poured out a bowl of soup, the fragrance of steamed vegetables filled up all rooms of her home. The rooms looked emptier than usual in the absence of her mum, who was spending the summer with Barbara's brother in Germany. She looked around for a book to read, while wondering if this time of the day felt lonely to most people. A few days ago, she did hear on the radio that the city council was creating a ministry for loneliness, and that loneliness kills more people than obesity. She wondered if loneliness could kill a place, and then she wondered if places can die. She imagined homes wilting without people living in it, and wondered if the empty homes around her were slowly dying right now. She is reminded of the face of the yawning security

guard from earlier in the day, and then all of a sudden, she imagines the face of the man stuck in metallic grills that she had imagined for several empty nights after reading about the incident. She tried to clear her head with the help of a book, but she couldn't concentrate on the translated poetry in her hands. Finally, she decided to draw out a plan for the closing of the bookshop next month, which is something she had been putting off for the past few weeks. She sat with a calculator and began to add, subtract, divide and multiply the measurements of books, boxes and empty spaces.

Chapter Two

Light and Darkness: Untangling Different Conceptions of Empty Homes



My first introduction to empty homes in my second field site, Cadogan Square, was through the medium of light. While the first chapter addressed emptiness in Sutton Estate, which was connected to debates of habitability around a set of four visibly rotting flats, the emptiness in Cadogan Square was quieter. I had to look for it, and to do so, I turned to newspaper reports. Many newspaper articles that problematised the emptiness of Central London relied on "light" as both, an observable evidence and an abstract metaphor. The above image is from an investigative report in the *Evening Standard* by Joshi Herrmann (2014) about empty homes in Cadogan Square. Ed Cumming (2015), in *The Guardian,* described the phenomenon as "Lights-out London", in which absentee owners are seen to push up property prices without contributing to the local economy. While some articles make use of photographs of partial lighting in apartment blocks to demonstrate the uncertainties cropping up in the housing landscape, other articles dwell on the ghosts propping up in the absence of light. For my first visit to Cadogan Square, I caught Bus 28 from West Kensington heading

towards South Kensington. The delay of the bus stirred up a conversation between strangers at the bus stop, and one of them asked me why I had a notebook in my hand. I described my field work to them and all of them recalled to me their own experiences of discovering empty homes. Light was a common path of discovery. One of them described walking around Chelsea in the evening and being horrified by the pitch darkness of residential squares, and then one of them encouraged me to take a walk in the area after dinner and count the number of lights that were switched on. 'Mind you, sometimes they put automated lights', said the woman with a baby, and as we laughed at the absurdity of the situation, I concluded that light was intimately tied to a sense of presence as well as the performance of presence.

The light-based descriptions of emptiness struck a chord for many reasons. It points to something that is visible in order to evoke something that is invisible. Lit windows are countable, rendering emptiness as something that is quantifiable and can be definitively pointed towards. It is premised on the universal binary of light and darkness, which relegates empty homes to the realm of the dark and the unknown, invoking the ghostly attributes of empty homes in London. Not surprisingly, empty homes are often described through terms like "ghost squares", "ghost towns" or "ghost blocks", depending on where they are situated. In investigative pieces on empty homes, the ghostly properties of emptiness are accentuated by the dramatic language built around light and darkness: 'The windows that are dark tonight have, by and large, been dark for months. Welcome to the ghost town of the super-rich' (Herrmann, *Evening Standard*, 2014). Light-based descriptions serve to link empty homes to the 'outsider', which implicates foreign owners or illegal sources of money, thereby turning attention away from the legal and visible structures of home ownership in England that produces, and thrives on, emptiness. By connecting presence with 'light', emptiness and fullness are tied to appropriate ways of demonstrating presence and care, and within these moralising narratives built around empty homes in London, some homes are problematised while others are not. In this chapter, I will untangle the different conceptions of empty homes to argue that emptiness is not a straightforward binary opposite of fullness, and vacant, not the simple opposite of occupied. Instead, emptiness should be

understood as a spectrum, in which there are different kinds of emptiness with concomitant different social consequences and moral evaluations.

Even though I stepped into the field site in the dark and counted the lit windows as part of the exercise recommended to me by the stranger at the bus stop, over the course of the following months, I found patterns in the emptiness that did not appear ghostly. To the contrary, these patterns appeared predictable, familiar and coordinated. The patterns were first revealed to me during my conversations with the gun-store manager who said: “this panic around empty homes is all made up by the newspapers. My entire business survives on a community, and if there is a community anywhere in London, it is here in Chelsea. Even if some people travel for most parts of the years, they always return and that is what is important”. Punctuality, and not fullness, was seen as the opposite of emptiness. Secondly, the intimate association of light with presence was further demonstrated by the correlation drawn between emptiness and lack of Christmas lights in December.

Once again, emptiness was less about the time spent living in a particular place and more about a failing in appropriately demonstrating presence and involvement in the community. I will therefore shift the conversation from light and dark, or day and night (the fullness of daytime versus emptiness of night-time in Chelsea), towards the framework of seasonality, that I build using ethnographic findings through my conversations with residents (who separate seasonal occupants from the less predictable occupancy of Airbnb tenants or new demographics of homeowners, who were described as “not caring” about the homes they bought), the nearby gun shop manager (who distinguished people who might live in an area for a long time but not be invested versus those who might occupy the city for a few months a year, but are deeply invested in the community), and a conservation architect assisting Cadogan Estate (who highlighted how the patterns of emptiness allow for coordinating repair works). To supplement these testimonies of my interlocutors, I also draw on anthropologists like Luna Glucksburg (2016) and Anna Minton (2017), who analyse the differentiation made between seasonal elite and the new elites in terms of their patterns of occupying London. My

intention behind highlighting seasonal patterns of home occupancy is to locate empty homes within longer timescales, and shifting away from studying the emptiness of individual properties, which are quantifiable and attributable to an outsider, towards studying the emptiness of land, the vast control of the Cadogan Estate and the historical norms of occupancy built around luxury homes in Chelsea. In sum, what I am suggesting is that along with the new owners, one should look at the feudalistic patterns of land ownership and the buying practices of old elite families, because both these practices co-exist side by side in Chelsea and that emphasising one over the other is a form of prejudice.

In the introduction, I referred to Hasan, a conservation architect working closely with Cadogan Estate, who confirmed that houses in Cadogan have historically been imagined as seasonal. Luna Glucksburg (2016; p. 249) confirms this observation as she argued that 'British elite have always inhabited London on a seasonal basis', refuting the media created "lights out panic" that poses emptiness as unprecedented. As discussed in the Introduction, the emptiness of homes in the Square is tied to the lease, which is always time-bound and ensures the return of the home to the freeholder. The emptiness facilitates the conservation process itself and allows the buildings to be cared for and maintained as heritage sites and not necessarily as places to be lived in. This emptiness being seasonal, and therefore punctual and reliable, further eases processes of care, repair and maintenance in the absence of full-time residents. Seasonality is not new but embedded in the history of the British upper classes, as Jane Austen's (1811) *Sense and Sensibility*'s plot unfolded in alignment with the London Social season (beginning in the 17th and 18th century), which comprised of balls, dinner parties and charity events (Gosling, 2013). The members of the British elite, made up of aristocratic families like the Cadogan family, regarded their country house as their permanent homes, and resided in the city only during the months of the "social season".

The social season consisted of prestigious events such as the Ascot, Doggett's Coat and Badge, which was the oldest rowing race in the world that started at London Bridge and ended at Cadogan Pier, as well as the Chelsea

Flower Show, that continues to run and in which residents from both my field sites participate. The season was also in line with the sitting of the Parliament, as the members of the aristocratic elite formed the Parliament, and the season provided a definite time when children of marriageable age met one another. In fact, in 1717, Sir Charles Cadogan married Elizabeth Sloane (the family that Sloane Street gets its name from), which paved the way for Cadogan family's ownership of land in the area (*The Telegraph*, 2002). Anna Minton (2017; p. 13), in her research into the emptiness in London, argued that the new elites, who occupy their homes for a few weeks or months a year, often replicate the traditional elite's practices of occupancy and 'come to London for their version of "the season"'. The retail stores on the neighbouring Sloane Street similarly define and adapt these seasonal routines by organising seasonal auctions, thereby shaping their own retail models around the cycles of emptiness that defined the area.

Luna Glucksburg (2016), as part of ESRC funded project *Life in the Alpha Territories: London's "Super-Rich" Neighbourhoods*, distinguished the different types of empty homes that exist in London. She debunked the facile correlations made in popular media between emptiness and particular ethnic communities seen to hollow-out London, by disentangling different types of empty homes of investors from the empty homes of old elite families who buy homes for their children in luxury areas. Glucksburg's (2016; p. 241) project covered a wide field site, including my two sites, as they included 'what estate agents call prime London (where properties sell for above £2 million) and sit in a crescent that goes from Chelsea in the south, up through South Kensington, Knightsbridge, Belgravia, Mayfair, Notting Hill and Holland Park in the west, to Hampstead and Highgate in the north'. She faced similar restrictions in directly engaging with the owners of these homes and thereby relied on the service providers in the area, such as estate agents, designers, florists and carers, who were assumed to be affected directly by the changing conditions in the borough. This was similar to my own approach, prompting me to reach out to the stores on Sloane Street, the gun shop, the designer studios, restaurants and nearby hospice to focus on how emptiness was described and measured by them.

In these descriptions, some empty homes were seen as emptier than others, and this had little to do with the actual emptiness of the homes and more to do with the profiling of their owners. Many of these descriptions echoed the light-based identification of emptiness. By interrogating the measurement of emptiness in light and focussing on the competing narratives of emptiness, this chapter will shine light on the kinds of emptiness that is not seen as a threat.

Measuring Emptiness in Light

Light bridges the domestic and the public realms. Through light, one's presence within their home spills into a presence within a city, or a world at large. Over the past decade, many night maps have circulated on the internet, with NASA's famous image of the world at night as seen from space, leaving many in awe of technology and the wonders of technological mapping. Mapping global cities such as London and New York at night reveals the role of light in portraying the density of population and liveliness of these areas, connecting New York to its portrayal as the city that never sleeps. David Conradson and Alan Latham (2007) studied the 'affective possibilities' offered by London to New Zealand migrants, who temporarily reside in London as part of their "Overseas Experience".[17] Living in London for these short-term residents was less about occupying a city and more about immersing oneself in the "affective possibilities" (Conradson and Latham, 2007; p. 235) offered by a global city. The affective experience of London was connected to the lights of the city, along with other sensory stimulations, that evoked London as a "world city", which was the draw for the New Zealanders who did not mind taking a career dip for this particular experience. Light is a selling point for the city, as it draws visitors and tourists towards its spectacle of liveliness.

Danny Dorling and Carl Lee's (2016) book *Geography,* with maps by Benjamin Hennig, discusses the relevance of light-based maps, among other ways of mapping, and argues for the decoupling of light and presence. They created a map by combining multiple satellite images of the earth to see what

[17] Overseas Experience (OE) is the visa category that allows under-30 citizens of Australia and New Zealand to reside in the UK for 2 years.

it would look like if night occurred in all parts at once. Dorling also shrunk the areas without lights, leaving on the map the areas where not only are people present, but where they have the energy and resources to demonstrate their presence through light. He argued that there are some areas that have actually become darker over time, and this is not because the populations have decreased but because people's relationship to resources has altered. For instance, in Tokyo, since the Tsunami, the light map has become darker as people have to rely on relatively lesser electricity after the nuclear power stations were turned off. In short, Dorling makes an important argument to say that light maps demonstrate inequality as wealthier parts are brighter and the poorer areas are covered in darkness.

I borrow this argument to understand the relevance of light in Cadogan Square, and why its absence stirs concern. Dorling connected light to wealth, and similarly, I argue that the presence of light is related less to the presence of people and more to the assurance of a particular status of an area. If London is described as a world city, and Chelsea as the centre of the world, then lights become necessary demonstrators of this reputation. To add to that, the use of self-timed lights further dismantles the simplistic relationship between light and presence, and instead, relates light to the affective performance of presence. Inge Daniels (2014), in her study of domestic atmospheres in Japan, similarly looked at the light and dark binary as embedded in discourses about progressive modernity, and how these performances of light are divorced from actual lived experiences of intimacy.

Tim Ingold (2000; p. 265) defined light as the 'experience of inhabiting the world of the visible, and that its qualities – of brilliance and shade, tint and colour, and saturation – are variations, upon this experience'. However, Bill and Sorenson (2007) extend Ingold's definition to recognise the active role of light in the making and unmaking of social life. I take the argument a step further to understand the ways in which light, due to its specific material qualities – namely, the contagiousness of light and its ability to draw attention to itself (Edensor and Millington, 2009) – transitions seamlessly between a source of energy and a source of meaning. It allows people to make sense of things and

attribute meaning to what they see. In Cadogan Square, the linking of emptiness to lack of lights turns it into an affective orientation that encompasses, but exceeds, empty homes. Dace Dzenovska's (2020) study of emptiness in rural Latvia also focusses on the interpretive frameworks through which those living with emptiness make sense of it. Just as the unlit windows are emphasised in Cadogan Square to turn emptiness into an eerie phenomenon, Dzenovska's (2020; p. 11) study looked at how it was 'dark windows of empty houses and talk of people leaving that created a melancholic public mood'. Such an affective evocation of emptiness turned it into an omnipresent phenomenon within dominant media narratives in both of our field sites, despite the fact that the emptiness we study emerge from very different processes.

This process of "making sense" of emptiness cannot be neatly distinguished between the senses. Here, I draw on Dzenovska's (2020; p. 11) approach as she studied the sensual dimensions of emptiness – 'the smell of damp basements', 'sound of doors swinging in the wind', 'abundant apple tree by abandoned homes' – and in these descriptions, the various sensory components are intertwined in ways that produces profound experiences that are 'not yet graspable in language'. I also take Ingold's (2007) advice that soundscapes cannot be extricated from lightscapes, given that aural perceptions are intertwined with other sensory experiences. For instance, Barbara had recalled the carol singing incident multiple times, in which the parishioner of the nearby church led a group of carol-singers to sing in and around Cadogan Square and were shocked at the silent reception they received. The Square stood absolutely empty, and in the stillness of the night, the group heard the returning echoes of their own song. Several residents shared this event with me, each emphasising, in their own words, the darkness of the unlit landscape and the returning echoes of their song. The description of the echo was enmeshed with the description of the darkness.

I draw on Ingold (2007; p. 3) as he argued against the reification of sound within the study of soundscapes, which often treats the ear as a playback device, neatly separating aural perceptions from other sensory experiences. He

argues that sound is unproblematically compared to sight, instead of light, which reveals the implicit assumptions 'regarding eyes being screens that allow us to reconstruct the world inside our heads', and 'ears being holes in the skull that let sound in to mingle with the soul' (Ingold, 2007; p. 3). Some of the residents of the Square also described to me the 'silence' or the 'stillness' of the Square during a festive time, taking their cues from the lack of Christmas lighting on balconies and the unlit windows. Given that luxury residential areas are not necessarily known to be loud, the complaints around silence arise from other sensory cues such as light. Therefore, I argue that light is as much heard as it is seen, just as sound is as much seen as it is heard.

My second argument draws on the materiality of the light source, as I jump ahead to the months following December, in which the gradual fading away of Christmas festivities is abruptly halted by the glaring presence of leftover lights hanging off balconies and windows. I return to Bille and Sørensen's (2007; p. 269) conceptualisation of the 'materiality of the lumen', in which they draw out a relationship between the different types of light (sunshine, electrical, gas, candlelight), based on the mode and the source of light, and its social manifestation and experience. Shifting away from light as affect, I turn to light as material – light that takes up space and decays with time. There is a complex relationship between the absence of lights during Christmas and the complaints about leftover Christmas lights in the months following December. While the former is visually indicative of empty homes, the latter carries an uneasiness of partial presence or partial absence. It is suggestive of owners who occupy their homes once a year and then leave. The materiality of leftover light therefore obstructs the light and darkness binary through which empty homes are spoken about. The shift of focus from light as affect to light as material also prompts the shift away from the binary of emptiness and fullness and redefines emptiness as a spectrum.

"Like night and day" is a common phrase used to denote the stark difference between two things. Mapping emptiness through light also translates into the binary drawn between daytime, which is seen to be full of life, and night-time, when empty homes reveal themselves through unlit windows. The running

commentary on empty homes in Cadogan Square consists of the comparison between how lively the area appears during daytime and how it 'becomes dead' at night. The descriptions of this contrast ranged from 'It's a different city in the day and a different city at night' to 'this place becomes a ghost town at night'. As for example, the Rector of the nearby church said to me: 'I walk home at night and the closest to humans that I see on the streets are mannequins standing by the shop windows'. The common thread running through these descriptions is the difference between day and night, which is closely tied to the difference between full and empty respectively.

This binary between day and night is tied to the resentment towards tourists. Many of the residents complained about the presence of tourists with cameras and shopping bags, and that their departure at the close of the day leaves the area abandoned and empty. "Chelsea is made for tourists" is a common complaint. The conversation about empty homes juggles the distinction drawn between day and night in order to establish emptiness in an antagonism to the treasured notions of a 'community'. The contrast is expressed in the criticism towards 'luxury stores' that take the place of other stores essential to community life, such as post offices, butchers or bookstores, which symbolise a more stable community (which does not require the community to be permanently present, but for its presence/absence to be stable/predictable/routine).

Two recent incidents punctured the neat segregation of day and night. The first incident took place three years before I started my fieldwork, but continued to stay fresh in the memories of the residents I interviewed. *The Telegraph* (2014) reported the death of two workers in the Square. Barbara recounted the story to me and told me that the news had given her many sleepless nights: two Polish construction workers were carrying an expensive sofa, climbing over to the second floor of a multi-million-pound home, whose owner lived elsewhere. The 130-year-old Victorian cast iron balustrade against which their bodies were resting gave way, leading to the two workers losing

their balance, and the weight of the sofa crushing their bodies through the piercing grills which are put up to prevent squatting in these empty properties. They both died on the spot. The second incident was narrated to me by Loida, the postal lady, who also cleaned several empty flats as her part-time job. She said that her friend, Josephina, who was also a Filipina cleaner in the area, was walking to the bus stop one afternoon. There was a tree being cut in the park at Cadogan gardens. Suspecting that there were hardly any people who lived around that corner of the park, or perhaps, out of sheer absent-mindedness, the workers paid to chop off the tree had forgotten to put up a sign or a fence. Josephina was walking down the road after cleaning one of the corner flats, and before the workers could call out to her, the uprooted tree fell right over her head, and snapped her neck. The ambulance was called but there was not much that could have been done, other than placing a fence around the fallen tree.

These two incidents might be disconnected from one another but they were both similarly brought to my attention by my interlocutors. While the postal lady spoke of Josephina's death as turning the concerns around emptiness into something quite real and tangible for her, the death of the construction workers was brought up through a poetry event that I hosted at Barbara's bookshop before its closing down. After the poetry event, the death of the construction workers was brought up by some of the residents and the Church Rector who attended the event, and in these conversations, the cruel irony of losing one's life while building a home that was possibly going to remain empty was highlighted. The incidents took place in the middle of the day, which challenges the simplistic attribution of emptiness to the ghostly realms of night-time. They also expose the labours that feed into empty homes, including practices of cleaning, maintenance works, renovations/redecorations, repairs, inspection of damages to maintain the value of properties with or without people living in them.

While the first chapter looked at material practices of care that were linked to ways of creating belonging, the care provided by Josephina and the

construction workers have little to do with belonging. Posing “care” beyond the moral stance, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) defines it as a “concrete work of maintenance”, drawing attention to the labours of care. Focusing on labours of maintaining a home also challenges the romance attributed to processes of homemaking, which is seen as the ‘underlying goal of all housing processes’ (Baxter, 2014; p. 134). Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell introduce the concept of “home unmaking” to challenge the linearity attributed to homemaking and instead focus on the precarious processes by which home making and unmaking are mutually constitutive. While they cite the example of the trade-offs made by victims of domestic violence leaving one home to build another, the idea of home unmaking is also useful to imagine the how homes in the Square are cared for in ways that are decoupled from physically living in them.

Visit to the Gun Store

I did not realise I was entering a gun store the first time that I walked into one, a short walk away from Cadogan Square. It was a hidden room, covered with a curtain, with the storefront selling garments for race-goers, that included pants, shirts, hats and walking sticks. Parting the curtains, I noticed many guns displayed in a glass cabinet spread across the walls of the room. The store manager was talking to two young men who were seated opposite to him, and he politely waved and asked me to wait outside. I stepped out and started browsing the racing accessories, and discovered black-and-white photographs of races and other occasions that constituted the London Social Season. Finally, the manager asked me to come in and clarified that the format of the store is designed to ensure intimacy and privacy. He only entertains one customer at a time, keeping his curtains shut to the other waiting customers, who can browse the race-wears in the part of the store that faces the street. He described his interactions with his customers as not just private, but also ‘sacred’. He clarified that the intimacy is crucial to his business so that people can freely speak about money without feeling self-conscious, especially as they are discussing six-figures. Another aspect of the intimacy is to distinguish the store from other luxury stores, maintaining the charms of ‘old school’ service

where customers were seen as family and friends. In fact, he used to work in Selfridges, which is a luxury retail chain, but took up this job to be able to make real and lasting connections with returning customers.

His case against the existence of emptiness was built on the premise that communities continue to remain alive in Chelsea, and it is this continuing community that keeps the business sustainable. He added: ‘the most significant thing about gun-selling is that it hasn’t changed; and I think it’s because shooting is not something you can just get into, it is a culture that continues through family heritage’. And many of them are in fact continuing family lines of gun ownership, as gun licences are seen as a rite of passage for the gun to transfer along patrilineal lines of descent.



The regularity of his business is also connected to the annual shooting season that spans in the UK from August to January, thus ensuring that his customers return to him at regular intervals for advice, repairs, or to hold their guns while they are away. Even as the gun store manager argued against emptiness, he

was making a profit out of it by charging a fee of a few hundred pounds a month to store guns for distant owners who did not have the required gun cabinet in their homes to store it in their absence. He admitted that there were some empty houses in the area, as he had noticed a scaffolding placed around a building on Eaton Square that was rumoured to have been bought off by a Lebanese owner but was left empty due to a discord in the lease. However, he distinguished these forms of erratic emptiness from the seasonal emptiness of Chelsea, which he did not see as a problem.

He complained about journalists making a big deal out of the empty houses in Chelsea, when, in fact, the area is known for having a strong community. According to him, the ability to participate in a community is not affected by where one's permanent residence is. He asked me if I had spoken to any of my neighbours, and I told him that other than those living in my building, I had never spoken to people on my street. He smiled and said: 'That is exactly what I mean – it is possible to live in a place all year around and yet not form a community, or live in a place for some part of the year but in those times, engage fully'. Emptiness was related less to physical presence and more to the ability to participate in a community, which remains undisturbed by seasonal emptiness. The participation in the community refers to partaking in particular forms of lifestyle, symbolised by the ownership of guns, attending seasonal events like the boat race or Ascot, engaging in consumption at the nearby restaurants and shops (also owned by Cadogan), etc.

Measuring Emptiness in Time

Empty homes, I realised, had little to do with whether a house was occupied all year round or not, and more to do with how regularly homes are occupied and the ways in which presence is demonstrated. With this realisation, I went back to the newspaper clippings I started off with, in which empty homes were posed as a crisis through the unlit windows with ghostly evocations. I noticed that only particular empty homes were called out through these light-based descriptions of emptiness, and that there are in fact several indicators of emptiness that can be spotted in broad daylight. For instance, when Barbara invited me over to her

home for breakfast, she pointed to the window in her living room through which I could see the backs of another mansion block.

Staring through the window, I could see the wall covered in pigeon droppings and the window grills rusting. Behind the homes, the back area held stagnant water. She said: ‘Some of these houses are barely houses; they are merely façades of houses with nothing behind the façade’. Some of the houses don’t have plug points either. This was a detail I had also heard from two cleaners who were responsible for the maintenance of four empty homes. Plug points, in these descriptions, were tied to the imagination of what it takes for a house to be liveable. Barbara had once heard loud footsteps from the flat next door, and had been excited by the possibility of someone finally moving into the empty home, but found out the next day that some workers had been sent in by the builders to examine the property. The emptiness that stood out was the emptiness that was not concealed through the performance of presence and demonstration of care.

While some empty homes had regular cleaning as well as renovations, others were seen as “hollow” – empty in the literal sense of the word. The home next to Barbara was rumoured to have been bought by a Lebanese owner but due to a conflict over the lease transfer, it was sitting empty for three years. Different kinds of empty homes were weighed against each other in terms of the regularity of their occupancy, in which the disruptive frenzy of “reckless” buyers (a term used by residents and real estate agents to describe the new demographics of home buyers, who were usually foreign investors) were pitted against the more traditional aristocratic elites, who inhabited Chelsea seasonally. In these moral evaluations of empty homes, the residents frequently complained against the Airbnb tenants, who would infrequently occupy these flats. Even as Airbnb was not allowed by Cadogan Estate, one of the residents living in a penthouse on top of one of the Cadogan houses complained that he had found Airbnb leaflets slipped under his door. Loida, the postal lady, confirmed this suspicion, as she said that sometimes when she rang the bell to deliver mail, some households never answered the bell, even as she could sense from the windows that the house was occupied.


SCHWEPPES



Emptiness was not so much about occupancy but about the appropriate occupancy of a house – legitimacy and predictability were mutually constitutive. While seasonality is widely studied in the context of non-Western societies, such as Japan (Daniel, 2009) and India (Rai, 2020), it is often disregarded in the understanding of Western societies. Early historians' accounts of colonialism operated on the binary between non-western societies that were seen to be adapting to seasons, and the colonists who were seen to disrupt these rhythms, especially in the context of agriculture. William Cronon (1983) studied the coming of the English colonists in Native American forests by comparing the different relationship that the two groups held with time and land. Common to most studies of colonial exploitation of indigenous land is the idea that indigenous people lived more in sync with nature by changing their ways of life according to seasonal rhythms, resulting in moving in search of food and remaining without food through winters. The colonists, on the other hand, due to their storage facilities, found it absurd that the natives went hungry despite abundant resources. In such antagonisms, there is a belief that the Native Americans are more affected by seasonal cycles, whereas European societies do not adjust their work according to seasons. In his book, *Changes in the Land,* Cronon disputes such claims to show how Native Americans actively changed and shaped their ecosystems, and how European movements were not exempt from seasonal rhythms.

In the context of European societies themselves, seasonality is romanticised as a thing of the past, within the temporal shift imagined from a pre-capitalist temporal order to the present time (Shove, Trentmann and Wilk, 2009). It is juxtaposed against contemporary capitalist societies, in which consumerism is seen to "inject frenzy" (Shove et al. 2009) into everyday life. Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann and Richard Wilk (2009) interrogate the current preoccupations with the frantic nature of modern consumerist society that is juxtaposed against the slower, romantic pace of an imagined pre-industrial rhythm of life. Instead of a simplistic 'sequential shift from one temporal order to another', they propose a framework that acknowledges 'multiple temporalities and lack of coordination between scales and registers of temporal order' (Shove, Trentmann and Wilk, 2009; p. 3). They suggest that

instead of ‘seeing material objects as a distracting presence that inject stress and temporal frenzy into our lives’ (Shove et al. 2009; p. 6), it is more helpful to understand the ways in which people employ material objects to stabilise as well as challenge temporal orders. It is within this framework of multiple temporalities and interdependency between natural and commercial rhythms (Moskowitz, 2009; Daniels, 2009), as well as the coexistence of chaos and frenzy beside predictability and routine (Shove, 2009), that I position my own ethnographic interest in the rhythms and routines born out of the presence of empty homes and the practices of measuring, mapping, maintaining and fighting them.

Shove debunked the notion that modern times are marked by the lack of shared temporal orders leading to the loss of communities. For instance, the shortening of meal times is immediately assumed to imply a proportional decrease in connectivity and a dwindling sense of community. Instead, she argued that the flexibilities of temporal orders allow people to create new forms of synchronisation patterns, as seen in the London peak and off-peak train schedules. She studied the creation of urban schedules and related practices of social synchronisation that allows for the coordination of everyday life. She proposed a shift in focus from “duration” towards the question of “coordination” to understand how seasonal rhythms interact with commercial rhythms (Daniels, 2009).

Building on her argument, I argue that the declaration of empty homes in Cadogan Square is not so much about the duration of emptiness, that is, how long has a house been empty for, but is in fact, about how emptiness is coordinated, scheduled and synchronised. Seasonality forms the basis on which a moral hierarchy of emptiness is produced, within which some homes are declared as empty, whereas other empty homes are normalised. Anna Minton (2017), in her book *Big Capital,* looks at the impact of emptiness on communities in Knightsbridge and Belgravia, in which 20% of the homes are empty. While on one end of the spectrum are investors who have nothing much to do with the homes other than drawing value, she looks at the wider range of buyers, including the categories of “buy to live”, “buy to let”, “buy for the

children" and "buy to leave". Similar to my own study of the classificatory frameworks within which empty homes are arranged, Minton looks at the new elites versus the old British aristocratic elites and their contrasting patterns of occupying their second homes (Minton, 2017; p. 13).

The retail stores in the area are also tenants of the Cadogan Estate, relying on them for their everyday needs and management, and in turn, generating most of their revenue. A store manager at Emelia Wickstead, a luxury design brand, was waiting for a repairman to be sent by the Cadogan family to repair the air conditioning system. On the other hand, Chloe, another luxury design store, was in the midst of organising a VIP auction of their latest collection, closing the doors to the public. Upon inquiring further, I discovered that there were invitations sent out for the auction, and that many stores on the street operate on similar routines of working towards periodic auctions that work alongside and capitalise on the cycles of emptiness and fullness in Chelsea.

Empty homes, therefore, cannot simply be seen as disruptions, as suggested by the light-based descriptions of emptiness in the newspaper articles at the start of this chapter. Instead, in order to understand empty homes in Chelsea, it is important to understand the imagination of particular temporal orders that normalises seasonal absences while distancing other empty homes that do not fit into these synchronisations. The dissonant empty homes belong to the lowest rungs in the hierarchy of empty homes. They are homes that get pointed at, singled out and attributed to particular racial and ethnic groups. The manager of the gun store insisted upon a sense of community in opposition to claims of emptiness, as he referred to continuing traditions of hunting within 'families that have lived in Chelsea for decades even if they are not always physically present'. He further stated, 'some people live in the same place forever and yet they don't form a community, and some people may not always live here but they are part of a community and they always keep returning'. In this sentence, the idea of a community is not tied to living in a particular place, but to the promise of returning to that place over and over again.

Ted Schatzki (2009; p. 47) argued that coordination relies on 'common, shared and orchestrated timespaces'. In Cadogan Square, these "timespaces" are created and maintained by the cycles of consumption – such as the regular subscriptions to luxury magazines delivered by Loida, the Royal Mail postal worker I interviewed, and by the cycles of regeneration, comprising the labours of cleaning, renovation, repair and maintenance. Emptiness does not disrupt these cycles but, in fact, finds a way to neatly fit within these cycles, generating labours and revenues. The Cadogan Estate provides concierge and security services that bridge the seemingly opposed notions of community and emptiness. By understanding empty homes in Central London within cycles of seasonality, my work sets out to challenge the singularisation of particular kinds of empty homes. This further reinforces the stigmatisation of some communities, namely the Arabs, who are seen to threaten the imagined "community" of the place. While one of the real estate agents spoke to me about the challenges of selling homes in Knightsbridge, which is reputed to have many buyers from the Middle-East, there are also a series of rumours circulating in the area. One of the rumours was about an Arab family who was uncomfortable with the surveillance cameras in the neighbourhood as they did not want the women of the family to be recorded on camera. They complained to the Council and allegedly ended up damaging the security camera. Following this incident, there were two cases of mugging by the notorious biking gangs in the area, and it was then that the broken cameras were discovered as the mugging was not recorded. Such rumours are common, resulting in the stigmatisation of certain communities as well as places where houses become difficult to sell, as per the estate agent I spoke to. Rumours play a key role in the context of emptiness, as they populate empty homes with imagined owners and create narratives to fill in the missing gaps in the puzzle. In my study, I make a note of rumours, especially the ones that have repeated themselves across my interviews, and use their descriptive elements as ways to understand the languages of emptiness and change.

Studying empty homes only as disruptions thereby poses the risk of reinforcing such stigmatisations in which the blame for empty homes is singlehandedly placed on particular communities, whereas the larger structures

of the estate's ownership of land remain unchallenged. Frank Trentmann (2009) warns against the two extremes that debates on disruption can take up. Disruption is either romanticised as social breakdowns or regarded as irrelevant, momentary nuisance. Avoiding these two extremes, he looked at breakdowns in terms of their interference in everyday collective habits (Trentmann, 2009; p 81). Similarly, I theorise disruptions not in opposition to order but, in fact, as avenues opening up possibilities for creating new forms of temporal orders and patterns of synchronisation. Instead of seeing them as opposites, my work sees "routine" and "disruption" as entangled and mutually constitutive. Empty homes are not problematised because they are empty. Instead, I argue that, empty homes are problematised only when they upset routines and seasonal patterns of consumption.

Finally, as I try to situate the competing narratives of emptiness, I see whether David Harvey's (1989) theory of time-space compression that underlies the process of financialisation applies to my context. While empty homes are often produced through the transformation of a house into a financial asset through which capital can safely move across continents, this in itself is an incomplete story. Much of the emptiness in London arises from homes sitting empty for most parts of the year and populated seasonally, or homes awaiting changing leases or planning permissions, or, as Danny Dorling (2014) suggested, private builders buy up land and wait for a few years before building. The developers don't want to flood the market with properties, so they hold onto land and drip-feed new developments into the market. In a similar vein, Catherine Fennell's work on house demolition suggested that abandonment, much like the emptiness I study, is not static, but a process that unfolds in time. Appel, Anand and Gupta (2018; p. 16) critique Harvey's time-space compression by pointing to the materiality of the infrastructures underlying this compression, including the fibre-optic cables, revealing the 'slowness of the process of speeding up'. Drawing on Laura Bear's work (2015), they argue that speed is not the core of capitalism, but rather, it is the 'heterogeneous forms of pacing' (Appel et al, 2018; p. 16) that underlies capitalist processes. Similarly, rather than positioning empty homes within the framework of time-space compression, I look at the processes of financialisation of housing taking place

alongside deeply embedded structures of landownership and distribution that frame my two field sites.

From Property to Land

By shifting away from the imageries of day and night, or light and darkness, and instead positioning empty homes within long-term timeframes of seasonality, I propose to connect the question of empty homes to the question of land, rather than individual properties. Cadogan Square is managed by Cadogan Estate, which is owned by Earl Cadogan, an aristocratic landlord who controls most of Chelsea. The Cadogan family came to own the land after Sir Hans Sloane purchased the manor of Chelsea is 1712, and after his death, the estate was split between his daughters, one of whom married the son of the Cadogan family. As described in the Introduction, the Cadogan family owns the freehold of most of the buildings in the area, including the residential properties that remain empty for large parts of the year. While some of the landed estates in London split up and eroded after the Second World War as they had to sell substantial shares to pay inheritance tax, the Cadogan Estate maintained its hold over Chelsea by diversifying its portfolio.

Cadogan created a capital investment management arm that invests outside of London to help the company meet its inheritance tax liabilities. *Property Week,* a UK-based real estate journal, reported that Cadogan acquired over £50m worth of assets outside of London (Midolo, 31st August 2018). Hugh Seaborn, the CEO of Cadogan Estates made the following comment to the journal: “With our focus on Chelsea, the success of Cadogan is inextricably linked to that of London and as the largest city of commerce in Europe, with excellent global connectivity, a diverse and highly-skilled workforce and an unrivalled lifestyle, the case for the capital remains powerful.” Cadogan positions itself as so intricately linked to the character of Chelsea and the histories of London as a way of legitimising its hold over land, and yet, many of their recent investments have been in the international market.

Even as emptiness is discussed as a source of distress to the community, which is a cause championed by Cadogan Estate, it is the Estate nonetheless that derives profit from these empty homes. The Estate earns an annual payment in the form of service fees for the maintenance of the homes, and provides additional services for the care and upkeep of empty homes. This paradox was also revealed to me by my conversations with the Rector of the nearby church, which is where I met many other residents of the Square. Before one of the morning sessions, I reached the church early and requested to meet with the Rector, who kindly agreed to speak to me about empty homes and how it affects the community.

My questions were followed by a long moment of silence. The atmosphere of the Church stretched it out even longer. The Rector removed his spectacles, took in a deep breath and said to me, 'I am not a community developer, Mayanka; I am a Christian priest; the community is not incidental to my concern but at the heart of my faith'. He is in a state of profound dilemma, given that he is expected to strengthen the church community while also being appointed by the patriarch of the Cadogan family that owns most of the land he walks on. The Rector expressed his discomfort with the complex structure of entangled relations between the Church, the family and the business, saying, 'this is the first time when I've worked in a place where as it were every square inch that I walk on is owned by the Cadogan Estate who is a Patriarch and is responsible for my appointment – I mean of course in conjunction with the Bishop – but it is his task to nominate the candidate – and that is quite an interesting relationship not just at the personal level with the family but with the business – how do you negotiate a relationship where you receive quite a lot and you want to say quite a bit?' When I asked him if he thinks the community is dwindling, he admitted that while the Church draws people from far away, the local community keeps disappearing. Tourists and Londoners from other boroughs continue to visit the Church due to the beauty of the building, its central location, the concerts that frequently take place, the Sunday morning offering and preaching that have been highly praised, and its publicly accessible restrooms. But he considers the local community to be his key

priority. He doesn't want to draw people away from their own local churches, reiterating that "locality" is of key significance to the Church of England.

Behind the Rector's concern is a common notion of the local community that is seen to be slowly dwindling as the area is increasingly populated by those who do not live in it. The measurement of a community, much like the measurement of empty homes, is not merely through presence and absence, but through regularity and coordination. His description of the complex relationship that he shares with the Cadogan family reveals the control of the Estate not just over land, but also over the moralising narratives about what Chelsea should be. Even as the Estate parades concerns about building a community, Barbara's (the owner of the recently shut bookstore) attempts of requesting the Cadogan Estate to house the Grenfell residents in the empty properties were in vain. The Estate had responded saying that they cannot make decisions on such matters, outsourcing the agency to the property owners and asking Barbara to take a vote on the matter. The seasonal empty homes are not considered empty, as they are routinely populated by their inhabitants, resulting in Barbara getting only one vote in favour of rehousing the victims. The Cadogan Estate's role as a freeholder allows it to enforce actions on leaseholders when it wishes, while passing on responsibilities when convenient.

The Rector further recalled one of the initiatives taken by the Cadogan Estate towards addressing the rising homelessness in the area. The Estate paired with Glass Door Charity participated in an event in which residents were encouraged to sleep rough for a single night, as a way of building empathy for the homeless while also raising millions of pounds through the act. He gave an embarrassed chuckle and revealed that the stunt of sleeping rough for one night involved lavish burgers being grilled on the streets, thereby inviting food companies to build profits out of the curated experience. There was a gulf between the symbolic quest for the community and the concrete practices towards community-driven action.

There are many stories about the Cadogan family embedded in the geography of Chelsea, legitimising their control over the area that has remained practically unchanged for the past 300 years. Over breakfast, one of the Cadogan residents who had lived in Chelsea for most of her life after moving over from Germany at a young age, vividly narrated her encounter with the Earl of Cadogan at a reception hosted at the Natural History Museum in 2008, to which he had invited all his tenants:

'Although, some say he considered us his "peasants". The reception was held at the dinosaur hall. The Earl recounted in his speech that that he was able to roam the halls free of charge when he was a child as his ancestor, Sir Hans Sloane, had given his collection to the British Museum. He had the key to the museum and would run through the rooms, surrounded by priceless specimens. A Labour Prime Minister did away with these privileges — it must have been Wilson as he was generally not terribly keen on hereditary privileges. As I arrived at the museum I was asked to stand in a reception line; when my turn came, I stepped forward to shake his hand and presented him with a copy of Hans von Trotha's 'The English Garden', an elegant slim red-linen bound volume and what I thought was the appropriate gift on the occasion. The Earl glowered down at the book and me and said: 'What am I supposed to do with THAT?' – My meagre response was 'Read it'. He obviously really didn't know what to do with it, since he walks with a stick and has no free hand – So he slipped it into his blazer pocket where because of its design it stuck out while he made his speech — perfect, if unintended product placement. I never did find out whether he read it or not…'

To understand empty homes as simply a product of financialised capitalism would disregard these feudal structures that continue to prevail in the models of estate ownership. By positioning empty homes in relation to land instead of property, I want to bring attention to structures of landownership in a context where land is owned by very few people. Sophie Chevalier (1998) compared the relationship between access to land and materialisation of lineage in the UK and in France, arriving at a crucial distinction. Given that in France a wider section of the population has had access to landownership, several families have a double residential project comprising of the main house and a second home that *'anchors their descent in space'* (Chevalier, 1998; p.

66). Between these houses, she observes, there is little movement of furniture and objects. She attributes the inalienability of material objects in France to a long-term relationship to land, wherein the transmission of the familial identity is materialised in the house. On the other hand, for the English, she argues that the lack of access to landownership for large sections of the population resulted in dematerialised notions of ancestry. 'Home' in Britain therefore becomes a 'common project' that is carried out in the lifecycle of a couple or a family, and will disappear with time (Finch, 1994; in Chevalier, 1998; p. 65).

The brevity of home and the longevity of land in Britain is born out of the distinction between freehold and leasehold. When buyers purchase a house on Cadogan Square, they are simply purchasing a lease for a limited number of years, after which they have to renew it. This means that even if one owns a house, they do not own the land that it is built on, and therefore have to seek permission from the freeholders about any alterations to the property. The Cadogan Estate, on the other hand, owns the freehold of the houses, which gives them a monopoly over the area while also allowing them to extract money from the leaseholders as service charges and a token ground rent that has historically been paid by the owner of the lease to the owner of the land.

The question of empty houses in this context is, therefore, not a straightforward one, given that the lease of a house is not owned by a single person. Cadogan Estate owns freeholds of most houses as well as the common spaces in the buildings. Some of the older residents praised this model of management, arguing that in buildings with many empty flats, having a centralised management by the Estate makes sure that it is taken care of. An older couple in Cadogan Court complained against some of the residents who had acquired the freehold from Cadogan after the Leasehold Reform Housing & Urban Development Act 1993 came into place, that allowed for residents of a building to come together to buy the freehold of the building. The couple complained against this reform as it made it increasingly difficult to coordinate repair works, as most owners were away from their homes for large parts of the year. The freehold/leasehold distinction creates enormous stress for many

residents. However, one of the residents I spoke to managed to "game" the system and even win a case against the Cadogan Estate.

This resident, a middle-aged musician and his daughter, live in Draycott Avenue, adjacent to Cadogan Square, and after a long-drawn battle with the Cadogan Estate, he acquired his current lease. He said that a Lebanese couple that owned the lease of the garden flat offered him the flat in 1982. Having developed a close bond with the family and taken care of their young children, he was offered the right of first refusal by the couple at £63,500. He discussed the offer with a solicitor, anxious about the responsibilities enforced on the headlease[18]. The solicitor convinced him that the wording could be easily changed in consultation with Cadogan. He went ahead and bought it. Within a year, a management company offered double the price to buy the flat. Upon consulting with Cadogan Estate, he discovered that the wording could not be changed at all, and that the caretaker's flat cannot be sold on the market. He decided to sue the solicitor for the wrong information and the compensation helped him pay off his mortgage in one go. He also realised that the headlease is the primary means by which Cadogan controls the properties in the Square. Another restriction imposed by Cadogan was that the headlease could not be the caretaker, and therefore, he employed his first and then his second wife to be the caretakers. Cadogan took him to court for this "cheeky manipulation" of the requirements. However, he won the case, and set up his own management company, and now he bills the tenants for the repairs and renovation of the building, while paying a minimum ground rent to Cadogan for his flat. The Landlord Tenant Act of 1986 allowed him to extend his leasehold by another 80 years, which helps him devote all his time to music and not worry about money too much. He now hosts concerts in his living room, and has invited Cadogan a few times to smooth things over.

One of the Directors at the Jones Lang Lasalle, a property management company based in Knightsbridge, spoke to me about his meeting with Cadogan

[18] The headlease owns the lease of the caretaker's flat or the garden flat, which is on the lower-ground level of the house.

at the pub the previous night and their shared concerns about the deteriorating communities within the area, and blamed this deterioration on the declining control of the estate, as more and more tenants were buying up freeholds (such as the previously discussed case between the headlease and Cadogan). He added that Cadogan and Grosvenor get together regularly to discuss ways of improving the 'public realm', illustrating the dissolution of decision-making powers of the Council and increased powers of the landed elite and the property owners. Mike Raco (2012) similarly studied the growing powers of the wealthy elite community in London by focusing on the Olympic Games of 2012. He looked at the hybrid models of governance, in which large private bodies intertwine with democratic bodies (in my case, the council, the aristocratic estate, the housing association and the private housing market), resulting in private interests 'co-producing all aspects of urban projects' (Raco, 2012; p. 453).

Atkinson, Parker and Burrows (2017; p. 191) describe London as a "minimum city" as a way of highlighting the withdrawal of the State from urban life, which is increasingly being shaped by private capital. The JLL director, over our coffee meeting, argued that the 'Estates march with each other' to maintain the particular "character" of the area. 'The great thing about an Estate', he contemplated, 'is that they have lots of power over the "look" of an area'. By the "look" of an area, he was referring to the powers of Cadogan and Grosvenor to control rents, allow and prohibit certain retail outlets in the area, control the exteriors of homes that include the painting of walls and doors and other extensions to the properties. He said that these controls help the area look "smart" despite the absence of a strong community and the overwhelming presence of empty homes in the area. The loss of freeholds in the past years, Wiggins suggested, contributed to the break-up of communities in the area, reflected in the phenomenon of buying up properties and leaving them empty.

The notion of the community is weaponised to battle empty homes on the surface, while carrying out a fight against the changes that threaten the hold of the Estate over large sections of land. The focus on 'properties' within discussions on empty homes is therefore not an oversight, but a strategic

means of romanticising the ownership structures of the Estate that is seen as the paternalistic landlord who is not motivated by private profits. In this sense, both Barbara and the Rector are unsuspecting accomplices. Cadogan Family and old elites managed to perform a sense of community by timing their Christmas lights and caring for the houses, whereas the new owners do not do that, thus creating the impression that the community is dwindling. In my study, the community figures as both a real social formation and an imagined trope. As an imagined trope, the community turns into an ideology weaponised by Cadogan Estate to maintain their stronghold over land and position themselves as its true patrons, in contrast to the private/commercial developers of housing.

Hasan, the conservation architect, similarly praised the development of Marylebone High Street, which was carried out by two aristocratic estates. She said that these Estates have a vision larger than individual private property developers, and are more interested in building "character" of an area than making profits. Many of the real estate agents as well as the residents in the area evoked similar juxtapositions between the Estate model, representing a paternalistic structure of landownership, and the model of financial capitalism, representing a profit-driven motive. I situate my study of empty homes in Chelsea within these two logics of accumulation that exist alongside one another and determine the moral evaluations applied to the different timeframes of emptiness.

While I draw on the Marxist category of "logics of accumulation", I do not see them as strictly separate or even sequential, but instead, I draw on David Graeber (2006) to understand how the question of empty homes in London is situated at the intersection of financialisation of housing on one hand (marketing of homes, outsourcing of care and security to private companies, investments in luxury retail, sale of homes to developers) and feudal models of ownership and belonging (control over "character", insistence on the "community", patronage towards the pensioners and the Church), on the other. Graeber is critical of the world-systems approach within which each mode is assumed to be a coherent whole, with "capitalism" or "feudalism" being seen as the overall modes of organisation. Instead, he argues for a more

sophisticated understanding of a mode of production, which would recognise the commonality and continuity between slavery, feudalism and capitalism, instead of viewing them as coherent wholes or overall modes of organisation. Similarly, I argue that the two logics of accumulation – financialisation and paternalistic land ownership – that belong to these historically distinct modes of production exist side-by-side in the context of Chelsea.

Conclusion

I started my search for empty homes by counting lit windows in Cadogan Square. And as per the claims of the articles on emptiness, there was indeed a darkness that descended upon these areas. However, seeing darkness as a symbol of emptiness is a slippery slope. While the financialisation of housing, that is, turning a home into a financial asset, results in the proliferation of empty homes in global cities, this is an incomplete story by itself. In this chapter, I argue that light-based descriptions of empty homes place the blame solely on individual property owners, obfuscating the role of luxury estates that have served as seasonal residences to aristocratic elites for a long time. The opposite of emptiness is not fullness, but predictability and coordination, which allow seasonal inhabitants to participate in local communities (even though the voter turnout in local elections 2019 was 39.7%[19] in Kensington and Chelsea) and demonstrate their presence through Christmas lighting and care for their homes, even if they do not live in them. I locate the study of empty homes within contemporary forms of capitalism, within which emptiness is produced and managed, as well as the continuing frameworks of land and ancestry, that are often posed as out-dated within the temporal sequencing of the ordering principles of a society.

On one hand, emptiness can be seen as belonging to various financialised forms of capitalism, where it is posed as a contradiction (Harvey, 2014) or as a creation and maintenance of presence in a globalised market (Ho, 2009), or as "overproduction" born out of "government-backed flexibility in regulatory frameworks" (Madanipour, 2018). However, seeing empty homes

[19] Based on the House of Commons Report 2019 by Elise Uberoi.

simply through the lens of financialised capitalism and its spatial manifestations is not sufficient in the context of London, that is shaped by aristocratic structures of landownership and street names that link back to a handful of families. Refraining from assuming a 'sequential shift from one temporal order to another' (Shove, Trentmann and Wilk, 2009; p. 3), I situate empty homes in Cadogan Square in multiple temporal frameworks within which they are scrutinised. By looking at empty homes through the lens of time, instead of space, I seek to dismantle the static and absolute understandings of emptiness. Empty homes, I argue, exist in a shifting scale of occupancy and care. The moral binaries of empty and full through which people make sense of their surroundings do not fit these shifting scales and cycles of occupancy.

Rowland Atkinson (2016; p. 1310) examines the ways in which the wealthy population in London build 'a complementary circuit of private withdrawal and shielded mobility appears to run alongside more public engagements with space'. He refers to this phenomenon as the 'spatial retreat of the affluent' (Atkinson, 2006) or as a 'proactive spatial disengagement by the rich (Hay and Muller, 2012; in Atkinson, 2016; p. 1308). He starts out with a quote from Danny Dorling, who explored the lives of Londoners living along the Central Line, in which he says: 'There was something odd about One Hyde Park: too few people went in or out of the building. Maybe the people who owned the residences there were so rich that they chose never to visit them?' (Dorling, 2013: 59). Atkinson distinguished between two groups of wealthy people in London – those who move between multiple residences and those who have chosen to live and immerse themselves in London through leisure, private education, luxury facilities, etc. While he argues that these two groups hold different orientations towards the city, my fieldwork explored patterns and narratives that reveal an ambiguous continuity between the two groups. This is what makes it so difficult to point to an empty home in the area. Even as the emptiness of some homes is announced through scaffoldings, unlit windows or rumours, most homes are situated on a shifting scale of occupancy.

Emptiness, in the context of Cadogan Square, is related to profitability. This is in contrast to my other field site, Sutton Estate, where empty flats

perpetrate narratives of inhabitability, bringing down the value of the place in the present with a promise for profitability in the future. While the emptiness in the Square is less obviously linked to liveability, it does affect the reputation of the area, and this is where paying attention to the light-based descriptions allows for a deeper understanding of why some empty homes carry a negative reputation whereas others are normalised through patterns of seasonality. Emptiness becomes notable when the traditional seasonal owners/occupants, who know the implicit codes of performing presence through light, Christmas decorations or expected kinds of interest and participation in the community, are outnumbered by the new owners/occupier, such as Russian second home owners or Airbnb tenants, who are seen to disrupt these rhythms. This contrast reflected in many comments by the residents and the real estate agents, who pointed towards Knightsbridge as “changing most rapidly” and as “full of investors who don’t care about the area”. As discussed in this chapter, the concerns around emptiness run parallel to the concerns around loss of control over the area, as more buyers are buying up freeholds of entire buildings instead of the leaseholds, obstructing the spatial continuity of the Cadogan Estate’s property portfolio. This chapter was, then, less about what light tells us about emptiness and more about how emptiness and light are linked by my interlocuters to make commentaries about the area and classify its changes.

‘Remembering Valerie’



There were no empty spaces in the cabinet. Almost every shelf contained, within its vaguely mapped out centre, a sculpture of a cat striking different poses. Valerie loved cats, and her son, Chris, loved walking alongside transparent walls of large shops that held tiny objects with cat motifs on them. He would admire them from a distance, and occasionally, buy them for his mum. Fulham road has several stores that make broaches, hairpins, fridge magnets, bookmarks and combs for cat-lovers. Chris’s favourite object in the cabinet was the sculpture of a cat tenderly holding a kitten in her mouth. For the first two weeks following Valerie’s death, Chris put away that sculpture, but even then, upon returning home from work, his eyes would softly rest on the empty shelf. Eventually, he brought back the sculpture and rearranged the cabinet in a manner such that his mother’s absence could hardly be traced.

He has been living on the estate since he was three years old. That was 1972, and since then, he has moved homes several times within the estate, and watched his first home disappear into the sky to make way for parks for children and cars. He also watched the communal clotheslines tied between homes of strangers wither into irrelevance, and the quiet installation of CCTV cameras

on the same hooks that used to hold the clothesline. He watched his childhood bullies grow into men who bought him drinks at the Queen's Head pub, and he watched the same men get evicted from their homes and the pub close down without notice. He watched these homes stand empty for years, and he watched emptiness strip homes of their pasts.

Where his first home once stood, there was now a tree. The Pavenham house was demolished in 1980s, and in its place, the residents were offered a garden to be imagined out of the concrete left behind. Over the years, the residents built for themselves a sunken garden, with benches and stools stolen from the Queen's Head demolition site, and planting flowers inside used tyres. Chris's best friend, Dorinda, runs the garden group now, organising weekly cleaning and watering sessions. Dorinda helped Chris during those difficult weeks after his mum's death. The council gave him a short notice to move into a one-bedroom house, allowing him barely a week of mourning before reminding him over and over again about the wasteful emptiness of the second bedroom. It always surprised him how only some empty spaces are noticed in a city bursting with empty mansions. Dorinda offered to take care of his two cats, named Princess and Picasso, as he transferred his belongings from Icknield House to Maylands house. He was most careful with the albums that contained taped up photographs of all the vacations that he took with his mum. The last vacation was funded by the bus company as a compensation for the accident in which Valeria hurt her neck and her back. The bus company also paid for the funeral costs a year later, and for the hand-carved motif of a sleeping cat on the gravestone.

Chris works as a screen-printer in Wandsworth. He takes the bus in the morning, and on his way back home, he sits in the sunken garden to watch old women feed pigeons and little children catch caterpillars on the ends of their sticks. Since he was home earlier than usual today, he decided to visit Valerie. He plucked a few flowers from the garden, and tenderly pulled out a handful of thyme – Valerie's favourite herb – and began walking towards the cemetery. Valerie always wanted to be cremated. She wanted her ashes scattered in her hometown in the north of the country, but Chris was never fond of the idea of

his mum resting so far away from him. So, after her death, he decided to bury her in the Brompton cemetery where they often went for long walks before her accident. As he made his way to the cemetery, he spotted a squirrel and realised that he forgot to bring the bag of monkey-nuts. He walked over to the nearest Tesco and bought a small packet. He left a trace of monkey-nuts as he walked towards Valerie's grave, followed by a file of overjoyed squirrels. In the early days, he would often notice the different scripts inscribed on the gravestones. He would notice Arabic and the Chinese alphabet, and would often wonder what the description said about those who lay buried around Valerie. Now, he simply walks towards the grave, racing against the descending sun.

His hands smelt of thyme, and there were two little craters in the mud, formed out of his knees that bent beside Valerie each week. He greeted her kindly and gave a gentle rub to the side of the gravestone. He told her about his week and about the coming of summer. He told her about his broken bicycle and the expired food that needs to be cleared out of the fridge. After a brief conversation with Valerie, he looked around and noticed how empty the cemetery was. He noticed the placards half-buried in the mud that indicated that the spot was up for sale. These spots were really expensive. He recalled his lengthy negotiations with the bus company for the spot where Valerie now rests. There's a bench just around the corner where Chris often sits. He brings along his lunch or breakfast to eat in the company of squirrels, pigeons and grieving families.

Chris regretted not bringing with him one of the photo albums. He remembers the last few months of Valerie's life when she was moved into a care facility, a few blocks away from the Sutton Estate. She would always ask Chris to bring along some of the old photographs that they took in the Icknield House. They would recall the way their home looked and felt before the modernisation wave that swept over the Sutton Estate in 1985. They remembered how cold the house always felt. And Chris remembered returning home from school, carrying his bicycle on his shoulders to the top floor, and just sitting in front of the fireplace for hours. They remembered the balcony where they sipped on cups

and cups of tea and made small talk with the neighbours. They remembered the balconies being turned into shower rooms, and the baths, which had wooden covers to serve as worktops when not in use, were removed, and new kitchen units were installed. Chris still remembers the smell of food mixed with the smell of soap before the bathroom and kitchen were turned into separate spaces. He remembers the rattling of the windows and the eventual silence that settled in once the modernisation works were complete.

As the evening sun began to dissolve into the surrounding trees, Chris started wrapping up his bag of monkey-nuts with a rubber band. He took the bucket from the neighbouring grave and filled it up with water. He gently watered the flowers that grew on Valerie's grave. He watched the moths that had grown accustomed to the smell of thyme, and then began walking back to the estate. He walked past graves of famous people and smaller graves covered with toys. He walked past graves with names of characters from books that Valerie read to him long ago. It was believed that Beatrix Potter used some of the names from this cemetery for her characters, and Chris loved all her books. He reached home just as the light faded into the dullness of Thursday nights.

As he walked upstairs, he realised that he had always been assigned a home on the top floor. As a young boy, he would love to run up the stairs, or walk slowly while counting each step he took. But now the four flights of stairs seemed tiring. He tried to complain to the council about his knee problem but the possibility of being relocated to the outskirts of London threatened him into a weary silence. As he unlocked his door, he stepped on a pile of neglected mail. He browsed through the mail and found several notices from Clarion, the landlord of the estate, informing him of the upcoming development plans. He looked at the proposed maps, covered with colourful graphics of happy and young people, and tried to trace what would become of his home. He couldn't find his home on the map. He outlined the map with his finger and tried to find his old home, Dorinda's home, his childhood school, the laundrette on Cale Street, the nearby cinema and other places that he grew up and grew old with, and eventually, put away the sheets of paper with a sense of annoyance and disorientation.

Chapter Three

Scattering the Ashes: Creating Layers of Belonging through Practices of Grieving and Remembering

'… I am writing on behalf of my late aunt, Una Madigan, and myself, both of us former residents of the Sutton Dwellings in Cale Street. The Dwellings are a sacred ground to her because it was where her parents, John and Josephine Madigan, lived out their exemplary lives, in 4 D Block (subsequently Delmerend House). They are to me too because her parents were parents to me, although I lived with my mother, Maureen Dorling, when she was single, in 30 P Block. Una died recently, aged 82, and it was her last wish that her ashes be scattered as close as possible to the tree outside of the Madigan flat…' (Excerpt from a letter by John Dorling, 2016)

One of the former residents, John Dorling, wrote a letter in 2016 to Affinity Sutton, the former landlord of the Sutton Estate, requesting for permission to scatter his late Aunty Una's ashes in the garden of the Estate. In his letter, he emphasised his aunt's attachment to the Estate where she had grown up, drawing out vivid descriptions of what the Estate once used to be. I will intersperse fragments of John's letter throughout this chapter along with my own observations around practices of grieving and remembering the dead within the Estate and in the nearby cemetery. My key argument is that practices of commemorating the dead are inseparably entwined with claims of belonging to a particular place, especially in the charged context of the Estate being 'decanted' for the proposed regeneration.

When I wrote to John, seeking his permission to use parts of the letter for my thesis, he promptly responded with a wholehearted agreement, adding a Postscript at the end of his email that read, *'PS: Half eaten kebabs are leftover, but communities live in our hearts forever'.* Ian Henderson, the chairman of the Save Our Sutton (SOS) organisation, shared this letter with the residents as a way of inspiring them to recognise their lasting relationship with the Estate and fight against its demolition and its decanting. The letter ends

with a set of two connected pleas – one, a plea for Aunty Una's passing to be "marked" in the dwellings, and two, for some part of the dwellings to be conserved in her memory. There is not only a concern expressed around the place of scattering, but also around the durability of the place.

Prendergast, Hockey and Kellaher (2006) map out the shifts in the discourses of grief alongside the changing practices related to death and mourning. They examine the changing post-cremation ritualisation practices in the UK. The first shift they mark is from the "breaking bonds hypothesis" of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, that assumed that practices of grief are motivated by the shared goal of 'coming to terms' and 'letting go of the dead', towards the model of 'continuing bonds', that was introduced by Klass, Silverman & Nickman in 1996. The new model of grief acknowledged practices of 'narrative, memorialisation, and continuity' (Prendergast et al. 2006; p. 887), focusing on materiality of grief through objects of personalised memorialisation in the 1990s in the UK as the 'cemeteries became filled with greeting cards, toys, solar lights, and wind chimes…' (Prendergast et al., 2006; p. 895).

Focusing on grieving practices in the West, Klass et al. (1996) described ways of 'continuing bonds' with the dead to render agency to the mourner; and in a similar vein, Margaret Mitchell (2007) compiled a set of creative approaches adopted by people to keep alive the deceased by carrying out their wishes, public activism, legal battles, pursuing a social cause etc. Mitchell distinguished her focus on "life after death" from ideas of reincarnation or afterlife by arguing that her interest lies in the ways in which people's lives are continued for them after they die, by the people around them. This agency is contextualised by Prendergast, Hockey and Kellaher (2006; p. 883) against the backdrop of UK's legislative control that enforces little restriction on the choices of the mourner regarding what to do with the ashes and where to scatter them. The availability of choice results in a heightened significance of place. As an illustration, they recount their conversation with a woman in the UK who is trying to look for a place to scatter her grandma's ashes. Her concerns are two-fold. She is looking for a place which holds significance for her grandma, while also hoping for the place to remain unchanged and undisturbed by the passage of time.

The choice of the sunken garden as a place for scattering the ashes is closely tied to the plea for longevity of the Estate in its current form. The longevity of the place that holds the ashes is seen as directly connected with the longevity of the memory of the person. In this chapter, I focus on the relationship between the two pleas made by John in his letter, in order to emphasise the entanglement between practices of grieving and claims of belonging, between personhood and place, and between remembering and preserving. Aunty Una's life continues through her wish of being buried in the sunken garden. John travels all the way from Wales, and from the boot of his car sticks out a cherry tree that he has brought with him to mark the spot in the garden where the ashes will be buried. The continuity of Aunty Una's life is therefore inseparably connected to the continuity of the place that is under the threat of change. I contextualise the framework of 'continuing bonds' within the political movement for continuity carried out by the current and former residents of the Estate to fight against its abrupt termination.

I briefly turn to Susanne Küchler's (1988) key anthropological work on memory, material culture and land, as she studied mortuary ceremonies in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. She located her study against the backdrop of increased warfare and fragmentation of clans due to abandonment of the central village. 'Continuity', she argued, 'could no longer be perceived in the relation between people and land, but had to be recreated at a place that epitomises the arrest of movement and of time' (Küchler, 1988; p. 629). This place was the burial site wherein memories could be anchored. She looked at practices of redistributing land after death, and how a shared memory of a place allowed for claims to land and residency (Küchler, 1988; p. 632). This is a departure point for me to understand how people in my field site lay claims over land by operationalising a shared archive of memories. The practices of grieving and burying relatives act as ways of firming one's roots in a place by evoking ancestors that lay buried in the soil.

I am also interested in the material practices of "marking" as demonstrated by the scattering of Aunty Una's ashes and attaching an inscription to commemorate her life on the Estate. Mitch Rose (2012; p. 759)

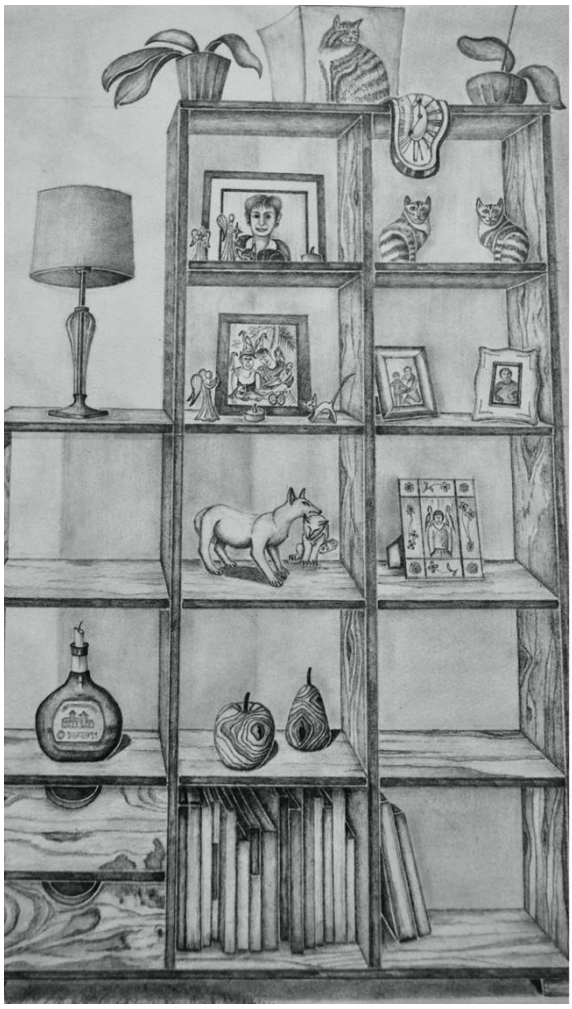
adds the process of marking of a place to Heidegger's categories of dwelling and building, as he argues that 'dwelling "marks out" a specific region of relations through the production of objects that catalyse those relations'. Mark F. Hau (2016) contextualises the process of marking in the Catalanist movement in Barcelona. He draws on William Kelleher's (2003) study of graffiti in Northern Ireland to understand the significance of physically marking places as part of a political struggle. Furthermore, Kevin Hetherington (1998; p. 183) looks at place through the act of placing, thereby arguing that 'places circulate through material placings, through the folding together of spaces and things and the relations of difference established by those folds'. Drawing on these studies and arguments, I adopt a two-fold focus – how the residents of the Estate engage in the process of claiming land through material practices of marking, and how they craft a coherent narrative around the land that is being abstracted from its local significance.

Placing practices of grieving against the backdrop of an emptying housing estate, I propose four interrelated arguments. One, drawing on Hallam and Hockey's (2001) study on how people in Western societies maintain an ongoing relationship with the dead, I argue that the practices of grieving for people who used to live on the Estate are inseparably tied together with grieving for the emptying Estate. Two, these practices are material practices that allow the residents to carve out layers of belonging to the Estate. The layers are both material – as formed through processes of burying bodies, scattering ashes and growing trees – as well as metaphorical – as formed through the interconnectedness demonstrated between various members of the Estate. Three, I will draw on Prendergast, Hockey and Kellaher's (2006) argument as well as John's letter to show that the mobility of ashes builds and strengthens the relationship between place and personhood. And four, these material practices of remembering enable the residents to draw parallels between their own ageing bodies and the ageing Estate and contest linear narratives of decline.

Tracing and Stretching Family Lines

John's letter opens with a set of kinship lines drawn between John, his aunt Una and the Sutton Dwellings. In this section, I explore the ways in which the practices of grieving for people and places emphasise the entanglement of kinship lines within the estate, thereby producing multiple narratives about a place to counter the singular narrative underlying the narrative of urban regeneration. While kinship takes up a feudal narrative in the case of Cadogan Square, where it is linked to control over and ownership of land, the lines of kinship in the Sutton Estate are evoked in relation to physically living in it. John Dorling, in his letter, reflects on his own experience of being raised by a single mother, and how Aunty Una's parents became his second family. Several residents at the Estate often draw similar kinship lines stretching between two homes. During one of our gardening sessions, a resident pointed to the protruding hook on the walls of the D Block and said, *'You know that place where you see the CCTV cameras, back in my day, that used to hold one end of the clothesline stretched between two blocks upon which we hung our clothes out to dry, like one big family'.* The communal clotheslines would stretch between two opposite blocks, gripped by the hooks hammered into the walls.

While the imagery of the clothesline at once melted into a visual metaphor for the lines of kinship drawn between various homes in the Estate, it also brought up two important characteristics of the Estate that often make up the plot of most episodes of reminiscing. The first characteristic, common to most musings about the past, relates to the longing for a tightly knit community and an ethos of sharing, in which a longing for the past is enmeshed within a critique of the present. The second characteristic is the phenomenon of several single-parent households that make up the Estate, resulting in strong ties to the figure of the mother, acknowledgement of the struggles of the single mother, as well as the rise of unusual composition of 'families' made up of neighbours, friends, cats, aunts and uncles, and other members of the extended families. In Chris's cabinet, I noticed a showpiece of a cat gently holding her kitten in her mouth in the shelf, and a locket pendant placed beside it, which contained his mum's photograph on one side and his childhood photograph on the other.







Insa Koch (2018) also reflected on the figure of the 'single mother' within her study of the increased abstractions within the welfare policies of the UK. She argued that within this context, the figure of the single mother is often stigmatised in the media as irresponsible and reckless, thereby branding her as both the 'anti-mother who fails in her duties of motherly care but also as the anti-citizen par excellence' (Koch, 2018; 3). However, this abstraction stands in stark contrast to the daily realities of these women who were also being celebrated as the 'matriarchs of the family home' (Koch, 2018; p. 4). The working-class women that Koch interviewed were thereby simultaneously 'dependent upon the state and depended upon by others'. Drawing on Skeggs (2011), she argued that these relations of interdependence were not simply a means of survival, but also important in terms of their role in creating a sense of self-worth and value, which were often tied together with the duties of being a mother and magnified by the figure of the single mother. Chris's idealisation of his mum was not uncommon, as I discovered many other single residents living with ageing mums, who they spoke of highly.[20]

'"You won't believe what happened today" is often something you say to your husband at the end of a long eventful day, but for me, I come home to my community and tell them the stories about my day,' Dorinda says while trimming the dead flowers in the garden. Several residents spoke to me about feeling lonely in their homes, and rushing to the garden to catch the faintest bit of sunlight and the company of other residents. In my first few months of fieldwork, it became clear that the family structures that I deemed unusual were not so unusual within the Estate. Tracy's mother's neighbour moved in with Tracy upon her mum's passing, thereby forming a household out of two separate households. One of Dorinda's friends, who is a lesbian, adopted her sister's daughter, and they now form a family. There is also a family born out of friendship on the Estate, wherein a resident asked a friend of her to move in with her, and sleep on the couch of the living room. Eventually, they applied for

[20] Report from the Centre for Research in Social Policy (Katherine Hill and Donald Hirsch, 2019) show that in the UK, 63 per cent of single adults between the ages of 20 and 29 live with their parents, as do just over half of 25-29-year-olds.

an extra bedroom flat, and the council granted them a two-bedroom house, officially recognising them as a "family of friends".

The concept of a family is far from a closed shape. Much of early anthropology and sociology rested on the structures and evolutions of what a family means and how kinship works (Schneider, 2004; Collier and Yanagisako, 1987 Levi-Strauss, 1969), and yet, exceptions outrun the rules when it comes to what 'families' entail. Later studies attempt to re-cast kinship through the concept of 'relatedness' (Carston, 2000), or "families of choice" (Weston, 1991). However, what makes the definitions of a family gain relevance in the context of my fieldwork is the fact that these council homes can never fully shut out the State that demands definitions of nameless relations and a detailed accounting of intimate decisions.

And so, even as I might find the boundaries of a family slipping away from the sphere of significance in the contexts that I observe, I cannot ignore their relevance in the case of the Estate. The power of the State to barge into homes of residents who live on benefits implies that it also holds the power to interrogate, approve or disapprove of the ways in which a family can be defined. One of the residents, Sara, who is a mother of two kids, complained that she was legally obligated to ensure that her two kids do not share the bedroom after the age of ten. Such a rule is enforced on children of opposite sex, which translates to Sara having to reapply for another accommodation, and give up her own bedroom as she awaits a flat with an extra bedroom. Along with reshaping the spheres of sociality for Sara, the presence of such regulations and their enforceability also brings up the tensions between unconventional families as created and imagined by the residents, and the norms of the nuclear family that remain entrenched in the fabric of the State.[21]

[21] My usage of the state with the capital "S" is to point to the emic category of the State, which is not limited to the national and local government but to other public and private bodies, with varying degrees of clarity and accountability, that are subsumed within this amorphous category of the 'State' that features in conversations about housing in London.

On one hand, the State is rigid in its definition of what constitutes a family and how each member of that family should occupy a home. At the same time, as illustrated above, the State recognised a "family of friends", which demonstrates how the residents negotiated with the State to accommodate unusual relationships. This is a relevant point to my work, as it helps me dismantle a simplistic opposition between the State and the local community. Instead, I look towards Insa Koch's (2014) work on an English council estate wherein she discusses the dynamic and intimate relationship between the residents and the State. She illustrates the ways in which residents of council estates "appropriate the State" (Daniel Miller, 1988) as she cites Gillian Evans' (2012) study of an estate in Bermondsey, wherein the local residents co-opted local state officials into their practices of cleaning to collectively develop "standards of communal living[22]".

Many residents further pose the tying-up of loose threads into families and communities as the identifying trait of the Sutton Estate. This is used as a point of contrast between the current management of the Estate by the housing association and the early imaginations of the Estate that are traced back to William Richard Sutton, who built the Estate with the explicit aim of helping small families and, particularly, women on low incomes. Moya Denmen, an older resident who was an active member of the campaign to save the Estate, drew comparisons with the nearby Samuel Lewis Estate to show that the Sutton Estate had a 'better sense of community'. She wrote in her appeal that 'the staircases in each block that gave direct access to flats encouraged neighbours to become acquainted with and mutually supportive of each other' (Proof of Evidence presented in reference to the appeal APP/K5600/W/17/31/77810). In fact, the empty homes scattered across the flats prompted some of the residents to keep their front doors open for air circulation, thereby turning corridors into spaces for conversations between the remaining residents of the building. This can be seen as one of many unintended consequences of the decanting process, resulting in the production of new avenues of sociality, and demonstrating that emptiness and fullness are intertwined categories.

[22] Unlike the habitability standards that are imposed from outside of the community.

Creating Layers of Belonging

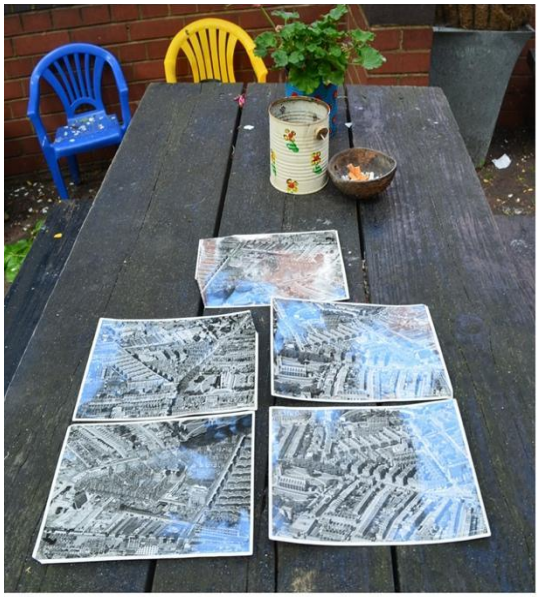
Another unintended consequence of the decanting process has been the communal visits down the memory lane by sharing photographs and newspaper clippings in the garden, archiving their lives in the Estate, clarifying details and confusions across the different narratives of remembering, and matching the photographic past to the physical present to map the flow of time. Piecing together the beads of the past is a complex process, especially in the context of ageing residents with fading memories and poetic imaginations. These poetic imaginations are fuelled by the fact that several residents are engaged in consignment-based jobs, be it in plumbing, cleaning or other handyman services, which gives them a few free hours in the day and days in the week to carry out artistic projects on the side, while also selling some of their art for extra money. While some of them have been self-trained and practice their art in their homes, there are a few residents who have also presented their works at the Chelsea art gallery.

Some of the residents of the Estate who practiced art drew comparisons between themselves and the “rich Chelsea artists” that the area is known for. The British History Online archive draws out the building history in Chelsea, stating that the sites facing the river were taken up in the late nineteenth century by ‘rich people with artistic inclinations’ who commissioned architects to create new styles of buildings (Croot, 2004). The borough’s artistic significance was therefore frequently evoked to situate oneself in the larger histories of the area, while also making clear the contrast between the richer and poorer sections of the borough. Chris, Dorinda and Theresa had made Christmas decorations in the shape of small dinosaurs last year that they sold at a stall in the Notting Hill Christmas market, along with a bunch of postcards that contained different parts of the Estate from different moments of the past. There were frequent debates while trying to recollect details about the Estate, such as the naming of the blocks or the timeline of renovations. Upon asking John about how the blocks were named, he sent the following email to me:

'The Blocks were originally called simply A, B, C Blocks and so on, alphabetically through to P Block - where I lived – which was the last in the series. I do not recall there having been an I block, perhaps because this would have confused the postman. Sometime in the 1960s, the Trust decided to give each block a fancy name, and the designation "House", starting with the initial letter it already had. So, D Bock became Delmerend House, where my Aunty lived. I believe these names came from the names of villages in the Counties with which the Trust had some historical connection. What the blocks other than Delmerend were called is alas shrouded in the mists of my fading memory.'

Brian also complained about his fading memory as he told me about his quest to find his long-lost uncle's grave in the Brompton cemetery. He has a chit of paper in his pocket, bearing the name of his uncle, along with the date of his passing, calculated through a rudimentary system of guesswork. He does not remember much about his uncle, except for the fact that he spoke very little and cleaned windows for a living. In fact, the rumour was that his uncle had fallen off a building while cleaning a window, and passed away shortly after. Brian remembers his uncle always being good to him. He wants to pay tribute to his uncle's grave, but has been unable to locate it in the cemetery. Some of the other residents have helped him with the search in their own ways. While some of them have looked around the cemetery for Brian's uncle's name, the others have helped him remember the year of his passing, by piecing together details of his life and death by pooling together their memories, rumours and stories. I was part of one of these reminiscing sessions in the garden, in which one of the residents spread out a set of photographs taken on the Estate on the garden tables, inviting all of us to stand around in a circle and watch. The piecing together of narratives involved both a reconstruction of the former configurations of the Estate and of Brian's ancestry, which was entangled with other ancestries on the Estate.







Heather Horst (2014; p. 12) looks at the shifting relationship between land and ancestry in Jamaica through the alteration in burial practices. She observed the change from burial on family lands to the public and private cemeteries, resulting in the "placing of the dead" (Blotch, 1971) alongside non-relatives. While Besson (1984: p. 19; in Horst, 2014) suggested that this shift would mark a transformation from family identity to community identity, Horst adopted a material culture approach to observe the ways in which the materiality and placement of the tombs marked a distinction between the tombs of the non-relatives and a visible continuity between the tombs of the relatives. I use her study to understand the ways in which the residents of Sutton Estate engage with their dead relatives and ancestors to draw out their belonging and ownership over the area of Chelsea. I am particularly interested in practices of visiting the graves in Brompton cemetery, cleaning the tombstones, watering the plants, and taking care of neighbouring graves using the shared bucket and communal sprinklers. I locate these practices as a demonstration of one's place and history in an area where their belonging is questioned within the ongoing wave of social cleansing and the gradual decanting of the Estate.

During one of our walks in the cemetery, Chris told me that he is so pleased that his mum rests with some of the great artists of Britain, such as John William Godward, Joseph Banomi the Younger and Edward Wadsworth. Chris further added, 'It wasn't easy to get a grave space here, even as so many spots lie empty. It is only because the bus company paid for the funeral costs, after one of their buses caused my mum to have an accident. Without that funding, I could never afford a spot here, and I would have had to send my mother off to a faraway place, which would have been very unfortunate.' He pointed to the figure of a cat that he had etched onto her gravestone, right above her name, 'Valerie', and said with a snigger, 'I even managed to bill them for the artwork on the gravestone'. Hockey and Hallam (2001) comment on the emergence of a widespread "museal sensibility" (p. 47) in the UK in late 20th century, wherein graves and tombstones are built and cared for as artefacts. They further argue that today's mourners no longer desire or tell a singular narrative of death, but instead, they use everyday artefacts to build more personalised and individualised memories. With Chris's case, the funding from

the bus company aided his attempts to personalise the mourning of his mother, thereby allowing him to grieve in ways that might not be an option for some of the other residents due to financial restrains that shape processes of grieving. Dorinda later told me that the bus company paid for a dual burial plot so that Chris can be buried next to his mum when he passes away, and with that last bit, she paused and touched wood. This was also something that Dzenovska (2020) noticed in her field site in rural Latvia, where amidst uncertainties about the future and the present state of emptiness, one of her interlocutors reserved an empty space next to her husband's grave so that at least there was something certain about her own future. Chris used to joke about the twin burial and say, "Well, they can chuck me out of Chelsea but I'll return when I die".



The temptation to keep the dead nearby was shared by several residents. Some of them spoke about the expensive burial procedures at the Brompton cemetery as a way of discouraging the social housing residents from burying their dead in the area and forming lasting connections with it. The kinship ties established beyond the immediate families, through practices of caring for other graves of former residents, are complimented by the distinctions maintained between the "other graves" and "our graves", the latter referring to the graves of various Sutton Estate residents and their relatives. I

see both these related processes – of establishing ties of kinship outside of the immediate family and of the preoccupation with keeping the dead inside or nearby to the Estate – as ways of creating *layers of belonging*, wherein I understand *layers* as both archaeological/physical as well as metaphorical.

The physical layers are created through the practices of burying or the scattering of ashes and planting a tree to mark the spot, along with the practices of visiting the catacombs that are opened up for the public every year, to be able to go underground and see the rich depths of the sedimented history of the city – imagining oneself as one of the many layers constituting an *ecology of memory* (DeSilvey, 2006; p. 336). I captured two photographs during our visits to the cemetery. In the first picture, Chris is crouching beside his mother's gravestone, and telling her about his day. Moments after, Chris stood next to me, pointing to the two dents in the mud where the earth took on the shape of his bent ankles, and said, 'not all graves have these dents beside them; I wish other people's graves were also visited as often as I visit my mum's'. The second picture is a sketch made by Chris to make the dents in the mud visible, as he thought my photograph did not capture them well enough.

The metaphorical layers of belonging, on the other hand, can be understood as both the layers of collective memory as well as the layers of relationalities drawn between the residents. Dorinda, for instance, recalled two hundred years of her family's history in Chelsea, in and around the Sutton Estate. While her grandfather was a plumber who fixed the pipes in the John Mills Church in Stratford-Upon-Avon, her grandmother's arm was blown up in the war, following which she became an envelope writer, using her one working hand to make beautiful calligraphies for strangers' messages. Dorinda's Welsh father's claim to fame was that he was the first to introduce yogurt to Chelsea, running a small dairy shop in the area. Dorinda recalled moving to the Estate after living in a squat for a while, and her first memories of the Estate is that Dolly, her daughter, took her first steps in the garden. Several other residents drew out a similar patchwork of relationships to the area, as they narrated to me their family histories that were always enmeshed within the history of the Estate.


11TH March 2012


In Loving Memory
of
VALERIE STEADMAN
2012

My conceptualisation of *layers of belonging* was inspired by Yael Navaro-Yashin's (2012) ethnography in Northern Cyprus. She focussed on the 'Turkish Cypriots' relations to houses, land, and objects that they appropriated from the Greek Cypriots during the war of 1974' (Navarro-Yashin, 2009; p. 1). I am interested in her combined approach wherein she brings together the social-constructivist approach, that emphasises the imaginative aspects of place, and the materialist approach, that emphasises the agency of objects in her conception of the "make believe" space (Navaro-Yashin, 2012; p. 5). By seeing space as both material and affective, she looks at how her respondents 'trace the ruins around them, not just passing them by, but locating them in time and space' (Navarro-Yashin, 2009; p. 14). I borrow this lens to draw out the ways in which residents at the Estate engage with land as both physical and metaphorical to create layers of belonging.

Conversations around relationalities between the living and the dead, between one household and another, or with members of the extended family, as drawn out in John's letter or in the family trees narrated by the residents, could also be contextualised within the framework of lease sharing. Upon looking at a copy of the tenancy agreement, I discovered the members of the family that can share a secured tenancy include parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, step-relations, half-relations and illegitimate children. This condition is also paired with the inability of several younger people to move out of their parents' homes and get a place for themselves. Andy Green (2017) describes the effects of the housing crisis in London on young people through the term 'boomerang children', which refers to adults – roughly 29% of males aged 20–34s and 18% of women in 2011 – who return to their parents' home after trying to navigate the private rental market. Dorinda's daughter, Doll, moved out of her home after finishing school, and lived as a guardian in various empty buildings in Chelsea, but after a few years, she moved back with Dorinda into the Estate.

Herein, I turn to Lauren Berlant's (2010; p. 52) theorisation of 'attachment', wherein she argues that people often build *'attachments to modes of life to which they rarely remember consenting, at least initially'*. She locates

this ‘attachment’ within the context of post 1980s as the social-democratic promise of the postwar period in the United States and Europe was withdrawn, and as people continue to hold on to their attachment to the promise of a “good life”. This rings true in the case of the Sutton Estate, wherein the celebrated notions of the ‘community’, unconventional models of families and progressive social forms are also inseparably intertwined with the withdrawal of care and a cutback of resources. The reconfigurations of families therefore cannot be understood detached from the conditions that prompt them. Dorinda’s daughter moving back to the Estate, or Brian’s romanticisation of the pre-modernisation days of the Estate, ties together with Berlant’s conception of “cruel optimism”, wherein she defines optimism as a map of attachments that organise the present, and deems it cruel because the desire turns into an obstacle to one’s own mobility. She therefore poses optimism as a fantasy that helps make sense of, as well as tolerate, the neoliberal present.

In sum, there is a combination of factors – ranging from the small print of the terms and conditions of a tenancy agreement to the structural austerity that prevents younger residents from moving out of the Estate, along with non-standard family structures – that makes place for middle-aged, unmarried adults living with their ageing parents, or separated couples still living in the same home, nieces and nephews staying with their uncles and aunts, and other unusual combinations that stretch the conventional imaginations of a family. Marilyn Strathern’s (2020) latest book called *Relations* explores the anthropological usage of the term “relations” and how in colloquial English, the term is interchangeably used with “kin”. This interchangeability leads to a default positive connotation attributed to the understanding of ‘relations’, thereby overemphasising the element of connection at the cost of disconnection. This leads to the danger of eliding ‘the analytical conceptualisation of relations with the reciprocals or reflexivity implied in interaction between kinspersons’ (Strathern, 2020; p. 12). However, she also argued that these overlapping ideas contribute to the richness of the term, rather than rendering the term less useful. Despite reading Strathern’s work towards the end of my writing process, I find her prompt to seek clarity around what we mean when we say ‘relations’ very useful, especially as I realise my

own positive bias attached to the word. I have focussed on the relations that have been evoked in response to the process of decanting, thereby inadvertently placing more emphasis on relations of connection at the cost of looking at the residents who might struggle to live with their families in the Estate, those who have left the estate by choice or those who already feel out of place above and beyond the threat of displacement.

Objects of Remembering

The remembering of the 'good old days' takes place against the background coloured by both, the threat of being decanted and removed from one's home, and the general longing for a period of relevance. David Parkin (1999; p. 313) looked at the objects carried by people under conditions of immediate flight or departure and how these objects provide a 'minimal reminder of who they are and where they are from'. He suggests that when the conditions prevent individuals from vesting their personhood in other people, they often turn to accessible objects (Parkin, 1999; p. 308). Adding to Parkin's framework, I argue that in cases where the forced movement exists as an ever-looming threat and where the place of home and the place of displacement are only a few miles from one another, there is often an ambiguous relationship between place, people and the objects they hold dear.

Parkin (1999; p. 317) suggested that under conditions of forced or sudden movement, 'private mementoes may take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge'. These objects, he further argues, hold possibilities of their own de-objectification and re-personalisation at a later stage as one 'unravels oneself from one's possessions' (Parkin, 1999; p. 318). When Chris's mother was taken away to a caring facility, moved away from the estate where she spent most of her life, Chris would visit her every week, carrying a different photo album each time. Upon his mum's passing, he began carrying these albums to her grave and looking through the photographs that were taken in all the different homes they moved between, all within the same estate.

One of the other residents told me that she has filled up her home with memories of itself – photographs of herself in the Estate, photograph of her sister fixing a pipe in the kitchen before the renovations, a piece from the first plate she broke, among other things. Upon asking her why she did so, she laughed and said ‘this will make sure that if anyone comes to remove me from my house, they think twice about doing so, and in case they persist, they will have to help me carry all this junk’. Upon losing his mother, Chris was given only three weeks to grieve for his loss, and then asked to move into a one-bedroom house, stating that a bedroom was being wasted in the absence of his mother. Dorinda helped him move, and even temporarily held onto some of the objects that reminded Chris of his loss.

Marcoux (2001; p. 83) studies the process of moving and emptying the homes and the related processes of reshuffling ‘relationships and memories by bringing them back into consciousness, by making them explicit and for deciding which ones to reinforce, which ones to abandon or put on hold’. Similarly, some residents, upon being forced to move, often experience a shock, causing them to leave behind some of their possessions with friends or neighbours, promising to return at a later date to reclaim them. Doris, a woman on the Estate, complained that she once had three cardboard boxes that were never reclaimed, and she had to eventually dispose away the contents. When she later discovered that the unreturned resident had passed away, she tried to retrieve some of the possessions she had thrown away. Her attempts were unsuccessful. She told me that she often thought about that resident, even though she knew very little about her. She added, ‘If I manage to find out where she was buried, I will definitely pay my tributes to her and apologise for throwing away her belongings. I wish I just kept them in the Estate – I think she would have liked that’.

David Parkin (1999; p. 318) also draws comparisons between individualistic and collectivistic societies, arguing that in the former, there is greater scope to read into the object a new identity, whereas in the latter, the possibilities of new identities for the object are limited, given the entanglement of social relations. However, such a binary crumbles in the face of the objects

that are collected, curated and shared between the residents of the Estate. The objects assume a certain role in the collective archive of the Estate. While Barbara collects books documenting the history of the Estate, another resident collects the changing maps of Chelsea. One of the residents, who was moved out of the Estate two years ago, brought along an album made up of newspaper clippings with stories about the Estate, and gave it to an older resident who was campaigning against the demolition of the Estate. John's letter to bury his aunt's ashes in the garden, and the cherry tree that he brought along from Wales, are simultaneously attempts to create additional layers of belonging in the Estate, while also emphasising the rootedness of the lives of those who have left the Estate but continue to hold it as their home.

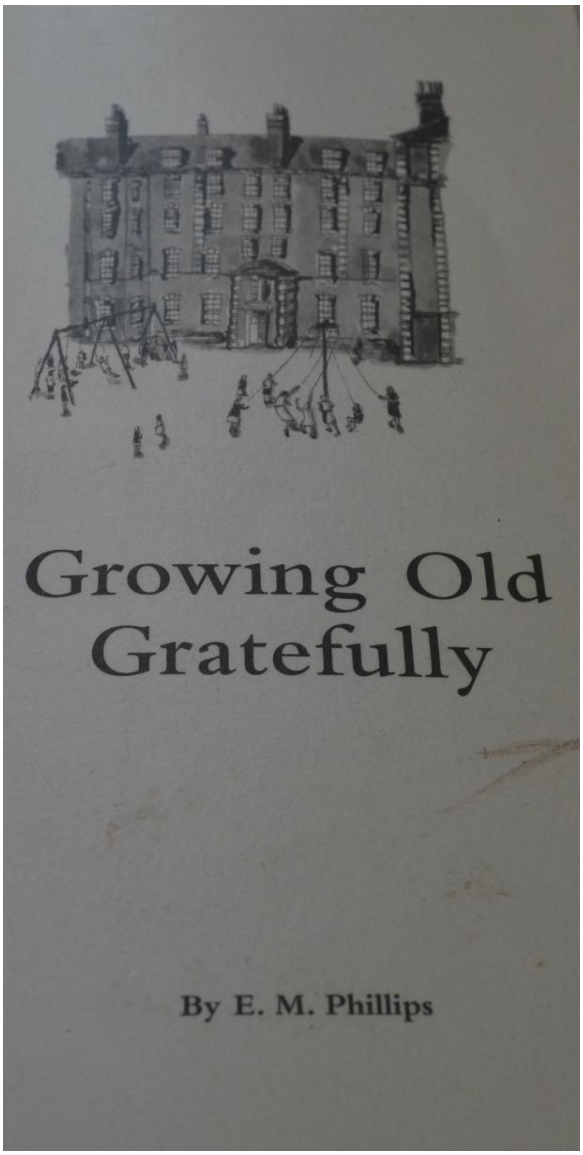
Along with ashes, the mobility of various objects is entangled with their lasting connections to the places they move between. Even as these objects take on new lives after being carried away from the Estate by the evicted/relocated residents, their connections to the Estate get renewed by the threat of demolition that hangs over the estate. Patricia, one of the former residents, has pieces of glass that belonged to her mother's window on the Estate, that was shattered by a bomb that went off during the Second World War. She still holds that piece of glass as a memory of her flat on the Estate from where she was relocated a few years ago. She told me that the shattered piece of glass has attained a new meaning given the condition of the estate and its slow death. Retuning to Parkin's framework of re-personalisation of objects, the piece of glass stored safety inside a plastic bag by Patricia attained new meanings while still being attached to its original context, assuming a revived relevance in the current climate of decanting and decay of the Sutton Estate. Several residents engage in similar processes of remembering places through objects, often pondering over the contrast between the permanence of objects and the impermanence of the places that are gradually disappearing.

However, I take caution to not exaggerate the "permanence" of objects too much (the glass window shattered, and only its pieces remained over time), and instead draw on Hege-Høyer Leivestad's (2017) methodology in her study of Britons living in caravans abroad. She critiqued the object biography

approach (Hoskins, 1998), which turns objects as sources of nostalgia/fixity amidst mobility across places. Instead, she focusses on the caravan to study mobile living and deeply immobile practices that exist alongside one another. She sees objects and places in a dynamic relationship with one another, rather than burdening the object with the permanence of meaning/longing. In order to do so, she shifts her focus away from special/meaningful objects and instead looks at mundane objects such as tiles and notebooks. Similarly, along with significant objects that the residents of the Estate had preserved over time, I also looked at objects that were broken, lost and left behind, as the residents moved between different flats of the Estate or away from the Estate.

Growing Old Gracefully

I borrow the title of this section from the title of E.M. Phillips' book, wherein she documents the history of the Estate along with her own memories of growing up and growing old inside it. She was born and brought up in the Estate, and her book was given to me by one of the current residents as an important piece of literature about the Estate. She described the Estate as a 'small plot of civilisation' that grew into various forms, as she combined the memories of her own childhood with the youth of the Estate. Similarly, the residents draw parallels between themselves and the buildings, making use of photographs and other objects in the collective acts of remembering and reminiscing, thereby charting out a biological time for the buildings. Through this conflation of their own lifespans and the lifespans of the buildings, the residents challenge singular imaginations of decay and deterioration, thereby turning processes of ageing, dying, grieving and remembering into political acts of rendering life to



buildings that are passivised within capitalist notions of development and renewal.

Constance Smith (2018) argues against the conflation of decay and decline or ruination, which are often used interchangeably for the council flats that she studies in Nairobi. She presents two key arguments for this uncoupling. One, she suggests that decay, far from implying loss or oblivion, is in fact 'a process of accumulation: an excess that constitutes a material history' (Smith, 2018; p. 107). The removal of these deposits, which is often the basis of urban regeneration projects, often serves to eliminate these residents' histories and their layers of belonging. Here, Smith draws a contrast between the category of urban decay as a material process and as a category of governance, arguing that the former is often used as a means to label certain communities as deteriorated or failing (Smith, 2018; p. 109). This also forms the basis of the underlying anxiety expressed by the residents of the Sutton Estate in relation to the maps of regeneration that are posted to their doorsteps and within which they are unable to recognise themselves and their homes. Smith argues that the anxiety associated with demolition 'may emanate not so much from decay as from its elimination' (Smith, 2018; p. 109).

The second argument she makes is centred on the processes of 'identifying and self-identifying decay' (Smith, 2018; p. 119): it comes down to what people consider decay to be. One of the Kaloleni residents she worked with refused to acknowledge the label of urban decay, posing the question –

“Who is it that is decaying? Me, I’m not dead yet”’ (Smith, 2018; p. 119). The branding of a site as decayed, Smith argues, turns the place *future-less* (p. 119), while also shifting the responsibility away from those managing the building towards a condemnation of the entire community, thereby ignoring the ways in which the disrepair of the neighbourhood is politically motivated. Similarly, in the Sutton Estate, the rhetoric of decaying of the buildings is often used to justify their decanting, which can be seen as a direct consequence of conflating decay and decline, instead of understanding decay through the framework of multiple temporalities emerging from a ‘complex relationship between notions of ruin, decay, sociality and subjectivity’ (Smith, 2018; p. 115). However, this is not to suggest that the decay is entirely imagined or simply a scope for creative redoings. There are many negative consequences of decay in the Sutton Estate that affect mental health and wellbeing of residents, restrict movement (due to ageing, lack of elevators and darkened corridors), and create panic amongst those who have spent their whole lives in Chelsea.

While the campaigners of the Save Our Sutton organisation spoke about the layers of history that cement the Estate, some of the residents also spoke to me about the ways in which their homes have aged with them, and slowly die upon the death of their dwellers. Brian used to be employed as a caretaker and claimed to know the Estate like the back of his hand. He helped several residents break into their homes when they locked themselves out. He helped fixed pipes and broken windows. His wife complained to me that Brian was gradually forgetting the details of the Estate as his memory became hazier with age. Brian interrupted the complaint to make an unusual case. He argued that while his age is stealing away crumbs of his memory, the Estate is also ageing and losing details with time. He said that the pipes in the toilet are more hidden, and the older light bulbs are exploding under changing voltages of power, resulting in darker corridors and quieter communal spaces. He points to the chipping of cement and the discoloration over time and contrasts it to the early days of the Estate.

He recalls a time when groups of people would photograph the Estate and turn it into postcards because it used to be so beautiful. ‘And now,’ he

sulked, ‘it’s becoming an oldie like me’. Barbara, another resident, said that the buildings on the Estate often cry out loud for attention, ‘like a little baby, or a really old person’, opening up leaks in odd corners and bursting pipes in flats with deceased owners to announce their own emptiness. John, in his letter, often describes the Estate as a keeper of many secrets, withholding certain places from the reaches of its occupants. He speaks about the haunted stories about specific blocks that were much darker and murkier before the 1980s wave of renovation swept away all the narrow alleyways that housed ghosts and hiding spots for children.

The descriptions of the Estate, as drawn out by the older residents, shift between specific moments of time and a more general period of history, thereby dissolving boundaries between history and memory. I turn to Daniel Miller and Fiona Parrott’s (2009; p. 511) understanding of the ways in which older people from South London collect things from antique shops, that allow them to transition between the specific pasts of the objects to their more generic pasts, thereby acknowledging the ways in which ‘people tie together the two ends of cosmological and specific memorialisation’ (Miller and Parrott, 2009; p. 511). Similarly, in the evocations of the Estate’s past, there is a constant shifting that takes place between revisiting specific engagements with the Estate. For instance, the memories of climbing down the fire escape when one got locked out of the house, playing with Penny-a-look boxes in the pre-television days, or playing kiss-and-run in the dark alleyways that the renovation project got rid of, or hanging clothes on the communal clothesline stretched between two buildings, are enmeshed within a more generic longing for the past that no longer seems to exist – a past that only exists as the opposite of the present.

The idea of *growing old gracefully* is therefore relevant for two broad reasons. One, the notion of ‘grace’ captures the anxieties felt by some of the residents I worked with, as they constantly distanced themselves from ‘those Brexit supporters’. With the recent backlash against the ageing population in the UK who are seen as the key demographic of the Brexit vote, the residents of the Estate often invoke their own unconventionality and the unique artistic communities of the Estate to separate themselves from the accusations of

being “regressive” and “racist”. Several residents at the Estate identify themselves as artists and as ‘progressive’, as ways of both, separating themselves from other social housing tenants and linking themselves with the rich history of Chelsea, that has often been referred to as the borough of the artists and the thinkers.

After our gardening session, Dorinda held up a black and white photograph from Brian’s collection carefully stored in a Tesco bag. The photograph consisted of a young tree being planted by the local councillor five decades ago at the same spot where we stood.



She posed with the photograph against the background of the same tree that is now fully grown, having transformed over the years into the anchor of the garden built around it and a resting place for several birds that are fed, called out to, and shoed away by the residents of the Estate.



One evening at Builders, the nearby pub, Dorinda looked over at me and said, ‘the white working class is often thought of as racist, but they paint us all with the same brush. One of my friends who lives on the Estate had once said to me, “Dorinda, we are not the poor; we are the genteel poor”, and that is true. Most of us are very educated and interested in the world events, and aware that our true enemy is the rich, and not the migrant or the foreigner.’ She fiddled with her rolling paper packaging that had an Anti-Israel slogan on it, and told me about the Angela Davis talk she attended the previous week, and the joy she felt when Davis mentioned her favourite British thinker: Stuart Hall! I told her that he was one of my favourite cultural theorists as well, and we shared a laugh.

The second reason for the relevance of the title of this section is that within the parallels drawn between the ageing buildings and ageing residents at the Estate, the question of demolition becomes highly personal. It was described to me as an “attack” by some of the residents, and underlying these descriptions was the thought that the ageing buildings, much like their own ageing bodies, were seen as useless. An unnamed architect from the whistleblowing organisation known as Concrete Action clarified that the demolition processes are closed off from the public and carried out by private companies hired by the developer, who have no skills of craftsmanship or awareness of the history of the Estate that they are brutally dismantling. She also mentioned several overnight demolitions, and the shock experienced by people when their homes suddenly disappear. To hurry the process up, the water supply is often cut off and pipes are not fixed, resulting in the rapid decay of the estate that prematurely ages. The architect added that the slow damages to the mental health of residents caused by the lack of care for the buildings is nearly as fatal as the fire in the Grenfell Tower. The premature ageing of the buildings, resulting from its managed decline can therefore significantly result in the premature ageing of its residents due to severe stress, anxiety and alienation.

The breakdown of a place, accompanied by a breakdown of connection between the present and the future, is a tactic that suppresses housing

struggles and depoliticises spaces through the strategic compartmentalisation of place and time. It also reveals the singular lens through which demolition is understood as a total destruction of a place. Gregson, Watkins and Calestani (2010; p. 1068), in their study of the performative capacities of asbestos in processes of demolition, define demolition as 'a transformative state in which materials stilled in the object form become animated'. They draw out their understanding of demolition as both a singular and a multiple practice. As a singular practice, they pose it as an unmaking of things or the 'purposeful reduction of large-scale objects, to the point of their disappearance and invisibility as objects' (Gregson et. al. 2010; p. 1080). They see it as a multiple practice in the sense that it entails salvage, remediation and an element of 'surprise' (Yaneva, 2008). In my study, I see these two ways of understanding the process of demolition in a constant contest with one another, wherein the tenants of the estate strive to reimagine ageing of their own bodies and their buildings outside of the linear trajectories of decline.

Natasha Langridge, an artist and writer, performed an act known as *In Memory of Leaves* across social housing estates that are currently under the threat of demolition. Her piece was inspired by her experience of watching her own estate, Wornington Green Estate, get demolished and redeveloped. She described the experience of watching her favourite trees get chopped down, as she wrote, "From my window, I'd just watched the massacre of a beautiful old park by developers. It was part of our estate's 'regeneration' in North Kensington. It broke my heart to see the trees being pulled up and chopped down" (in Theatre. London, 2017). Langridge also performed the piece at the sunken garden in the Sutton Estate, leaving several residents to ponder over the future of the oldest trees of the Estate. Paul Cloke and Owain Jones (2004) looked at Arnos Vale, a Victorian cemetery in Bristol, focusing on the role of trees in the claims made over a public space that was being gradually privatised. They wrote about the symbolic and material value of trees over time that turns them into 'the focus of individual and social resistance based around a particular place' (Cloke and Jones, 2004; p. 331). This connects to the notion of time that underlies this thesis, as the trees embody long-term time in a very physical way, allowing the residents to visualise and mark time.

Chris spoke to me about the tree that was planted in place of his childhood flat, Pavenham block, which was demolished during the modernisation of the Estate. Even now, when he gazes at the tree absentmindedly, it somehow reminds him of the home that has now disappeared into the leaves, and the gradual growing of the tree captures his own journey of growing up, moving between jobs and homes, taking care of his mum, burying his mum and now, trying to make himself more self-sufficient in her absence. The practices of grieving for trees, buildings, people and a time gone by is also an attempt to counter singular narratives of decline and ageing with multiple layers of belonging to a place and multiple ways of *growing old gracefully.*

Conclusion

I have mapped out the various *layers of belonging* that are created by the residents of the Estate in response to the threat of emptiness, which at once stands for the empty flats as well as the broader conditions of living in the Estate. I have posed these layers as both archaeological and metaphorical. Within the archaeological layers, I explore concerns among the residents around practices of burying and grieving, focusing specifically on the stories of residents who visit their relatives' graves in the nearby cemetery. At a more metaphorical level, the *layers of belonging* can also be imagined as the textured histories of the interconnected families on the Estate that claim their place in Chelsea through lines of ancestral belonging as well as the entangled branches of their family trees.

I also explored the parallels drawn between the ageing residents of the Estate and the ageing of the historical Estate itself, in order to examine the possibilities opened up by the metaphor of age. While the metaphor of age carries within it the danger of imposing a linear temporality of lifespans upon buildings (Ringel, 2016), it also holds the scope of creating multiple, dynamic and contested temporalities. These temporalities emerge through the collective sessions of reminiscing that take place in the garden of the Estate, wherein

several residents draw out the lifespan of the Estate in accordance to their own lifespans, merging the boundaries between history and memory, between building and personhood, between time and place. These sessions also contain debates around specific details about the Estate and its histories, with conflicting and contrasting narratives being juggled across the fading memories of ageing residents.

While emptiness is not the central character of this chapter, it features as an impending threat that prompts its precise opposite – fullness, sociality and 'excess' (Smith, 2018; p. 107). The layers of belonging are built and cultivated through collective acts of remembering the past and calculating the losses it claimed. This sense of loss of a particular time or person is tied to the loss represented by empty homes on the Estate. While residents of the Estate have visited the nearby cemetery or performed funerals in the past, the focus of this chapter is on how the same practices have attained a heightened significance in the context of emptying. Chris's attempt to reserve a grave next to his mother, John Dorling's attempt to scatter his aunty's ashes in the garden or the drawing of family trees to demonstrate rootedness in the area – have all attained new meanings as they get co-opted by the larger movement to save the Estate. The Save our Sutton campaign took up some of these causes to create a coherent meaning out of these different practices that come together to make a case for the Estate to not be demolished. The layers of belonging can also be reimagined as the shape of the flat itself, in which each life unfolds on top of another. As John writes in his letter – 'In the Dwellings dwelt a vibrant and colourful community in a drab post-war world. We all knew that the people who appeared fleetingly as grotesques, eccentrics and Characters were real people, but here's the thing: you all live below, above and beside each other, and yet the castle thickness of the walls and ceilings blanks out all the dramas except your own.' The framework of *layers of belonging* can potentially open up a multitude of possibilities of imagining the history of a place and the people who have lived in it. As numbers and statistics increasingly populate the emptiness in London, my chapter turns attention to the richness of everyday life that is operationalised by the people I work with to battle empty homes and empty abstractions of their lived experiences.

‘200 Years in Chelsea’



It started with a scream. Dorinda’s hands were still covered in mud, and the gardening gloves lay on the table, forgotten and clean. She looked around the estate to trace the direction of the scream, and concluded that it came from one of the two blocks that stood on the right-hand side of the garden. She phoned the police while her eyes continued to shuffle across the windows, attempting to draw out a map based on her memory of the sound. The police arrived at the estate, and began knocking on all the doors in the suspected blocks. Nobody answered. Several houses in the blocks were empty, and some of the residents were perhaps away, taking an afternoon nap, or just scared to open their doors, Dorinda concluded. As they walked up the stairs, she could hear the gushing sound of the boiler echo inside one of the locked houses. She had heard from Greta that the floor was empty, as not many people would want to live right above a laundrette, breathing in the exhaust fumes and burning their nostrils with the overwhelming smell of the fabric softeners. The police left shortly after, and Dorinda stayed in the garden for a little longer, re-potting the basil plant, sweeping the leaves to the side, and waiting for a sound that she hoped she

wouldn't hear. It's always longer to wait for something not to happen, she told herself, and continued to sweep even after all the dried leaves had found their place in the pile and the evening light had quietly dissolved.

Dorinda spends most of her evenings in the garden. She set up the garden club a few years ago to fight against what she calls the 'managed decline' of the estate. As the estate gets emptied, and the empty homes rot away to fit the moral of the story of regeneration, she battles the story with her hands. Her hands know and love the estate. They turn over soil, plant seeds, pat down mud, spread out roots, pick up dead leaves and measure the moisture contained in the earth. Her hands are attentive to the surface of the estate. They produce makeshift arrangements to cover up leaks, repair wires and mend pipes. For instance, only yesterday, she placed a bucket to collect water from the leakage that peeks through the block on the left-hand side of the garden. She also remembers the day she moved into Hammerfield house and discovered that there was a plug socket right next to the water pipe of the washer. After receiving no help from the council, she simply taped up several plastic bags around the socket, and occasionally feels its surface to make sure that the water does not get through and spark up a fire. Dolly often looks at her mum's hands and wonders if they have a mind of their own. Dorinda tell her that she comes from a family of people who thought and worked with their hands. Her great grandfather was said to have built the church at Stratford-upon-Avon, leaving behind a family of builders. Her grandfather later married into a family of plumbers. In fact, Dorinda recalls her grandmother telling her that when she was in school, one of her lessons was to draw out a plumbing plan of her home, and that was the first time she imagined her home through the network of pipes that carry around water beneath the still floors. However, she grew up to master a different skill with her hands, as she became an envelope-writer, drawing out the addresses of strangers in a beautiful lettering.

While recalling the long and extensive ancestry of hands to Dolly, Dorinda would always repeat the story about her grandma's arm. It was a story that Dolly loved to hear and Dorinda loved to tell, even though it had taken place long before she was born. It was during the Second World War, and Dorinda's

grandmother was late for work at the factory, as she had stopped on her way to buy some sweets, and so she didn't end up sitting in her usual spot. That very afternoon, the factory was bombed, and she only survived because she was sitting on the other side. However, the bomb splinters blew off her arm, and she held onto it with her other hand, knowing that if she didn't, somebody could accidentally pull it off. She held her arm in its place and bravely walked towards the road through the burning factory. Her arm was eventually fixed, and she ended up living till 2006, using her hands to fill out envelopes with her lovely writing for several years after the war. Her son, Dorinda's father, grew up to work at a dairy shop, and his claim to fame was that he introduced yogurt to Chelsea once upon a time. Dorinda can count up to 200 years that her family has lived in Chelsea.

It is only in the last few years that Dorinda's place in Chelsea had been questioned. Few days ago, when she sat outside the Builder's Arms with Chris, her friend from the estate, a woman came up to them and asked for a lighter. While smoking her cigarette, she made small talk, and was taken aback when she learnt that Dorinda and Chris lived in the area. Once they told her that they lived in social housing, she bent towards them and said, 'I earn about ninety grand and I still can't afford to live here'. Dorinda wanted to ask the woman what she had meant by that, and where she thought people like Dorinda and Chris should live, but in that moment, she just silently stared at the smoke that filled up the distance between them. Dorinda thought about her early years in Chelsea, as she moved into the Sutton estate at the age of twenty-nine after living in a squat for a few years. As a single mother, she found several ways of not feeling lonely. She remembers the 'baby massage' events where she met other single mothers and they played with each other's children. Over the years, as Chelsea got richer and richer, Dorinda found herself surrounded by nannies at these events, and she could barely afford to join the other single mothers for their expensive lunches.

Chelsea changed in other ways too. Old haunts disappeared, the number of empty mansions increased, and gay pubs were shut down, followed by the rise of expensive cuisines from other countries. For instance, she remembers one

of her favourite pubs, called Red House, being replaced by a fancy Japanese restaurant called Kiru. New names fortified the area that had begun to slowly appear unfamiliar to Dorinda. As Dorinda and Chris watched the woman leave the pub in a swanky car, she told him about an interesting conversation that she once had with a policeman several years ago. The policeman had said to her, with a long sigh, 'there is no middle class in Chelsea – there's the very rich and the working class'. He went on to tell her how this makes his job rather difficult, as the rich are unaffected by the police and the poor don't want to listen. Like many buildings in Chelsea, the police station now stands empty. In fact, Dolly lived as a guardian for a few months in one of the rooms in the building, and they had a good laugh at her door, which read 'Chief Inspector'. Chris was almost done with his beer when Dorinda told him about the flowers that she brought over from Barking to be planted in the garden. They walked back to the estate and brought out the flowers, seeds and two bags full of good soil from the shed. As they patted down the seeds, they spoke about the mail they received from their new landlord about the upcoming developments. Chris said he couldn't really find his home on the map, and Dorinda told him that she found in place of her home, a plan for a penthouse. They wondered what would happen to the garden, as they looked around to see the sunlight streaming through the gaps between trees and falling onto the older men and women who spent their evenings solving Sudoku, discussing their health problems, drinking tea and asking the children not to run around the garden with earthworms hanging on their sticks.

This morning, Dorinda decided to stop by the garden to take a quick look at the flowers that she had freshly planted a few days ago. She envied Chris as he lived on the top floor of a block right next to the garden, and could look at it from his kitchen window anytime he wanted to and watch it change with each different light of the day. She briskly walked towards it, in the opposite direction of the school where she teaches, while keeping an eye on her watch. She saw a rug sack in one corner and realised that there was perhaps a homeless man who spent the night in the garden. She could see the frame of a man in the other corner, bent over, facing his back to her. She was about to call out to him when she realised that he was tidying up the garden. She watched him pick up

dried leaves and carry them to the pile that Dorinda had formed during her previous cleaning. She just stood outside the garden and looked at him gently pull out the dying ends of a branch and throw last night's cigarette butts into the bin. She was so overwhelmed by what she saw that she lost track of time. He finally noticed her standing and immediately rushed to grab his rug sack and leave. Dorinda told him he could stay in the garden and even store his rug sack in the shed if he wanted to. He politely refused, claiming that the rug sack held together his entire life within its feeble grasp. She sat down on the bench beside him and asked him his name. 'Dan', he answered. She learnt that Dan was a Romanian journalist and came into the city only a few years ago, and was struggling to find a place he could afford. He worked for a while as a security guard in Chelsea for a building that he suspects was empty, where he spent his entire day doing nothing outside a house he knew very little about. Eventually, he left the job and has been homeless ever since. Dorinda realised that she was really late for work. She left after saying a hurried goodbye but kept thinking about Dan, and how the other residents at Sutton may protest against his stay, and how his eyes were following a bird all through their conversation.

After work, she walked towards the garden, hoping to find Dan, but he was nowhere to be seen. She sat in the garden, remembering all the strange encounters that make up her memory of the estate. She wondered if these stories would all be forgotten one day, as the estate is emptied, dismantled and rebuilt for other people. Even those fighting to save the estate did not really look at all these little stories that make up the larger truth. Their campaigns speak of grand ideologies that don't really take into account the everyday experiences of people like Dorinda. They only acknowledged the experiences that neatly fit within the folds of their agenda; be it the agenda of regenerating the estate or of stopping the regeneration at all costs. For instance, the head of the labour party for the council laughed off Dorinda's complaints against the closing of the gay pubs in the area. They imposed their own priorities on the lives of the residents, and did not realise that gay pubs have a long history in Britain, and bring together a community. Words like 'community' perhaps seemed a bit old fashioned to the leftist campaigners, Dorinda thought to herself. 'After all', she

muttered, 'the leader of the local campaign is Scottish, and so he can't really represent us anyway'.

She felt annoyed by the thought that most stories had a short life span if they served no purpose. For instance, stories about the rave parties in the empty flats before they got barricaded, about the sound of water running through empty homes, about the man who fought with the landlord to bury his auntie's ashes in the sunken garden, about the scream with no address, about her neighbour's ceiling collapsing because of the council's neglect, or about Dan's attempts to tidy up the garden this morning – they simply hover as rumours and eventually die out. Feeling a sudden wave of exhaustion, Dorinda decided to put away her gardening work for now. She placed all the tools and bags of seeds in the shed and locked up the garden. She went upstairs to her flat and realised that Dolly would be home late. She placed a can of beer in the fridge, thought about cleaning the mess that covered her floor, and then decided instead to finish the painting of her cat. She squeezed her paint tubes to check which ones had dried out completely. And as she cleans her paintbrush under the running tap, her mind remains preoccupied with fragments of stories that are slowly being forgotten.

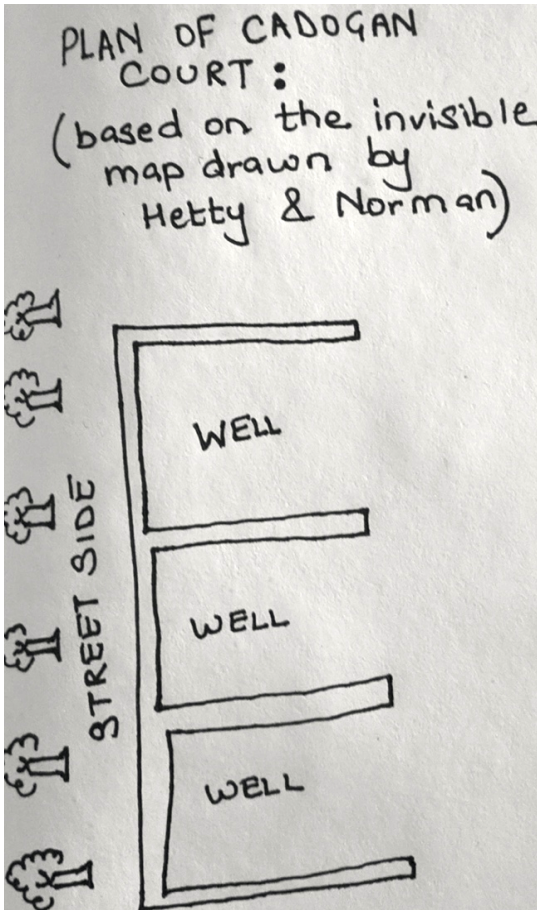
Chapter Four

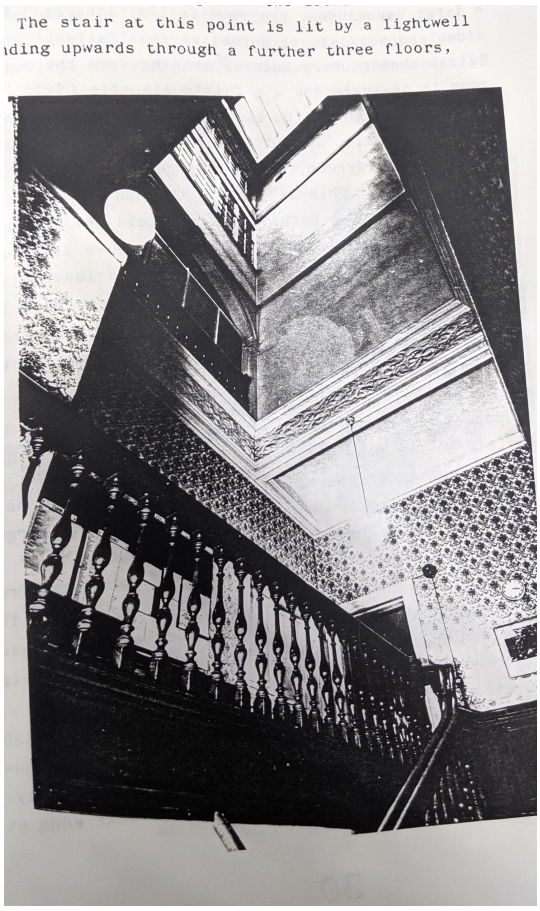
‘The Museum is my Home’: Tracing the Presence and Absence of Communities Alongside the Museumification of Chelsea

Walking around Cadogan Square, it is not hard to notice that along with house numbers, the homes in this area also have another set of numbers. These are the dates suggesting when each house was built. Each house holds a set of unique carving details within the red brick design that is characteristic of the area. One of the residents of Cadogan Square, who is a young professional and recently moved into the area, said to me, ‘Often when I walk my dog in the afternoon, I notice buildings more than people, and I admire them as if I am inside a museum’. Another resident in her late 60s echoed a similar feeling as she described the experience of walking from one end of the road to another and seeing the dates gradually increase, signifying that the buildings were built in a linear progression. She compared this sudden awareness of chronology attached to the space she occupied to the feeling of being in a museum. ‘But in this case’, she added, ‘the museum is my home’.

The descriptions of the area as a museum were not uncommon among the residents of the Cadogan Square and the neighbouring areas. They commented on the historical value of their buildings and the rich histories of Chelsea. The staircases of the buildings were adorned with paintings and prints that captured the landscape of the area over many decades. One of the distant owners from Australia described the experience of being in her London home as ‘stepping into history, momentarily’. The architectural features of the buildings, such as the balconies, red bricks, light wells and the layout of the mansions are regarded as historical gems that should be preserved, even if they might not be conducive to living. The light wells serve as an interesting illustration of this prioritisation. I only learnt about them through my field work when I met a couple who moved out of their Cadogan home to the nearby mews because of these “light wells”. When I asked them what light wells were, they drew a plan of the building with their fingers on the dining table between us.

The Cadogan Court, they explained, is built like a giant E with the long downward stroke being the street side end of the building and the wells they referred to being the space between the horizontal legs. As remnants of an impressive Edwardian design, they were meant to provide light for the stairs, which open towards them with windows, capturing the natural light from the open sky above and filling the corridors with it. These designs did not account for commercial planes and the overhead flight path, resulting in the light well brimming with amplified echoes of the plane sounds, driving away the couple.





Weeks later, I went to the Kensington Archives, and discovered a photograph and a plan of the Cadogan House from late nineteenth century, in which the inside of the light well can be seen. However, an echo is a product of design of a space as well as its materiality, which cannot be easily captured by a two-

dimensional plan,[23] and so I asked Barbara what the light wells were made up of, and she replied to my email saying that they were constructed with white glazed tiles, rather than the terracotta ones on the outside which create the perfect conditions of the echo.

The concerns over preservation outweigh the concerns over liveability. One of the other residents who invited me to her home pointed out the space at the back of the buildings, which still held remnants of the no longer functional Edwardian intercom that were used to send messages upstairs for the servants to pull up the service lift with the supplies. Another resident in the area described to me her sense of wonder at imagining the water tanks that used to exist on the tops of buildings and were covered with "pigeon-protectors", a colloquial term referring to a surface that covers the water from pigeon droppings. The preservation of the historical features of the buildings requires extensive care and maintenance work, and these are often carried out in empty homes. It is easier to perform maintenance works in the seasonal periods of absence. Practices of care are decoupled from the physical presence of people. Unlike the Sutton Estate, in which practices of care were tied to making the Estate more habitable, the practices of care in Cadogan Square were not necessarily connected solely to their liveability but rather, to their restoration and renewal as an object of history and heritage.

This chapter ties together the process of "museumification" of Chelsea and the historical reverence for its buildings to show that practices of care need not always be about fighting emptiness; they can also be used to make place for it. Michael A. Di Giovine (2009; 261) defined the process of 'museumification' in the context of heritage sites as the 'transition from a living city to that of an idealised re-presentation of itself, wherein everything is considered not for its use but for its value as a potential museum artefact'. In the context of the Cadogan Square and the neighbouring areas, this process unfolds as buildings turn into objects of heritage and their preservation is

[23] Christine Helliwell (1992) explored the gaps between floor plans and the lived materiality of a home in the context of Dayak Longhouse, which led her to live inside one of the homes and carry out an embodied ethnography. She also discovered the travelling of sound through the walls.

prioritised over their usage. Much like a museum, homes in the Square are carriers of history rather than people; they have personalities above and beyond their current occupants or lack of occupants.

Houses are known by a unique house number that is connected to their historical residents, and these linkages are made known by the blue plaques that hang outside some of the homes, much like objects in a museum. A blue plaque is a permanent round sign installed in a public place in the UK to commemorate a link between that location and a famous person, event, or former building on the site. The plaques started as part of the English Heritage Scheme launched in 1866 by the politician William Ewart to mark homes of famous people, and Chelsea is full of them. Chelsea was also written about extensively, and a trip to the local archives led me to many such books, some devoted only to Cadogan Square. Robert Pearman (1986; p. 9), in his book about the Cadogan Estate, described the 'titles, plaques, statues, friezes and heraldic devices' that appear on Cadogan houses, and how these reflected the interests and backgrounds of previous owners. In the archives, I found a photo of a tile – earthenware, tin-glazed – used as house numbers (No. 37 and No. 191 of Cadogan Gardens). The inscription on the tile referred to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, suggesting that the tiles were brought over.



Another way of understanding the uniqueness with which each home is framed and perceived is to go back to its building and design. After purchasing the land in 1882, the Cadogan family appointed different architects to design clusters of homes around a central square. The Cadogan family also sold leases to independent contractors, who brought in their own architects. For

instance, the lease for No. 1 Cadogan Square was contracted to Trollopes and Sons, who brought in their own architect, G.T. Robinson. Each architect had a unique vision, and they often disagreed with one another. Pearman, in his book about the Estate, outlines the tensions between J.J. Stevenson and G.T. Robinson, two architects who were responsible for homes on opposite sides of the Square and were trained in different architectural traditions. The unique identity of the homes in the Square is less connected to its current residents (or lack thereof) and more to their architectural features and the esteemed owners who once lived in them. The house has a personality above and beyond its inhabitants. I relate this argument to Daniel Miller's (2001) study of the negotiation process between a house and its inhabitants, which he illustrates through his own relationship to his north London flat and its pre-given decorative schemes that he had to accommodate with his own desires of self-expression. In a more extreme form of the agency of the house, he turned to the 'tradition of the English haunted house' in the Oscar Wilde story "The Canterville Ghost", in which he situated the ghosts in the gap formed out of 'the discrepancy between the longevity of homes and the relative transience of their occupants' (Miller, 2001; p. 107). The value/identity of homes is decoupled from the physical presence of people in the context of Cadogan Square, contrary to the depreciating value of empty houses in the Sutton Estate.

This chapter recasts the homes of the Square as buildings that are revered and cared for, and consequently, transformed into objects of heritage and history. I study how the historical character of Chelsea is produced and maintained by landowners, such as the Cadogan Estate, which owns most of the freeholds of the area, thereby holding the power to control the way people relate to their buildings. I identify the mechanisms that feed into the maintenance of the "character" of Chelsea – the process of listing buildings, enforcing guidelines of maintenance for the residents, formalising regimes of care through a concierge service, or the creation of the nearby hospice for retired veterans that feed into the spectacle of the community. By unpacking these practices, the chapter attempts to uncover the underlying nostalgia for a particular kind of Englishness that plays out in the geography of Chelsea.

The character of Chelsea is related to the models of landownership that persist in the area. Central London is covered with aristocratic families who control large chunks of land and own the freehold of the homes in the area. This means 'that purchasers are not buying the properties outright but only a time-limited interest, in which they have to pay ground rent to the owner of the freehold, to whom the property reverts when their leases (which in some areas of central London are for no more than 35 years) run out' (Chris Bryant, *The Guardian,* 2017). Within this model, also known as the Great Estate model, aristocratic families like the Cadogan family, have temporal and spatial control over the land. The short leases ensure that the Estate get back the homes that they give out, knitting emptiness into the fabric of ownership and renewal.

The spatial continuity ensures that the family, which is now commercialised through the managing Estate that runs it, has control over the character of the place. Kate Allen (2017), from the *Financial Times*, argues that this model of controlling land gives central London a 'reputation for being essentially a cluster of disparate villages'. Peter Murray, the Chairman of New London Architecture and the London Society, praises the model for creating an 'enduring approach to stewardship'. In this chapter, I will juxtapose these feudal structures of owning and controlling land with the flow of mobile capital in and out of the city, to be able to disentangle the kind of emptiness that is seen as inevitable and the kind that is seen as disruptive to the character of the area.

Juliet Patricia Davis (2017), an architect and urbanist, studied the politics of stewardship in London, and traced the large-scale urban landholdings back to the Georgian era of urban expansion following the Great Fire of 1666 (Summerson, 1945; in Davis, 2018). She traced the resilience of these models in contemporary times by focussing on the Grosvenor Estate that controls large parts of Belgravia, and operates on similar principles to the Cadogan Estate. The Estate managers she interviewed pointed to the areas with a growing number of empty homes, and correlated these areas of emptiness with the area in which Grosvenor has lost its freehold. She argued that 'properties that were converted into multiple occupancy dwellings or offices, or that were mixed use, were typically not affected' by the problems of emptiness. The loss of freehold

was also equated to the negative changes in the relationship between the landlord and the tenant. Through these arguments, the Estate managers seem to make a moral case against emptiness, and in favour of their own models of landowning, which are then inseparably interlinked with a particular form of Englishness that is said to be slipping away.

Within this form of Englishness, the homes that are declared empty are not necessarily the ones whose owners are absent, but rather, the ones whose owners are negligent towards these established regimes of care. In other words, what you do with your property is your business, but when it puts a blemish on the local area, then it becomes the community's business. The underlying argument of the chapter draws on the contrast between practices of care across my two sites. While the practices of care at the Sutton Estate contest the narratives of uninhabitability and fight the threat of demolition, the practices of care in Cadogan Square are motivated less by the need to make a place liveable and more to create a spectacle of presence, fullness and character. In other words, I argue that the practices of care in the former emerge as a battle against emptiness, whereas the practices of care in the latter make place for empty homes.

Place as Archive

During one of my visits to the Kensington archives, I overheard an old couple that was visiting from Brisbane, Australia. They had been trying to locate a particular street in Chelsea where their grandfather lived and had been christened many decades ago. They complained to the receptionist that the house and the entire street could not be found anymore. They had brought along many photos of their previous visits to the area, and described in detail the particularities of that street; the church on the corner, the shops on one side and red-bricked homes on the other. The receptionist suspected that the bombing during the Second World War might have reconfigured the street, thereby making it difficult to find the house in question. Eavesdropping on the above exchange, I realised two things. The first is the emotional relationship between people and places even if they live apart from one another. The

second realisation was around the ways in which heritage was defined, such that the personal and the historical are inseparably entangled.

Contrary to what I thought, living away from one's home was not an exceptional condition but instead, an implicit assumption embedded in the leases of most Cadogan homes. As stated in the second chapter, Tanvir Hasan, the Deputy Chairperson of the Donald Insall Associates, who has worked closely with the Cadogan Estate on conservation projects, told me that these homes were historically imagined as seasonal. They were luxury homes that were not meant to be occupied for the entire year, but only for a defined period of a few months each year, thereby allowing the Estate to be the principle stewards of the homes. The notion of seasonal occupancy is not a state of exception, but in line with other seasonal elements that were integral to Chelsea's history. The second chapter described in detail the London social season evolved in the 17th and 18th centuries, which is around the same time that the great Estate model was put in place. The Social Season referred to the annual cycles of events customary for members of the social elite, involving balls, dinners, parties and charity events, for which the members were expected to be resident in their city homes rather than their country homes. Absence and presence, within this historical context, are not absolute conditions but instead dynamic states that unfold in line with the social calendar.

The current and former residents of the Square spoke to me about the area with a strong sense of attachment to the place in its present form as well as its rich history. As I walked alongside some of the older residents, after the Thursday morning Eucharist at the nearby church, they pointed at various buildings around us and described to me the many lives of those buildings. One of them pointed towards the Cadogan Hall, which was behind the Church, and explained that it used to be a Church of Christ, Scientist Church, in the previous century until it fell into disuse and was acquired by Mohamed Fayed, the then owner of Harrods. Fayed tried to turn the building into a luxury house but could not obtain planning permissions due to the fact that the building was listed as a heritage site, thereby resulting in the building staying empty for a period of time until Earl Cadogan purchased it in 2000 and turned it into a performance venue.

Next, we moved past the Sloane Street station and reached a more spacious road, with green spaces and sports grounds on both sides. One of the older residents said to me, 'you want to see a community? Look! There is a community', as she pointed towards the Royal Hospital Chelsea, which was founded by Charles II in the seventeenth century and has been operating as a hospice for veterans. The resident continued to tell me about the coffee shop in the hospice which was funded by the Cadogan family. In between her descriptions, we saw a group, and I was fascinated by the contrast between their blue uniforms and the grocery bags with fruits that swung as they walked past us with a smile. I will describe this site in further detail in the next section.

The residents also commented on the number of blue plaques within a short radius of the Square. I counted over 21 blue plaques in the course of a ten-minute walk from Cadogan Place to Draycott Avenue, which vaguely covered the spread of my field sites. Yi Fu Tuan (1977) looks at the heavily textualised nature of modern space in which text replaces material symbols. The textualisation of the area can be seen in the form of street names or text panels outside pubs and cemeteries that describe their historical significance, year of building, details about the patrons and funders and, often, a connection drawn to Englishness. For instance, the panels in the Royal Hospital Chelsea convey the ways in which Chelsea relates to Britain's involvement in wars across the world, be it in Korea or in Iraq. Texts also exert a certain "museological authority" (Singh, 2010) when placed alongside images, thereby turning photographs into artefacts, people into legends, incidents into history, and viewers into an audience.

The museological undertone of the area is further amplified by the presence of tourists. Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea funded the Study of the Visitor Economy Report (2009), which revealed that the visitor economy generates over £3.1 billion for the Borough, with shopping accounting for 48% of all expenditure. The report also confirms that 60% of visitors are UK day visitors. The overseas visitors were estimated to spend over £100 per day in the Borough. Chelsea is heavily marketed towards this tourist gaze. A retail

worker, who works at Emilia Wickstead, a luxury-clothing store on Sloane Street, told me that most of their customers were travelling from somewhere else, and they did fittings in less than a week to accommodate their customers. Lots Road holds many high-end antiques stores that sell luxurious memorabilia to tourists, and the Royal Hospital Chelsea has tours for visitors and storytelling sessions facilitated by one of their pensioners. The sports stadium, the annual flower show in which residents from both my field sites participate, and the luxury restaurants bring many tourists to this part of the city.

While Chelsea is covered with visitors interested in the rich life of the borough, the silence that is left behind in the evenings after their departure reveals a cruel irony. Through the text panels, the listed buildings, the parading pensioners, the tourist hot spots and the focus on heritage, Chelsea becomes a museum unto itself. Its museological appeal triumphs over conditions of liveability. It stops being a place and turns into a representation of a place, which is connected to its histories and its imaginations as a particular way of life. An article about Chelsea in the *Daily Times* in 1957 described the area in the following manner: 'Chelsea is no longer a place. Chelsea has become an idea, a pattern of life. It is a crucible where the England of tomorrow is being created.' This brings me to the key argument of this chapter – caring for a place is not the same as fighting emptiness, as might be the case in Sutton Estate, but rather, it could function as a way of performing life while making place for empty homes.

Community as Spectacle

Community becomes a tourist spectacle in Chelsea. Most residents I interviewed spoke about a community with a sense of both loss and longing. More than once the Royal Hospital Chelsea was evoked as a space where one can truly witness a community. It holds a community of 300 army veterans who are known as the Chelsea Pensioners. One of the four gates to the hospital opens up with a cemetery at the very front, where the graves hold members of the army as well as the late gardener of the hospital itself. While the cemetery draws out a chronology of the British Empire, connecting each death to a

particular war in History, the gravestones operate like text panels in a museum, outlining the contributions of the individual that lies buried in the ground and connecting their lives to the life of the nation.

Exiting the cemetery, I made my way to the first room on the left, and found the walls covered in badges and medals, and descriptions of Britain's role in the wars in Korea, the Falkland Islands, Cyprus, Northern Ireland and World War II. Outside the room, there was a souvenir shop holding books containing the biographies of pensioners and the history of the hospital, along with figures of army veterans in their official uniforms. The Cadogan family opened a café in 2010 in the Royal Hospital to invite the Cadogan residents to engage with the community of pensioners and learn more about the history of the place.

When I reached the café, I saw some of the pensioners, dressed in the official uniforms that I thought were restricted to the glass boxes and the toy figures, sipping on the soup of the day. Taking my chances, I asked one of the pensioners if I could have my lunch with him and ask him a few questions about the place. He stood up from his seat, pulled out the seat from under the table and signalled for me to sit, and only sat down after I did. He pointed to his uniform, and said to me with a snigger, 'It would be very dishonourable to say no to a lady'. Discovering the advantage of doing fieldwork in a community marked by both loneliness and chivalry, I introduced myself to other pensioners and ended up having tea with another group of them after lunch. While one of the pensioners complained about the omission of his role in Korea from the history of the hospital, the other pensioner complained about wearing the 'blue clothes', which refers to the official uniform that the Chelsea Pensioners are required to wear within the premises and up to a 2-mile radius. The other two pensioners at the table, drinking diet coke, added that it was nice to not be lonely and to live in a place that had the spirit and discipline of the army life. They referred to each other as 'lads', which was a term I had never before heard in the context of eighty-year olds. They also admitted that even though they liked the greenery around them, they wished that the hospice was located in a

place by the sea and not in the centre of London, which is so crowded and appears “foreign”.



One of them lamented that the place that they fought for back in the day seems unrecognisable today. One of the pensioners at the table said that he wished they were in Spain, as it is close to the water and has many English communities down there, to which the other pensioners nodded while adding that they were of course extremely grateful for the Royal Hospital. I found this to be a striking point, complicating the relationship between place and community. The pensioner who had just finished his Diet Coke said to me, ‘We hate ‘communities’ – it feels so forced, especially when we are trapped in a place where we cannot afford anything’. The others backed him up and said that they often wonder where all the ‘normal shops’ went, and by ‘normal shops’, they meant the butchers and bakers and news agencies. These shops were seen as necessary for sustaining a community.

Residents across both my field sites had expressed similar concerns; the Sutton Estate tenants complained about the closure of convenience stores, pubs and local cinemas, an older resident of the Square complained about the long walk to the post office, and Barbara lamented the closure of her bookstore. The spectacle of the community was unmatched by the fodder required to sustain it. Many of the conversations about emptiness in Chelsea echo a silent cry for the loss of communities, and by extension, the loss of Englishness, that was made up of particular kinds of lifestyles and consumption practices (which sustained the bookstore, the butchery, the bakery etc). In the hesitantly expressed discomfort by the presence of burqa-clad women to the complaints about the changing character of Chelsea as well as the real estate agents who

struggled with the changing reputation of Knightsbridge, there is a shared agreement of something that was once present and is now lost.



Setha Low (2001; p. 48), in her study of gated communities in America, examines how the desire for community among upper-middle-class individuals is closely linked to the facilitation of ‘avoidance, separation, and surveillance’. The feeling of danger, she argues, is a response to the experience of increasing cultural diversity that is associated with a “loss of place” (Low, 2008; p. 45). Interestingly, in the United States, gated communities have historically emerged as a means to ‘protect estates and to contain the leisure world of retirees’ (Low, 2008; p. 45), which captures the idea of Chelsea as an English village with the army retirees marching around.

However, the sense of Englishness is not at all homogenous or singular, and neither is the past that is longed for. A couple that used to live on the Square, and later left because of the airplane sounds from the light wells, bemoaned the loss of “proper shops” on the King’s Road and their gradual replacement with cafes and commercial stores. The “proper shops” were different from the “normal shops” that I discussed above. These shops referred to unique stores that captured original craftsmanship and an artisanal characteristic that they insisted used to be a key feature of Chelsea. Englishness, in this case, is described as the opposite of capitalist chain stores that now fill up the area. The couple attributed this loss of character to the imposition of the Congestion Charges in 2003, which is a fee charged on most motor vehicles operating within the Congestion Charge Zone.

In the congestion map, most of Chelsea falls within the orange Central London zone, and the grey line on Sloane Street denotes that it is a charged road. The couple explained that these charges made it difficult for independent stores to operate, and thereby opened the area up to larger chains and established brands. While on one hand, the couple equated Englishness to the eccentricities of the former King's Road that consisted of 'handmade objects, specialist stores and frequent appearances of cross-dressers', on the other hand, they also lamented the transition of the Pheasantry to a Pizza Express chain. They said that Pheasantry was dear to their heart and closely tied to the history of the area. The Pheasantry was built in 1766, derived its name from the business of Samuel Baker who developed new breeds of oriental pheasants. Capitalist chains were therefore juxtaposed against places that were ascribed historical significance and linked to the fostering of a community.



Heritage as a Tool

About 2% of English building stock consists of listed buildings (*Heritage at Risk Report*, 2010), revealing both the historical value of the buildings in the country as well as the value attributed to history. Peter Luff (*The Telegraph,* 2015), the current head of the heritage fund, stated in an interview that contrary to popular assumptions, 'Heritage is not for the Elite'. Criticising the narrow definition of heritage, Luff argued that the British notion of heritage can apply to a wide range of buildings. Luff's argument rings true in the course of my research, as people operationalised heritage as a tool across both my field sites. The historical significance of a building is a powerful identity that can be used against newer developments or alterations. In this section, I see how this identity is mobilised across my two field sites in relation to emptiness. I found two photographs that capture Chelsea at different moments and from different angles.


Sloane Square
London
1896


GRA
TUNG
OR
YOU

The first photograph was framed and decorated in the hallway of one of the Cadogan homes, and it holds a glimpse of Sloane Square from 1896. The second photograph was shared with me via Facebook by Dorinda, who pointed out Sutton Estate that formed the backdrop, and said that it might be from the 1960s. She said she found it on the Internet, but kept it with the hope of turning it into a sketch one day. Both of these photographs, spread across two centuries, are linked to the heritage value of Chelsea, be it through the architectural styles of the buildings, the broad roads, the market squares or the quirky dressing styles that Chelsea used to be known for. Heritage is a loosely defined term, but within the UK, it is concretely manifested through the process of listing, which places a building or a structure on a statutory list. A listed building cannot be demolished, extended or altered without permissions from the local planning authority in conjunction with the central government agency. Coal Drops Yard, a shopping complex designed and built in 2018 by Thomas Heatherwick, near Kings Cross Station, is located in a former coal store. The shopping complex was listed even before it was built, due to the historical significance of the area and its central location. The process of listing is based on an assignment of value, and is therefore not a fixed property of a building but rather a dynamic process of negotiation. Even within the process of listing, there are sub-categories that affect the level of protection afforded to a building. My two field sites represent two of these sub-categories. Cadogan Square holds many buildings that are listed as Grade II, which refers to buildings subject to regulations that protect their historical and architectural significance. Sutton Estate, on the other hand, was deemed a Non-Designated Heritage Asset by Montagu Evans, a chartered surveyor. This denotes buildings that are 'identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest' (Annex 2, National Planning Policy Framework).

Speaking to Hasan, the conservation architect, I learnt how involved the Cadogan Estate is in the conservation of listed buildings. Many of the houses in the Square are listed and are therefore protected as objects of heritage rather than as places of living. Heritage preservation is facilitated by emptiness, as it allows architects and in-residence builders and developers to work with the

property in the absence of its inhabitants. On the other hand, in Sutton Estate, the status of the Estate as a 'Non-Designated Heritage Asset' was used by Save our Sutton, the residents' campaign organisation, to fight against the demolition. What underlies the ethic of preservation is the core idea that things must be saved against their natural decomposition. This notion can be used to contest as well as facilitate emptiness. The homes in the Square are preserved for their historical value, which is directly linked to their monetary value, thereby turning them into financial assets divorced from the liveability of these homes. In the Sutton Estate, blocks A-D have been left empty for years by the Housing Association on accounts of being uninhabitable. The residents fighting against their emptiness argue that the flats were made uninhabitable by leaving them empty for so long. The relationship between presence and preservation, or alternatively, between absence and decay are, therefore, in stark contrast across my two field sites.

Liam Buckley (2005), through his study of a postcolonial archive in Gambia, and Caitlin DeSylvie (2006), through her study of a dilapidated homestead in Montana, argue that the process of conservation is far from neutral. Modern conservation has an underlying notion that the 'the erosion of physical integrity is associated with a parallel loss of cultural information' (DeSilvey, 2006; p. 318). Buckley studied the decay in a postcolonial archive in Gambia as a conscious decision to 'let go' of a particular history. He argues that the material decay of the colonial photographs causes tensions because 'it reminds us of our feelings for, and intimacy with, colonial culture and asks that we imagine ways of finally letting go' (Buckley, 2005; p. 270). The preservation of the Cadogan homes, which is prioritised over and above their liveability, arises from a similar sense of nostalgia and, in particular, the nostalgia for a brand of Englishness that is seen as chipping away through the arrival of the new demographic of buyers in the Borough.

The attention to the historical details of the home is what sets apart the two contrasting types of emptiness. While seasonal habitation of homes allows the resident to attend to the homes and periodically leave it empty for the Cadogan Estate to conduct examinations and repairs, the disruptive emptiness

is criticised for the owners' lack of care for the homes. This is reflected in comments about the "dangerous" new buyers who "buy up homes like investments and just abandon them". This abandonment is quite different from the "managed decline" evoked by the Sutton residents to complain about Clarion's disregard for the material conditions of the home. The abandonment of the Cadogan homes is less about liveability and more about maintaining the homes like sites of heritage – to be looked at and admired.

This abandonment is often referred to by newspapers through the evocation of ghosts through terms like "ghost squares". As I argue earlier, the ghosts can be linked to the rumours and inferences drawn out about imaginary owners of empty homes; Daniel Miller's (2001) understanding of "ghosts" in the context of historical estates provides another interesting lens. Miller (2001; p. 109) locates the figure of the ghost in a haunted home within the anachronistic home-ownership patterns in London, which he described as a 'historical city saturated with an older form of housing associated by these modernisers with all sorts of vices, promiscuity and disease that they saw as having flourished in conditions of overcrowding and poverty'. Similar to my own categories of the old and new emptiness, Miller contrasts the British aristocracy's relationships to homes with the more "modern buyer". He draws on Oscar Wilde's story, 'The Canterville Ghost', which takes place on a similar aristocratic estate as the one I look at (and coincidentally, this was also a place where upper-class people would gather for a hunt), and the general plot of the story revolves around an American buyer (modern buyer) purchasing an aristocratic estate but not valuing its historical depth and relevance. The ghost is the personification of this negligence, and it emerges from the discrepancy between the long life of the house versus the short life of an individual tenancy. The ghost only rests when the daughter of the American owner marries into the aristocracy, and therefore the family becomes a more rightful owner of the home – occupying a home is less about physical presence and more about the "appropriate" way of appreciating and caring for the home (a reverse statement of my own conclusion about emptiness being less about absence and more about negligence). This also takes me back to Anna Minton's analysis of the new

forms of buyers in Chelsea who try to replicate the seasonal patterns of the old elite.

The Cadogan family, through its language of preservation, cast themselves as the gatekeepers of English heritage, thereby allowing for feudal models to exist even within a cosmopolitan city. The family has made efforts to rebrand itself as a modern Estate. The Cadogan Estate, a professionalised managerial arm of the family, manages and develops the area. The Estate's website declares their motto as 'protecting the area's unique heritage and supporting a thriving community'. In the archive, I found a book entitled *Cadogan & Chelsea: The Making of a Modern Estate* by Beatrice Behlen, written in 2017. The book praised the family for its contributions to the maintenance of Chelsea's heritage, while also discussing the ways in which the Estate has renewed itself over the years, adapting to the contemporary times, while still not straying too far away from its rich past. There were two glimpses from Behlen's (2017) book that caught my eye.

The first visual consists of a modern map of Chelsea, marking out its restaurants, salons, pubs and shops, thereby indicating the shift in focus of the Cadogan Estate from a residential model towards a retail model, as more freeholds of residential properties were bought out over the last decade by private builders and residents. The second image is a comparison between the Cadogan buildings in the recent times and their plans from two centuries ago. Some of the residents in the Square also had similar photographs in their homes, and it was with pride that the resounding similarities between the past and the present were pointed out to me. In six out of eight Cadogan homes that I saw from the inside, these kinds of photographs decorated the walls of living rooms, bathrooms and the staircase corridor. In these homes, the residents who invited me over for breakfast or tea spoke of the area with a sense of long-term attachment. While half of the residents I spoke with were English, the other half of them were American, Australian and German, but they all spoke in a similar manner about the way of life that Chelsea symbolised, which was closely tied to an upper-class English lifestyle, along with the historical relevance of living here (even if some of them only lived "here" for few months a year).


BEATRICE BEHLEN
A FASHIONABLE HISTORY OF THE KING'S ROAD
CHELSEA
RESTAURANTS
PUBS
COFFEE BARS
ANTIQUE SHOPS
KINGS ROAD
PETER JONES
ROYAL COURT THEATRE
CHELSEA BARRACKS
112
113



TOP
HOUSES ON THE WEST SIDE OF CADOGAN SQUARE
Designed by Gordon Allison, 1992

BOTTOM
44 AND 72 CADOGAN SQUARE
Designed by Richard Shepherd Roach, 1817–18

administration in the 1890s, he argued in Cabinet for more favourable purchase terms for tenants in the controversial Land Act (1896) that was introduced in an attempt to relieve the pressure for Home Rule. Although neither an investor nor active director of the new company, Cadogan was entitled to pass or refuse any of the designs and his son Edward described how 'politics and management of his estates claimed his working hours'.[1] He was also an active advocate of housing reform, clearing slum areas on his property and replacing them with better housing for displaced people. He supported the Guinness Trust, making in the process what Edward Cadogan described as 'a vast financial sacrifice'. In later decades, the Cadogan Estate has resisted attempts to reduce the housing stock for the less well-off, in order to maintain a social mix.

The 'Queen Anne' style, which characterises this area, is a deceptive term suggesting a revival of the style of the Queen who reigned between 1695 and 1714. The late Victorian Queen Anne was a composite style rather than a simple revival – a highly distinctive mixture of the provincial classicism of northern Europe from 1560 onwards, with the tall chimneys and gables of the Gothic Revival. From the latter movement came the redemption of red brick, previously viewed by an earlier generation as a crude rustic choice for a city who favoured pale yellow or grey, but soon adopted by a new cultural elite as the badge of membership. The white-



What distinguishes my two sites and their claims over heritage is the relationship between preservation and liveability. The Sutton Estate's heritage is connected to the quest of making it more habitable, thereby preserving not just the buildings, but also the original intentionality of its founder, William Sutton, who wanted to create housing at the heart of the city for working class men and women. The Cadogan Square's heritage, I argue, turns Chelsea into a museum of itself, and its community into a spectacle. The idea of preservation is prioritised over the idea of living and occupying a place. The model of preservation resembles more closely the conservation model of a museum. This is comparable to the "community museum" model in other parts of the world that renders a place into a representation of itself. Stern and Hall (2019) study the presence of community museums and their effects on cities and communities in the context of a former silver mine town of Cobalt in Ontario. They critically examine the role that these museums play in shaping the narrative about the place as well as rendering the locals as tourist spectacles. They further argue that the museum attempts to contain and control the tourist-oriented development, and in doing so, they speak over the local histories and material realities to reduce the place to a singular narrative about 'what the town should be and what it should not be' (Stern and Hall, 2019; p. 28).

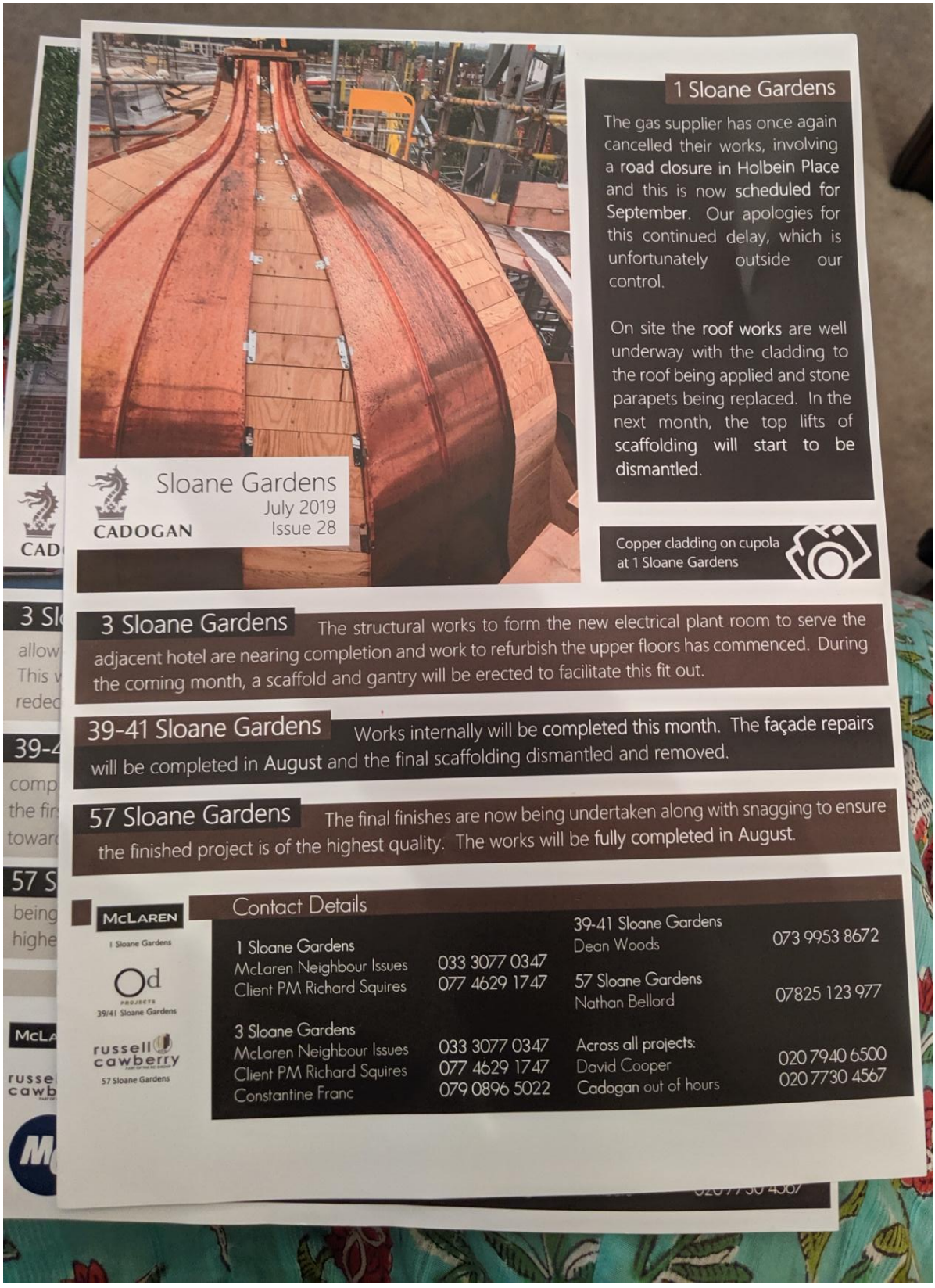
Distance and Detail

Underlying my line of analysis is my attempt to bring together the study of "global cities" like London, marked by a constant movement of people, ideas, money and objects, and the material relationships between people and buildings. On the one hand, financial capitalism turns second homes into investible assets, which are abstract entities whose values become delinked from personal meaning. On the other hand, the empty homes I study are full of meaning and attachment. They are loved, treasured and valued, even if not physically occupied for a sustained period of time. While the previous section decoupled presence and attachment, this section decouples absence and abstraction. I see how homes are at once abstracted into financial assets, while also being invested with personal meaning and significance. Cadogan Estate, for instance, sends out regular newsletters to keep its non-resident

homeowners informed and make them “feel connected” to their homes from afar. These newsletters consist of details about buildings, infrastructural developments in the area, and the history that ties together the different elements of Chelsea into a coherent narrative, thereby allowing detail to bridge the distance between people and their homes.

One of the leaseholders, whose house is owned and managed by the Cadogan Estate and located on a quiet street adjacent to the Square, told me how much she misses her London home when she is away in Australia. Her lease is 998 years long, and the length of that duration gives her the confidence to refer to herself as a homeowner. Even though she lives in Australia, she says she feels most at home in the two weeks when she is back in her London home, resting in the living room that she has decorated over the years during her annual visits. As she makes herself a cup of tea and stares through the large Victorian windows at the Plane tree that casts a swaying shadow on the large wall made up of narrow red bricks, she tells me that this is the feeling of being in London that she tries to recall when she is back in Australia.

She has managed to devise a system by which she leases out her home for most parts of the year to other Australians who want to be in London for a short period of time. She adds that there are many Australians who, much like her, have a British passport and hold London as their second home. ‘One way of feeling connected to this home when I am away’, she tells me as she brings out a folder with a bunch of monthly newsletters, ‘is by looking through these newsletters that are issued by the Cadogan Estate that keep me posted about all the latest projects and also remind me of some of the lesser known historical facts about these precious buildings.’ The newsletters appear to me like medical reports of the buildings, outlining the internal and external issues with various buildings, and describing in detail the level of progress/recovery made by them. The residents/owners are informed about when the scaffoldings will go on and when they will be undone, and the timelines of various renovation plans are described with visuals alongside them.



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CADOGAN

1 Sloane Gardens

The gas supplier has once again cancelled their works, involving a **road closure in Holbein Place** and this is now **scheduled for September**. Our apologies for this continued delay, which is unfortunately outside our control.

On site the **roof works** are well underway with the cladding to the roof being applied and stone parapets being replaced. In the next month, the top lifts of **scaffolding will start to be dismantled**.

Copper cladding on cupola at 1 Sloane Gardens

3 Sloane Gardens

The structural works to form the new electrical plant room to serve the adjacent hotel are nearing completion and work to refurbish the upper floors has commenced. During the coming month, a scaffold and gantry will be erected to facilitate this fit out.

39-41 Sloane Gardens

Works internally will be **completed this month**. The **façade repairs** will be completed in **August** and the final scaffolding dismantled and removed.

57 Sloane Gardens

The final finishes are now being undertaken along with snagging to ensure the finished project is of the highest quality. The works will be **fully completed in August**.

McLAREN
1 Sloane Gardens

Od
PROJECTS
39/41 Sloane Gardens

russell cawberry
57 Sloane Gardens

Contact Details

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Sloane Gardens
August 2019
Issue 29
CADOGAN

1 Sloane Gardens

Works continue to go well, with the roof being completed in the coming month, making the building weathertight. With the walls to the guest rooms and restaurant space now being formed, the interior design is being finalised to allow the finishes to be ordered.

Externally the existing windows have been replaced and the final brick repairs are being carried out, thus allowing the gradual dismantling of the scaffold.

Left: 3 Sloane Gardens.
Below: 39-41 Sloane Gardens.

3 Sloane Gardens

A scaffold has now been installed to allow the redecoration and external repairs to be undertaken. This will be in place until November. Inside refurbishment and redecoration works have commenced.



39-41 Sloane Gardens

Works inside have been completed and the final external works to repair and refurbish the first floor balcony are underway and should be completed towards the end of the month.

57 Sloane Gardens

During August the final snagging is being completed to ensure all works are completed to the highest standard. Following this the hoarding will be removed.

Contact Details

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Many policy-makers argue that the crisis of empty homes emerges from homes being imagined as financial assets instead of homes. One speaker at the Chartered Institute of Housing's conference in Manchester in 2018[24] insisted upon not referring to homes as "units", which were cast as impersonal and violently abstract. However, in this section, I look at how an attachment to a place is not the opposite of emptiness. Homes can be loved and revered, and yet, continue to remain empty for large parts of the year. I borrow from Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell's (2014) critique of the anthropological understanding of homemaking as a linear process, which is 'lauded as the "underlying goal of all housing processes"' (Dayaratne and Kellett 2008: 55). Challenging the underlying romance of the home, Baxter and Brickell use the category of *home unmaking* to shine light on the simultaneous processes of the making and unmaking of a home. They also highlight the role of temporality in mediating these processes of making and unmaking by looking at Myerson's (2005) study of a Victorian house in Clapham, which was a site of 'of comings and goings, of living and dying, of moving in and moving out, of material decay and repair' (Baxter and Brickell, 2014; p. 140).

Similarly, I argue that there is no simplistic opposition between homes as financial assets and homes as a site of attachment and meaning. Empty homes cannot be seen as empty of meaning or attachment, but rather, as fashioning news ways of forming attachments to homes; not necessarily as a place to live in, but as a place to admire and treasure. This is where my focus differs from Rowland Atkinson's (2018) study of the relationship between property development and the global super-rich, in which he classifies the London skylines that are empty of its occupants as "necrotectures". The term, as suggested by its nomenclature, refers to these homes as dead spaces which are empty of attachment and meaning (Atkinson, 2018; p. 4). The skylines are filled with newly built developments with no history, but the Cadogan Estate probably attracts people who care about the heritage (even if they do not permanently live inside them). Anna Minton (2017; p. 24) looked at a Virtual

[24] The conference was titled 'Housing 2018', and it took place at Manchester Central from the 26th to the 28th of June, 2018.

Reality experience offered by Deloitte Digital at the London Real Estate Forum, which allowed potential buyers to virtually experience being inside a home that was yet to be built. Minton cites this as an illustration to show the detachment between the property market and reality. However, in my fieldwork, I look at homes that are quite the opposite – they are full of meaning, history and material lives that are directly linked to their desirability as assets, rather than divorced from it. In order to understand these attachments to buildings in a place like Chelsea that holds so many empty homes, I situate my ethnographic approach at the intersection of financialisation underlying the global city framework with a more material culture approach to buildings and embodied ways of belonging to homes.

For instance, Victor Buchli (2013; p. 153) looked at urban architecture to argue that 'the generic, interchangeable, and fluid nature of dwelling under the conditions of modernity', allows attachment to be decoupled from permanence. He illustrates this through Diana Young's (2004; in Buchli, 2013) study of the colour white in the London property market, which she argues enables a speedier circulation of houses due to its ability to assimilate into a range of tastes. He draws on Marcoux (2001; in Buchli, 2013) to argue that it is precisely the detachability of a house that allows for a 'promiscuous attachability' (Buchli, 2013; p. 128) by its changing residents. The affective properties of "homeyness" (McCracken, 1998; in Buchli, 2013) disrupts this 'promiscuous attachability' and thereby brings down the value of a property. Similar to Young's observations around the use of the colour white, the use of bricks in Cadogan Square creates a de-personalisation of the home, allowing it to belong to the larger architectural traditions, that increases the value of the properties. However, many of the residents I spoke to evoked the red bricks as a cherished imagery that related intimately to their sense of home. My study does not create a binary between the 'feeling of home' and its transferability in the property market (through the leasehold/freehold model), but instead, focusses on how personal meaning is produced simultaneously alongside the museumification of Cadogan homes, on one hand, and the transformation of homes into investable assets, on the other.

For Saskia Sassen (2005), a global city is a command centre of the global economy. Contrary to expectations that globalisation will erode the significance of places, the financialisation of the economy revived certain cities as command centres of the global economy. Finance capitalism had to be serviced somewhere, and it was and continues to be serviced in global cities. The concentration of the financial industry also requires a service industry – people who service the bankers, the stockbrokers, etc. – thereby situating the global city as a historical formation. She uses the term "global city" intentionally, as it recognises the 'specificity of the global as it gets structured in the contemporary period' (Sassen, 2005; p. 28). In other words, the global city is not an abstract formation, but a concrete one, with multiple layers of embeddedness. 'Many of the resources necessary for global economic activities' she argued, 'are not hypermobile and are, indeed, deeply embedded in place' (p. 31).

Similarly, the homes in Chelsea's luxury squares, even as they become financial assets that are profitable to invest in, continue to hold personal and historical significance. The financialisation of housing, therefore, does not automatically imply abstraction or a lack of attachment. My ethnography serves to juxtapose London as a global city alongside people's embodied relationships to their own homes that they may live in or they may leave empty. I bring together the frameworks of financialised capitalism underlying the global city with a more ethnographic/material culture approach to the home. By seeing these two frameworks together, I argue that the intimate relationships with buildings and their historical attributes feeds into the museumification of Chelsea – in which homes are not necessarily seen as places of living but as heritage sites – and prompts tourism and investments that sustain empty homes. Moreover, recognising empty homes as places of attachment (even if it is not a lived-in attachment) allows for an understanding of the labour that is constitutive of this attachment. The Polish workers who died while transporting a sofa to the Cadogan home, or Josephina's death by the tree falling on her after she cleaned a home on the Square, highlight the violence that is implicit in the labours of making homes. Richard Baxter's (2014) notion of 'home-unmaking', that interrogates the default positive connotations ascribed into the

imagination of the home and its making, is useful in reflecting on these two violent incidents that were both linked to the labours of homemaking – beautification of the home by the sofa transported by the worker and the cleaning/maintenance of the home by Josephina.

Louis Moreno (2014) notes that the identification of a city as a "global city" is a prime means to attract investments. Similarly, Luna Glucksburg (2016; p. 239) quoted the Conservative housing minister, Brandon Lewis, who said: 'The last thing we would want to do is introduce illiberal, protectionist measures that would strangle investment in the market. Such a move wouldn't just restrict home ownership—it would jeopardise the capital's status as a world-class city, to the detriment of all Londoners'. Moreno locates the concept of the "global city" within the context of the financialisation of the urban landscape, arguing that 'urbanism does not merely reflect or represent the culture of financial accumulation, but has been a crucial socio-spatial process enabling the permeation and penetration of finance into the fabric of daily life' (Moreno, 2014; p. 244). Moreno applies this understanding of financialisation and its impact on the urban process by looking at London's property market that he sees as an 'extensive process of value extraction'. He highlights the key features of the rent-extraction system in contemporary London to show that the urban process in question is not a residual of the continuing notions of private property, but is an emergent form of financialised urbanism. The distinctive feature of this model, as exemplified by the property market in London, is the underlying financial logic that generates surplus value with little fixed investment.

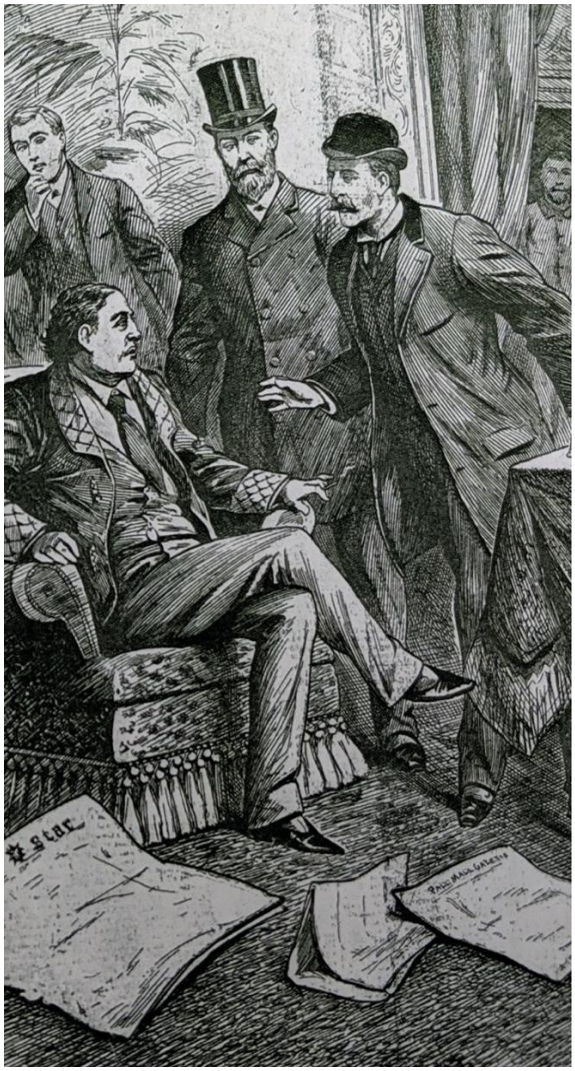
Roger Burrows, Caroline Knowles, Rowland Atkinson, Tim Butler and Richard Webber conducted a 24-month interdisciplinary study, starting in February 2013, to look at the "spatialisation of social class" in London. Their approach shifted the focus from studying class through the lens of employment to studying its relationship to residential location. Their study included 'golden postcodes' such as Chelsea, which they refer to as an "alpha territory", where the super-rich of London reside or buy up homes as investments/second homes. They explain that these locations cover 3.5% of all households and 4.3% of all individuals in Britain. Similarly, Luna Glucksburg (2016; p. 241)

identified such areas as “prime London”, where properties sell for above £2 million and ‘sit in a crescent that goes from Chelsea in the south, up through South Kensington’. By shifting the focus from individuals to territory, such an approach, much like Moreno’s, brings attention to how socio-spatial property relations shape the micro-economies of cities. However, instead of seeing these shaping factors as abstract forces, I see the ways in which socio-spatial property relations are mediated through the materiality of homes, and how “golden postcodes”, such as that of Cadogan Square, have to be maintained through material practices of care.

My arguments draw from the increasing attention within anthropology to the materiality of financial forms of capitalism, within which global cities can be positioned. Webb Keane (2001; p. 87) poses the entanglement between the materiality of money and its symbolic authority as unstable, arguing that the dematerialised ideology of money ‘celebrates abstraction, denies social mediation and imagines that signification offers the subject an escape from materiality’. Bill Maurer (2006) counters the dematerialised assumption of money as an abstract symbol by highlighting the entanglement between its symbolic, social and material values. Similarly, Karen Ho (2009), in her ethnography of the everyday workings of the Wall Street, looked at the phenomenon of empty offices to reveal the materiality of place within the imaginations of the global. These offices, she observed, are set up by many banks as a prerequisite to identifying oneself as global, and she further described them as: ‘occasionally staffed, their resources are minimal, and their operations are cyclical’ (Ho, 2009; p. 311). The study of the materiality of empty offices serves to puncture the abstract imagination of capitalist operations. I pose Ho’s study of the workings of the Wall Street through unoccupied offices in specific locations as an ethnographic critique of the dematerialised imaginations of the ‘global’ and the abstractions of the ‘world cities’ approach.

Jane Jacobs (2012) compared the relational approach that poses the city as a set of flows and relational networks to the poststructuralist approach to the city. The latter positions urbanism outside of terrains and instead sees the city as ‘a subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual

and the material, presence and absence, flow and stasis' (Amin, 2007; 103; in Jacobs, 2012; p. 416), thereby deterritorialising the city. The Poststructuralist city borrows the concept of *assemblages* from Actor-Network-Theory, in order to 'collapse the separation of humans and objects' and 'deconstruct how we see distance, proximity, scale and linearity' (Smith, 2003; p. 574; in Jacobs, 2012). However, even as my study of Chelsea reflects on the processes by which place is turned into an abstraction, I acknowledge that these processes rest on people's embodied relationships to their material spaces. Some of the distant homeowners I spoke to in and around the Cadogan Square spoke about rushing back to London to fix the external façade of the house and maintain the building's historic character. The love for the buildings and its history is therefore at once thoroughly material as well as part of a larger, abstract narrative that feeds into the myths of the global city.



To the right and before
him Pont Street
Did tower in her new
built red,
As hard as the morning
gaslight
That shone on his
unmade bed,
"I want some more
hock in my seltzer,
And Robbie, please give
me your hand –
POLICEMEN came in:
"Mr. Woilde, we 'ave
come for tew take yew
Where felons and
criminals dwell:
We must ask yew tew
leave with us quietly
For this is the Cadogan
Hotel."

My research brings together the financialisation of the city along with the material lives of people and buildings, thereby seeing the global city as a physical and material place. By doing so, it focusses on the processes through which places get abstracted and personalised; empty homes are not simply abstract nodes in the global networks of capital, but also physical places with personal and historical meanings given to them. In Beatrice Behlen's (2017) book about Cadogan Estate, there is a photo capturing the arrest of Oscar Wilde that took place at the Cadogan Hotel in Chelsea in 1895, that inspired John Betjeman's poem, titled 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel' (1937). This was also a reference that two of the residents I interviewed had made, along with other key figures of history who had roamed the streets and pubs where we sat and chatted. Since I began this chapter with Miller's analysis of Oscar Wilde's story about the haunted estate, it seems apt to end on the grim note of Oscar Wilde's arrest for "indecent behaviour", which took place in my field site, next to Cadogan Square. Rather than seeing Cadogan Square and its neighbouring areas as the background to various historical events, the book frames the location at the heart of the story. Places don't lose meaning within global flows of people and money, but instead, the relevance of places itself becomes a commodity that draws these flows.

Ways of Belonging

In my early days of fieldwork, I tried to measure emptiness through absence – the absence of people, sounds and lights, furniture and plug points, and sometimes, the physical insides of homes. To prove and quantify emptiness, I tried to count garbage bags out on the streets of Cadogan Square and found an average of ten bags over the course of the first few months of fieldwork. I tried to record the absence of people by following the postal lady, Loida, who pointed to various empty homes in Chelsea, and described the lightness of her bag of letters that would now only hold luxury magazines from Harrods or newsletters from the Estate. However, gradually I learnt that emptiness had little to do with absence. For instance, some of the residents of the Cadogan Square and neighbouring areas pointed to a particular house as empty if the owner was unknown or if the owner lived far away, which almost always implied

a different country or continent. Homes that were left empty for large parts of the year by owners who lived in Surrey, or the rest of the English countryside, and returned for a few weeks in the summer and in Christmas were rarely described as empty. Emptiness, I learnt, was not a description of presence or absence, but rather, a description of a disruption, in the form of a person or a group, to the particular imaginations of Chelsea, its community and its character.

I trace the decoupling of emptiness and physical absence alongside the museumification of Chelsea, which I define as the process by which Chelsea turns into a museum unto itself; its present is built as a reflection of its past, and its community turns into a living spectacle to demonstrate certain forms of Englishness that are seen as slowly dying out. Museumification also provides a lens to resolve the dilemma between homes at once being empty of people and yet full of attachment. The attachment is not the warm and cosy attachment that one imagines with homes (even though I am sure these homes are quite warm and comfortable), but rather, the attachment is enmeshed in the historical lives of these homes. The attachment is born out of the home turning into a site of heritage, and it is this attachment that is being sold by the Cadogan Estate to people like the Australian lady. The attachment is therefore not a prelude to fullness, but rather, dissociates the idea of a home from a place of living.

To understand the wider processes of museumification of the area, I looked at the spectacle of the community produced by the Royal Hospital Chelsea, wherein the pensioners are paraded in their military uniforms, colouring the streets of Chelsea with shades of red and blue that capture a nostalgic longing for the Empire. I also looked at the intimate relationships between people and buildings across my two field sites. In Sutton Estate, this relationship played out in practices of reminiscing, grieving, gardening, and archiving parts of the Estate that were connected to key historical events such as the arrest of Reginald Christie, the explosion of a bomb from the Second World War or the bricks laid down by German bricklayers. In Cadogan Square, this relationship played out in the form of newsletters that were distributed by the Cadogan Estate to keep the owners up-to-date with the development plans

for the area, as well as the everyday musings and discussions around the historical and technological elements of the homes that serve to transform them into objects of heritage and history.

I argue that the idea of heritage, in the context of the Cadogan Square and neighbouring areas owned and maintained by the Cadogan Estate, serves to flatten out the everyday experiences of the people into a single narrative about Chelsea and what it used to be, thereby drawing out a timeless representation of the area in ways that invites investments and tourists and temporary visitors. This argument is echoed in the comment of the Chelsea Pensioner, as he complained about being made to wear bright uniforms and roam the streets that hold things he can never afford. In contrast to the dematerialised notions of Englishness in Chelsea and the museumification of the Cadogan Square, the tenants of the Sutton Estate, on the other hand, operationalise the category of "heritage" as a means of challenging the singular narrative of decline imposed by the Estate, and fight the proposed demolition of the Estate and the decanting/emptying out of its residents. I locate this contrast in the different relationships between people and land across my two field sites.

Even as it may appear that the resident-owners of the Square or neighbouring residential areas have nothing in common with the insecurities of the social housing tenants of Sutton Estate, there are in fact many overlapping experiences. The residents of the Cadogan Square only own the leasehold of their properties whereas the Cadogan Estate controls the freehold, thereby giving the latter the authority to dictate the character and its upkeep. I interviewed many resident-owners who gave me the precise duration of their tenancy, ranging from 88 to 998 years. By thinking of their own homes as an important piece in the larger museum of Chelsea, these resident-owners have to give in to the pressures of upholding a particular character of their homes. The tenants on the Sutton Estate, on the other hand, including the ones with assured tenancy, are vulnerable to Clarion, the landlord of the Estate that holds the power to relocate them. These tenants live on homes that are provided by the State and their everyday relationships to these homes are mediated by the

Housing Association that acts as the Social Landlord. The comparison emerges between the management of housing by two types of landlords – the aristocratic landlord in Cadogan Square and the Social Landlord in the case of Sutton Estate.

I brought up Sophie Chevalier's (1998) work previously to look at how the lack of direct access and ownership to land in Britain resulted in de-materialised notions of Englishness and identity. However, by highlighting people's relationships to homes that they may not directly or permanently own, I want to reimagine the relationship between owning and belonging in the context of empty/emptying homes. Rather than reducing my two field sites into a simple binary opposition, in which the residents of the Sutton Estate are been as "belonging without owning" whereas the homeowners of Cadogan Square are seen as "owning without belonging", I want to draw attention to the overlapping ways in which they relate to Chelsea. I see how buildings across both my field sites are loved and treasured, and it is through the love for the architectural and historical details of buildings that the feeling of belonging is produced despite the lack of direct access to ownership. The feeling of belonging, I argue, rests at the intersection of the process of personalisation of the home and the simultaneous process of its depersonalisation through the gradual museumification of the area as well as the financialisation of its housing. By studying two contrasting sites in an area bursting with empty homes, this chapter introduced new ways of imagining a sense of belonging in places struggling with the dynamics of emptiness.

‘If a Tree Falls’



Loida knocked once again on the door. She checked the time on her phone as she shuffled her feet. She could just leave the envelope with the caretaker of the building but she wanted to personally hand it over to the sweet Somalian man who had gifted her a packet of flowering buds when she had knocked on his door two weeks ago and they had discovered their common passion for gardening. Loida works as a postal lady for Royal Mail, and even after twenty-seven years of delivering letters and parcels in and around the Cadogan area, she still enjoys the sound of the knob turning gently to reveal the familiar face of a stranger. While some faces hold sparks of excitement, others hold a casual indifference to the content of the parcels that Loida brings. And then there are some faces that light up at the sight of Loida, rendering the parcels irrelevant in themselves. Just this morning, as she approached the Guinness Trust, right next to Cadogan Court, the Filipina on the fourth floor noticed her arrival from her kitchen window and waved with joy. The lift rose upwards at a reluctant pace, and the Filipina lady was waiting right outside it. Loida stepped out and gave her a hug. A few months ago, they had bonded on their common Filipino background, and over the months, once Loida found out about the cancer that had been eating up the lonely woman, she began helping out with her everyday chores. This morning, she had a cup of tea at the lady’s house after she helped

her shake off the spider-web that had entangled at the edges of her curtain. The woman slipped in a packet of biscuits into Loida's jacket since she refused to take any money in return for the tasks that she hardly saw as favours. As Loida felt the shape of the pack of biscuits in her back pocket, the door finally opened.

She didn't recognise the face of the woman who opened the door. Once she handed her the parcel, the woman confirmed that she was the wife of the recipient of the parcel. Loida hesitantly asked the woman where her husband was, and as she noticed a sense of puzzled grief forming on the forehead of the woman, she immediately added that she was hoping to thank the man for the flowering buds that he had given her two weeks ago. The woman's face crumbled into a gentle cry, and as she rested her quivering cheek on the wall, she said, 'He passed away two days ago'. Loida rubbed the shoulder of the woman and stared at the dishevelled interiors of the house. After receiving no clear response from the woman, Loida gently patted the envelope loosely held by the preoccupied hands, and left. In the last few years, she could roughly count up to twenty people who had passed away in the area, and it was often in this manner that she learnt about their passing. She made her way to the final address for the day, and realised it was the home of the Spanish man who was extremely flirtatious and would repeatedly ask her why she was smiling when she really wasn't smiling at all. She tiptoed her way to his door and just slipped in the letter through the slit, and hurried to the lift as she heard him yell, 'There she is. There she is.'

As Loida completed her delivery for the day, she decided to eat her sandwich by the bus stop. She gazed at the locked-up park at the centre of Cadogan Square, and wondered why they didn't just build a wall around it so as to not tease the passers-by with its unwelcoming emptiness. While the newspapers spoke about empty homes in the area with a sense of 'discovery', Loida had known about the emptiness for a long time. She felt it grow and spread in the most tactile ways. Her bag of letters became lighter each Christmas, and the sorting time at the Royal Mail office shrank from an hour to just thirty minutes. While it is true that people don't write handwritten cards anymore and are often

more mobile during holiday time, Loida knows that the lightness of her bag pack has something to do with the news she reads. The young drivers she passes on her way to the bus stop smile shyly in her direction. In her past conversations with these men, she learnt about the rich families that make their way to their London homes during special months. Some of these drivers have nothing to do all day, as their employers only come out at night, dressed for expensive clubs and secret parties. One of the younger drivers was so nervous when he carried a pair of luxury guns in his backseat that his hands were shaking as he reversed the car.

She unpacked her sandwich at the bus stop, while gazing at all the buses that came and left. The death of the Somalian man was still playing on her mind, even as she struggled to properly remember his face. She recalled the awful piece of news that she had overheard a few months ago at this very bus stop. It was about her friend, Josephina. She was also a Filipina, and a part-time cleaner like Loida. They had met a couple of years ago, and bonded over their common fascination for looking at the framed photographs that decorated the homes they cleaned. They both cleaned three, or sometimes, four homes in and around Cadogan square, and had never ever met any of the owners or residents. They were given their own sets of keys, and were paid through Direct Debit each month. There was hardly much to clean in any of the homes, except perhaps the dust that the furniture would gather in its silent protest against absence. Every year or so, the rebellious furniture would get replaced with newer furniture, and Loida and Josephina would wonder, in their own respective empty homes, whether the cycle of replacement was simply to forge a myth of use and presence. For months, the insides of the ovens would have stickers that said 'Remove Before Use', until the stickers began to gradually lose their stickiness.

She could hardly believe the news when she heard it – Josephina had died right outside a home in Cadogan gardens. Loida asked a few questions to make sure it was the same Josephina, even though she knew that there couldn't be two Filipinas with the same name who cleaned homes of rich people in the area. She asked questions about the hair-colour, about the blonde tips that

Josephina had recently tried out, about the sandals that she insisted on wearing even in the coldest of winters, and about her handbag with glitter on its strap. The women at the bus stop – one was an English nanny and the other was a Vietnamese cleaner – confirmed that the woman who died was indeed the same Josephina with whom Loida had shared many laughs and secrets over the years. She learnt that there was a tree being cut in the park at Cadogan gardens. Suspecting that there were hardly any people who lived around that corner of the park, or perhaps, out of sheer absent-mindedness, the workers paid to chop off the tree had forgotten to put up a sign or a fence. Josephina was walking down the road after cleaning one of the corner flats, and before the workers could call out to her, the uprooted tree fell right over her head, and snapped her neck. The ambulance was called but there was not much that could have been done, other than placing a fence around the fallen tree. As Loida searched for tissues in her handbag, she recalled how scared she had been that afternoon when she found out about Josephina. It was the first time that she understood why the area around her was referred to by many of the newspapers as a 'ghost town'. There was something haunted about her friend disappearing, and a tree falling at the centre of London and barely making a sound.

After lunch, she made her way to 14 Cadogan Court. She patted her pocket to check if she had the keys, as the owners were away in Essex for the month. She passed by the Chelsea Cloisters that provided hotel-homes to foreigners who wanted to live and shop in Chelsea. Loida wondered to herself whether most homes in Chelsea were in fact hotels, as they all held people for a short period of time, and were barely decorated with personalised objects, like fridge magnets or souvenirs. She knew that if she had the money to travel, she would definitely spend most of it on souvenirs. But unlike hotels, these homes held precious things that their owners left behind. There were rooms she wasn't supposed to enter, and people she wasn't supposed to let in. In fact, just yesterday, when she was knocking on doors to deliver letters, a couple refused to sign for the parcel. Her husband later told her that they were perhaps living there illegally, or were just guests through Airbnb. She made her way into the living room and began dusting the centre table as she looked around to

calculate how much cleaning was really required. She plugged in the vacuum cleaner and felt glad that there was just one floor to clean. In a house, two streets away, a family had bought all the four floors of the building and began living in a strange, vertical manner, with each floor holding a room or two. Some of the rooms had no plug points and this had baffled Loida the first time she had looked around the house. Loida struggled to drag the vacuum cleaner all the way to the top, and gradually work her way down this odd-looking house.

Once she finished the floor of this Essex home, she decided to make herself a cup of tea. Being alone in an empty house makes for several interesting plots for fictionalising one's own life. Loida often imagines owning the place, and wonders how she would decorate it. She would definitely bring in more flowers, and perhaps cover one of the walls with photographs of her family who are still in the Philippines. She often played out characters that she had heard about from the more reliable gossipers. For instance, she tried to imagine the woman who lived across the street, in Guinness Trust, and had lost her mind out of loneliness and boredom. The woman was said to have run out of her home, fiercely removing all her clothes as she ran towards the centre of the estate. She flung her underwear across the wall and it landed in the compound of the boys' school next door, leading to a series of laughs and cheers. Loida wondered how many people must have lost their minds inside these homes. She finishes her cup of tea, and as her two-hour slot comes to an end, she locks up the house and begins to walk towards her bus. She phones her daughter, Christina, but gets no response. She guesses that Christina must be busy with a haircut at the parlour where she works. She closes her eyes and leans back on her seat. She still has two hours to go, before she reaches her home, somewhere on the edges of the city.

Conclusion

How to Fill the Empty Space?

The first draft of this thesis was written, it seems, in a different historical time to the second draft. In between the two, the world around me appears to have changed forever. Stopping midway through the writing and editing, I took the last flight home to New Delhi before most international flights were cancelled to guard against the spread of COVID-19, that has left streets of Delhi and London similarly deserted. Emptiness has begun to exist everywhere now. The streets, the cinema halls, shopping malls, public transport and parks are all empty. The Internet is crowded with images of empty historical, tourist and religious sites that have never before been seen in daylight unobstructed by bodies. Bodies have become sites of fear in times of social distancing. At this point, writing about emptiness seems both relevant and fraught.

Every time I spoke about my research to friends and colleagues, they often asked me what I think could be the solution to the 'problem of emptiness' in London. Newspaper reports covering empty homes posed emptiness as a static category that could be measured, quantified and, therefore, filled up as a way of "solving" the housing crisis brimming in the city. Seeing empty and full as neat opposites of one another results in the creation of a set of binary oppositions, namely between emptiness and community, between absence and presence, between care and negligence, and between owning and belonging. Each chapter in this thesis attempted to complicate the binary oppositions in order to de-couple emptiness from physical absence, and community from presence, and instead, reimagine the question of emptiness as an ongoing process of negotiating with a place. However, as the world around me alters and adapts to the spreading virus, I find myself once again reconsidering these conclusions. The emptiness I see from my window feels very physical, and the abstract categories of darkness and echoes that grew out of my analysis have once again transformed into material realities.

After landing in Delhi, I got in touch with some of the residents of Sutton Estate, as well as the low-income tenants in Brent that I used to work with, to see how they were doing. Both of these groups of residents have complex housing conditions, which range from social housing, emergency accommodation or poor-quality private housing. The UK government passed emergency legislation to suspend new evictions from social or private rented accommodation. While the space of the home is imagined as a safe space in times of crisis, my conversations with the residents revealed the distress that emerges from the material conditions of a home that one is now confined to.

We spoke of leaks, damages and overcrowding, and I want to channel some of these concerns, along with the changing ways of thinking about globalisation and mobility, into my conclusion, even as the rest of the thesis unfolded at a time that seems radically different from the present. While it is tempting to think of COVID-19 as a rupture, there are many continuities in matters of housing conditions, especially for those who were already disadvantaged before the pandemic. On one hand, the temporary suspension of evictions and housing the homeless people in the UK brings about some hope, but on the other hand, the conditions of precarity continue and worsen as the material conditions of the homes get ignored in rehousing projects. For instance, Southwark Council is planning to bring back empty council flats into use in the Ledbury Estate in London, in which four towers with serious construction issues will be repopulated with homeless families (*Inside Housing*, April 2020).

I started with a search for emptiness and, in the course of my research, learnt that emptiness cannot be understood as a static attribute of a place, but rather, as a process that unfolds unevenly. Emptiness started off as a concept used by the media, which, then, became an emic concept used by my interlocutors. Emptiness became a tool of telling stories of change across both my field sites. This is why I pose emptiness as a process that unfolds at the intersection of the material reality that it gives shape to and the narratives that it is shaped by. Dace Dzenovska (2020; p. 12) in her study of emptiness in rural Latvia refers to it as ongoing – ‘a lasting state of affairs with its own dynamics’.

In a similar vein, even as I started with a search for emptiness as the object of my research, it turned into a lens through which I looked at the various negotiations between people and place in relation to varied presence of capital.

In this thesis, I have made use of a range of ethnographic evidence. The ethnographic data emerging from Sutton Estate primarily comprised of resident interviews that were conducted during gardening sessions, meetings in the pub, walks to the cemetery and conversations by two sites of burial – Aunty Una's ashes in the garden and Chris's mum in the Brompton cemetery. The places where the interviews unfolded inevitably had a big influence on the content and pace of the conversations. Along with these interviews, I also looked at feedback forms distributed by Chelsea Association of Tenants and Clarion Housing, and recorded minutes from meetings and townhall proceedings to see how widespread the objection to the proposed demolition was. However, the most involved residents were also the ones who felt most strongly against the proposed demolition, and therefore a large part of my ethnographic data comprised of photographs, artworks, albums and stories that were actively, and often repeatedly, shared with me in support of the Estate in its current form.

There was also a discrepancy in ethnographic data between the two sites, as Cadogan Square's emptiness did not pose a direct threat to its residents and therefore did not warrant an immediate/active response. This is precisely why in my second field site, a large part of my interviews is not of the residents themselves, but of retail workers, church groups and cleaners, who felt the brunt of empty homes more directly. To fill in the gaps of ethnographic evidence due to the difficulty of finding as many residents in Cadogan Square as I did in the Sutton Estate, I relied on archival data from the nearby Kensington archives, and often brought along details from the archives to the residents' homes to prompt discussions about Chelsea, and hear their own descriptions of how they relate to the histories of the area and how their own homes fit into these larger histories. I also relied on data from Freedom of Information Reports and on the mapping project carried out by Concrete Action, as a way of ascertaining the suspected number of empty homes even as the focus of my research had shifted to the experience of those living alongside

empty homes rather than the homes themselves. Yet, this supplementary data helped me develop a better understanding of the gaps between technical definitions of empty homes and the subjective perceptions of emptiness. This wide range of data, therefore, served to strengthen my understanding.

My thesis also served as a mediation of place and its significance in the lives of my interlocutors. During my years of writing up the thesis, I lived in the same neighbourhood where Doreen Massey lived and wrote her famous essay titled 'A Global Sense of Place' (1991). From the window by my desk, I could vaguely see Kilburn High Road that Massey describes as a site that is distinctly unique, while also being connected to the world spatially (the overhead airplane path to Heathrow) and temporally (the imperialist history motivated particular forms of migration that make up the area). As the world becomes increasingly connected through the movement of people, objects and capital, Massey argues that place continues to hold a heightened significance. This statement seems truer now than ever. As airports shut down and borders are sealed off in the face of the spreading virus, place emerges as a form of stillness against the threat of movement. To stay put is to stay safe. Countries like Australia, the USA and the UK have called their citizens back home before they close the borders. Such an evocation of 'place' has been described by Massey as reactionary, and she illustrated this through the rise of hyper-nationalist movements or claims over heritage by indigenous communities. A sense of place is evoked in reaction to something oppressive, but she argues that this is not the only way to think about place.

Massey's article serves to find a more progressive way of studying place by posing it not as a static and singular characteristic, but rather, as multiplicities with moving boundaries. I draw on Massey to reimagine emptiness not as a fixed condition as suggested by its problematisation in the media, but as a constant process. Three key insights emerged from my research. One, not all empty homes are regarded as empty. Two, emptiness is less about physical presence or absence, but more about demonstrating care or negligence towards one's home and performing sociality through participation in annual/seasonal events. And three, on a related note, empty homes exist within

a structure that thrives, manages and profits off emptiness. Emptiness is not always a loss. Often, emptiness signifies a period of waiting or negotiating. Emptiness can also be understood as a symptom of larger conditions of precarity that unfold through the decrease in council housing and increase in temporary housing structures, that are negotiated between councils and private landlords/investors.

Massey simultaneously poses places as something specific and material, while also holding them as nodes to extrapolate larger realities. Similarly, I look at empty homes in Chelsea, in London, as places that have a material specificity, even as they tell us larger stories about the movement of capital and the changing demographics of the area. However, Massey warns against the temptation of turning places into props or metaphors, and thereby acknowledges the uniqueness and specificity of a particular place. This was an important word of caution for my own research. Emptiness melts away quite willingly into poetic metaphors of abandonment, decay and loss. For instance, Caitlin DeSilvey's (2006) study of the residual remains of a derelict homestead in Montana reimagines its active potential of decay. She focuses on the ambiguous nature of residue that Georges Bataille (1993; p. 81) described as 'the unstable, fetid and lukewarm substances where life ferments ignobly'.

However, instead of romanticising decay, I see the decay of empty council flats as embedded within specific social and political structures. In the Sutton Estate, it emerged from what the residents referred to as the "managed decline" of the Estate, which implicated that the landlord of the Estate, Clarion, was strategically speeding up the process of material decay in order to build a case for regeneration. Brenna Bhandar (2018) draws on Anna Minton's (2009; p. 10) analysis of London's real estate infrastructure to argue that the process of 'managed decline' constitutes 'a form of organised state abandonment — the state relinquishing their duty to provide safe, secure tenure for people on low incomes, in order to achieve the objective of stimulating economic growth through real estate development'. Herein, she is drawing on the Prison Abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2011) category of "organised abandonment", in which public and private institutions manufacture crisis as a

means of imposing new modes of governance upon populations. Bhandar further located this contradiction in the rise of Public-Private Finance Initiatives that leads to 'handover of hundreds of billions of taxpayers' funds to private corporations providing goods and services once provided by the state, who then "invest" it back into public projects' (Bhandar, 2018), which is something I analyse in detail in Chapter 1 as I trace the rise and growth of Housing Associations in London.

Bhandar connected this process of "organised abandonment" to the Grenfell fire, which was frequently referred to by the residents of the Sutton Estate, as they spoke about the neglect of the Council towards their repeated complains. Even as the fire occurred in one tower, it was a shared tragedy that shook up the borough, and was identified with by many of the social housing tenants to reflect upon their own precarity. Through a mentorship program called 'Under One Roof Mentorship', I work with a Bangladeshi-British tenant currently living in emergency accommodation in Brent (my own borough), and she described to me the sensorial affect that the Grenfell fire had on her. Having read many news pieces and testimonies of survivors, she was frozen with fear when she smelt smoke in her own flat in December 2019. The memory of the news had fused with her reality, thereby emphasising the shared aspects of grief and inequality. The fire had highlighted a contrast in living conditions and issues of precarity in the borough, which is what prompted my choice of field site in the first place. However, the conditions of precarity are not limited to the fire or other similar incidents that exacerbate the neglect of the landlord and management. These conditions penetrate into everyday life in the borough and are profoundly connected to my study of emptiness.

They play out in the form of emergency housing that is owned by private landlords and leased out by the council, as well as property guardianship, in which distant owners give out parts of their empty homes to people for an undefined period of time with little or no tenancy rights. The first chapter highlighted these forms of precarity through the question of habitability. The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act came into force in March 2019, which required landlords to ensure that their properties were fit for the tenants

to live a safe and comfortable life. However, habitability was itself operationalised by the landlord of Sutton Estate to hasten the process of decanting, as I noted in the first chapter.

The claims of inhabitability resulted in flats being labelled as unfit for occupation, residents being relocated, and flats being locked up. No matter the accuracy of the claim, over time, the empty flat became truly uninhabitable, thereby making it difficult to untangle which came first – inhabitability or emptiness. Even as the Homes Act was put in place to prevent the exploitation of tenants, my study showed the ways in which this act could be misused to evict people from their homes. This scope for exploitation emerges from the fact that habitability is not an abstract trait of a place, but a material negotiation between human and nonhuman agents. Just like emptiness, habitability also unfolds over time, and cannot be seen as a static attribute of a place.

It is also not helpful to think of emptiness as a crisis. Chapter two serves to bring attention to the seasonal forms of emptiness, which is seen as less troubling by the residents. It is this form of emptiness that is maintained by an elaborate infrastructure built and managed by the Cadogan family itself, even as they position themselves as the caretakers of the community. Chapter four further attempts to probe particular tropes of care and community that play significant roles in the fight against emptiness. The chapter serves to challenge the idea that empty homes can be fought by creating attachment to place, thus arguing that homes can at once be loved and cared for and yet, continue to remain empty for large parts of the year. It does so by examining ethnographic evidence taken from the homes of Cadogan Square that demonstrates that emptiness is not always perceived as a crisis and is often accommodated and facilitated. This evidence largely comprise of newsletters sent by Cadogan Estate to distant homeowners to keep them posted about the conditions of their homes, framed photographs of Chelsea in the common spaces in the buildings that fed into the museumification of the area and the transformation of homes into heritage sites, and finally, a detailed discussion about an architectural feature known as “light well” that demonstrated the prioritisation of conservation over conditions of liveability.

The thesis therefore demonstrates that financialisation is not a singular process, but rather, that financialisation of housing plays out in complex ways, as it is intertwined with structures of feudal estate-based management of housing, questions of history and heritage, professionalisation of care, and the museumification of an area. Financialisation connects my two sites and prevents them from being reduced to a binary opposition. The emptying of Sutton Estate is situated against the background of the increasing power of housing associations that received private investments that require returns, and the decreasing power of local councils. The local councils have lost a considerable amount of funding under the conservative government, which has recently increased the interest on borrowing by the councils by 1% (Gareth Davies, in The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2019). According to this report, 'the Treasury increased the interest rate for the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) by one percentage point — meaning the typical rate for a loan is now 2.8% instead of 1.8%'. By making it harder for councils to create and sustain housing, this model further empowers public-private partnerships that now control the housing landscape.

Within this housing landscape, emptiness is not a disruption, but rather, an integral part of investment. Drawing on research conducted by *Shelter* and BBC's *Panorama,* Lucie Heath (*Inside Housing,* 2020) stated that 86% of spending on temporary accommodation by the councils in 2018/19 went to private landlords and letting agents. This means that it is very profitable to have an empty home that councils can temporarily lease as emergency accommodation. Emergency accommodation refers to short-term accommodation provided by councils for people who are homeless or in crisis. Given the urgency of these situations, private landlords and letting agents controlling these properties can charge large sums of money for the temporary period. This motivates many of the private landlords to not lease out their homes as long-term tenancies or social rent, but instead keep these properties empty for a long period of time. Ironically, this motivation further worsens the problem of homelessness due to lack of availability of homes,

thereby resulting in an increase in emergency or temporary accommodation. Emptiness therefore leads to more emptiness.

Finally, emptiness is also not something that can be filled out by way of "solving" the problem. Ali Madanipour (2018) critically examines the responses to empty spaces in the UK through a case study of Chesterfield House in Wembley, London, which was leased out as an office space, but could not compete in attracting office users. Madanipour (2018; p. 1102) describes the empty space as 'the result of functional relocation, technological obsolescence and the overproduction of office space caught in a global crisis', locating emptiness in the larger narrative of financialised capitalism that reconfigures urban space. This particular building was thereafter leased out through the 'Meanwhile Lease', that was introduced by the UK government 'to encourage the temporary occupation of empty town centre retail premises by non-commercial occupiers, who will be able to contribute to town centre vitality but who would otherwise be unable to afford normal commercial rents (DCLG, 2013)' (Madanipour, 2018; p. 1099). He poses such temporary uses of empty space as emerging from a 'government-backed flexibility in regulatory frameworks' and a 'landlord and developer-backed flexibility in interim use', wherein vacancy is seen as the opposite of profitable land use, and the transformation from the former to the latter as the solution to the problem. Madanipour critiques this framework, arguing that it produces conditions of precariousness for short-term beneficiaries.

Narratives of Emptiness

My research serves to destabilise emptiness as a static attribute of a place and instead focus on different kinds of emptiness with concomitant different social consequences and moral evaluations. As I argue throughout the thesis, not all empty homes are seen as empty. Or alternatively, some empty homes are seen as emptier than other empty homes. These differential evaluations of emptiness within Cadogan Square, I argue, relate to the profiling of homeowners as well as to the adherence to various established regimes of care. Within these regimes of care, presence is not simply about physical presence, but rather,

about the correct ways of demonstrating presence – be it through the hanging of Christmas lights during December or maintaining the exteriors of the home. Absence, therefore, is not the opposite of presence, but rather, the failure to demonstrate presence through appropriate practices of care towards one's home.

In the Sutton Estate, the narratives of emptiness played out against the looming threat of demolition. My fieldwork unfolded alongside the rolling out of the planning appeal that proposed the demolition and regeneration of the Estate. Over the course of the year, the appeal was spoken about in the gardening sessions and other informal gatherings, in which the figures were repeatedly quoted and the claims of inhabitability challenged. This led to two things. One, most residents that I spoke to were very clear about the number of empty homes, and unlike the discussions about emptiness in the Square, the residents of the Estate quoted to me quantifiable measures of emptiness. Two, there emerged a juxtaposition between the stagnant claims of inhabitability evoked by the Housing Association versus the dynamic understanding of habitability posed by the residents, who argued that houses could be "made" habitable through care as well as "made" uninhabitable through neglect. In other words, habitability in the former is seen as a fixed property of a place, and in the latter, it is a spectrum or a process. As the written claims were being debated, the object of these claims, the building blocks themselves, were ageing and rotting with time. This juxtaposition played out in the form of the Save our Sutton Campaigners bringing in architects to physically enter the locked-up flats and see if they were truly unliveable. The textual claims were therefore countered through a more embodied experience of a place.

This tension between the abstraction and the personalisation runs throughout the debates on housing in London. It was manifested in the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013, as an attempt to simplify the welfare system by 'rolling' six benefits and tax credits into a single monthly payment. Insa Koch (2018; p. 3) looked at the gendered effects of the Universal Credit system, and how welfare reforms 'target precisely those areas of life that working-class mothers often remain responsible for: the family homes that

constitute the domain for social reproduction'. These reforms, Koch (2018) argues, presents women with moral choices upon which intimate familiar relations delicately rest. Along with abstracting forms of care into a single quantifiable unit, the administration of UC interferes with the private decisions of a family, such as the decision of a tenant to live with their ageing parents, or the decisions of one family member to refuse to get entangled with the bureaucracies of the benefits system. The tension between the abstract and the emplaced, the public and the private, the State and the family are heightened through welfare reform measures that are far from neutral.

I observed this tension between abstraction and personalisation across both my sites throughout the thesis. While Chapter 1 juxtaposed abstract notions of habitability against lived experience of habitability, in the second chapter, this tension plays out in the mapping of emptiness, in which the abstract notion of emptiness is situated within moral orders that are used to subjectively evaluate emptiness. The third chapter engaged with this tension through the lens of decay and ageing, in which the residents fought the linear narrative of decline, underlining the rationale behind regeneration by looking at multiple temporalities of ageing, dying, grieving, remembering, growing trees etc. And finally, in Chapter 4, I situated this tension between abstract notions of heritage and Englishness juxtaposed against material practices of care and maintenance. In Cadogan Square, heritage, as an abstract notion, was operationalised to make place for empty homes that facilitated cycles of renewal and restoration, as the conservation of homes as heritage sites was prioritised over their liveability. In Sutton Estate, on the other hand, the idea of heritage was tied to the process of making the estate a place of living, as it was operationalised to fight against the threat of demolition and evoke the will of William Sutton and his intention of housing the working class people at the heart of the city.

Land in times of Financialised Capitalism

At the time I started writing this thesis, which can now be described as a pre-COVID-19 time, mobility was a given, at least in the context of one of my field

sites – Cadogan Square. People, objects, and capital moved across spaces, and this is what allowed homes to be turned into financial assets or second homes that periodically housed its mobile inhabitants. I rely on Costas Lapavitsas' (2013; p. 793) definition of Financialisation as 'an unprecedented expansion of financial activities, rapid growth of financial profits, permeation of the economy and society by financial relations, and domination of economic policy by the concerns of the financial sector'. It is also marked by a retreat of public services, as seen in London's housing sector, in which many essential services including the provision and maintenance of social housing have been outsourced to private consultants and housing associations competing for funding. This funding is constantly in motion across sectors/industries as well as countries, as it gets invested and re-invested in efficient ways. It moves along the logic of financialised capitalism.

David Harvey's (2014) conceptualisation similarly rests on the geographical mobility of capital. He argues that the current phase (again, pre-COVID-19 phase) is the 'acceleration in the speed of circulation of money capital and the reduction in financial transaction costs' (Harvey, 2014; p. 178). While the current crisis of COVID-19 has brought into question the assumed pace of mobility within capitalism, Anand, Gupta and Appel (2018) raised questions around the concept of time-space compression by pointing to the material infrastructural conditions that facilitated this compression. They draw on Nigel Thrift's (2005) critique of capitalist flows, as he studied the "apparatus of installation, maintenance and repair" which constitutes the "bedrock of modern capitalism" (2005; p. 3), shifting the attention away from speed and refocussing on processes of 'delay, accretion, suspension, repair, resistance and repurposing' (Anand et al, 2018; p. 16). In the course of this thesis, by looking at different forms of emptiness, in which some empty homes arose out of financial investments made across continents whereas others were tied to seasonal absences of the domestic elite, I similarly hope to disrupt the assumption of rapidly moving capital and instead pay attention to the different paces/temporal flows within which emptiness can be situated.

The acknowledgement of different temporalities of emptiness also makes place to understand financialisation as many things and not one overriding phenomenon. Louis Moreno (2018), the co-editor of *CITY*, in a housing conference titled the *Financialization and the London Question*, stated that the distinctive forms of financialisation in London play out in the overriding strength of the finance sector, the penetration of financial relationships into real estate, and the spatial polarisation between London and other parts of the UK. In the case of housing, he argues that it is simplistic to blame the housing crisis on one kind of financialisation, namely foreign investments in housing, which has been emphasised by many housing scholars including Anna Minton (2017). Instead, Moreno clarifies that there are at least three different types and paces of financialisation. He argues that the financial relationships between private landlords and tenants, between council tenants and landlords, and between owner-occupiers and the banking system are all very different from one another. I have illustrated some of these distinct relationships in the course of my thesis, drawing out the relationship between Cadogan Estate and its 'tenants', between the Housing Association and the residents of Sutton Estate, and between the Council of Kensington and Chelsea and the two landlords – the aristocratic landlord (Cadogan) and the Social Landlord (Clarion).

Similarly, Brett Christophers (2018) goes back to Massey to say that there are many privates and many publics, and therefore, a simplistic/homogenous narrative of privatisation is not sufficient to grapple with the housing question. He also argues that it is important to not 'reify ownership status' (Christophers, 2018; p. 37), by which he implies that the change in ownership means very little if the land is exploited in the same way. For example, a council estate being owned by a non-profit Housing Association means very little, if the latter is driven by the profit-making motives in the context of funds being cut off and social housing being replaced by affordable housing. An individual owner can act in very similar ways to a public-sector owner, and vice versa. His work is crucial in bringing attention to the question of land within the question of housing in the UK. He deliberately uses the term 'enclosure' for the current conditions in order to elicit the eighteenth and nineteenth century program of closing common access to public lands. Even though these two

forms of enclosure are apart in time, they both unfolded on a similar principle of land being seen as wasted in its current form and the need for land to be closed off and put to a more efficient use. The idea of emptiness is therefore inextricably linked to the question of land use and ownership.

I built on this relationship between housing and land in two broad ways. One, I looked at the two types of landlords and owners of land, namely (a) an aristocratic estate; and (b) a social landlord or a Housing Association. The aristocratic estate, which is the Cadogan Estate for the Cadogan Square, owned a continuous plot of land and gave out homes as leaseholds, therefore retaining the ultimate control over the area and its character. The social landlord, on the other hand, which was Clarion Housing in the case of Sutton Estate, owned all the 14 buildings as well as the freehold, which means they owned the land on which the buildings stood (Planning Application Reference: PP/15/04878). This is what gave Clarion the power to shape the future of the Estate by 'decanting' its current residents in preparation for regeneration towards a mixed-rent model of housing. The ownership of land allows for structural decisions around the use and distribution of housing.

The second way in which I examined the relationship between housing and land was through those who lived in the homes and made land-based claims of belonging. In the absence of directly owning their homes, many of the Sutton residents spoke to me about their attachment to the area, and this attachment played out in ways that physically evoked the land we stood on. In chapter 3, I focused on the ways in which trees, ashes and graves were used to create layers of belonging in a city populated with empty mansions. Land did not lose importance in times of financialisation, but rather, was the primary force behind the processes of financialisation as well as the resistance against it. My thesis thus keeps together the literature on financialisation – (a) financialisation of luxury housing as assets/investments and (b) financialisation of social housing through the shifting configuration of Housing Association and the disappearing welfare state – along with a more ethnographic/material culture approach to land and tactile ways of belonging.

Ownership and Belonging

Ownership and belonging are used synonymously and often interchangeably. Studies that justify the status quo as well as studies that try to advocate for a more egalitarian distribution of housing, both rely on the premise that one feels more at home in a home that one owns. For instance, Paul Collier (2018), in his book *The Future of Capitalism*, recalls an anecdote about two parts of a street in Oxford. One part consisted of rented housing and the other part consisted of owner-occupied homes. The difference between these two parts was visible, as the latter was covered with trees and well-maintained plants. The point that Collier was trying to make through this anecdote was that people care more deeply for a place they own. While these forms of musings serve towards a larger case for making home-ownership more accessible, it also draws an uncritical linkage between owning and belonging.

As most countries have declared national lockdowns and self-quarantine measures, the home has become less permeable and more fixed in time and space. In such times, it becomes even more pressing to ask whether ownership and belonging do in fact correlate. Or are there ways of creating belonging beyond the questions of ownership? And alternatively – and this is more pertinent to the question of empty homes – are there structures of ownership completely divorced from ideas of belonging? Anna Minton (2017) makes a case for the latter in her latest book on housing in London. She starts off on a bus tour of the city, known as the "Kleptocracy tour", in which a guide points out properties owned by overseas companies, Russian oligarchs, overseas investors, war criminals and wives of ministers from other countries. The rest of the book builds on the contrast between those who are forced out of their council homes in the city and those who buy up homes and leave them empty.

While Minton's analysis adds useful insights to our knowledge about housing, it holds the risk of slipping into a binary that I myself struggle with – between those who own without belonging and those who create ways of belonging to homes they do not own. This binary plays out across my two field sites. It is easy to assume that the empty mansions in Cadogan Square

represent distant owners with little or no sense of belonging to the city. The neighbours that I spoke with evoked a similar sentiment, as they described the 'absence of community' or the fact that most of these distant owners 'do not feel like they have a stake in the place'. In contrast, my other field site, namely the Sutton Estate, easily fits into the narrative of belonging in the absence of ownership. This played out even more vividly against the looming threat of displacement as the Council was assessing Clarion's planning permission. It took on different forms, ranging from caring for the garden, scattering ashes, visiting the nearby cemetery or sharing photos with another of growing up and growing old in the Estate.

In the course of my thesis, I strived to complicate this binary opposition. One way of doing so is by clarifying my choice of field sites. It may appear that they represent opposite sides of the spectrum, especially given that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea have the reputation of economic polarisation. However, I see the two forms of emptiness – dilapidated council estate flats and luxury mansions – as emerging from similar conditions of capitalism. While most studies about emptiness are located alongside the withdrawal of capital, my two sites unfold side by side, against the shared backdrop of private investment. The entry of private capital in the case of Cadogan Square can be seen in the workings of the Cadogan Estate, the working arm of the Cadogan Family that manages, develops and invests in properties, as well as the financialisation of the individual homes that are largely owned by developers. Similarly, the regeneration of the Sutton Estate emerges from the changing nature of housing associations that have now merged in partnerships to increase profits and compete for public funding. Clarion Housing was formed by the coming together of Affinity Sutton and Circle Housing Group, which represents the larger shift from localised housing bodies to large conglomerates that manage private and social housing. Often this is because larger conglomerate represents safer investments, and therefore the financial markets are willing to capitalise them on lower interest rates. Even as this might work within the existing system (lower interest rates allow for more affordable housing), but in reality, it's suboptimal to the previous

system, as local authorities could formerly borrow more cheaply than housing associations.

Another way of complicating the binary is by unpacking the two terms – ownership and belonging. “Ownership” is not a homogenous condition. There are multiple types of ownership even within the Sutton Estate. While some of the tenants had assured tenancies, the others were more vulnerable to the whims of the landlord. Some of the tenants who lived above shops were not as anxious, given that the shops generated enough revenue for the buildings to stay intact. The tenants also challenged Clarion’s claim over the estate, and evoked William Sutton as the original owner, and his values were upheld as the basis of many claims of ownership. Similarly, the term ‘belonging’ is also multiple. As I discuss in the fourth chapter, a sense of belonging can be created devoid of physical presence. For instance, Cadogan Estate sends out regular newsletters to distant owners to keep them updated about their homes. Many of the distant owners come back to their Cadogan homes during Christmas, thereby making their relationship to the place punctual, seasonal and regular. This allows them to participate in community activities and develop a sense of regularity to their stay. Some of the owners spoke about the historical nature of Chelsea, and how their own homes were objects of heritage that needed to be maintained and preserved. This work of maintenance could be carried out from a distance. I concluded from these conversations that there were many ways of belonging to a place, even if that belonging did not take the shape and form that was familiar to me.

The opposite of belonging was evoked through the category of ‘ghosts’, in terms like ‘ghost squares’ or ‘ghost houses’ to refer to empty homes that were devoid of attachment, meaning and belonging to Chelsea. These stigmatised owners were subjected to more criticism for their empty homes than the seasonal occupants of Chelsea, whose punctual and predictable rhythms allowed them to carve out ways of belonging without being physically present throughout the year. While Glucksburg (2016) located the discrepancy in judgement in the racist attitudes towards the newer demographic who were seen to “take over” (a term used by an estate agent I spoke with) Chelsea, I

further connect these varying attitudes towards different types of empty homes to the ways in which belonging is crafted and communicated. Miller's (2001) category of "ghosts" was useful for me to understand how residents across both my sites made homes in houses that were not entirely their own, and how in this chasm between belonging and ownership, emptiness found a place – be it through the cycles of renovation in the Square or the movement of residents between the flats of the Estate (decrease in family members, repairs, age).

Miller (2001; p. 119) situated the idea of belonging to one's home within the dialectical relationship between: 'people feeling that their homes are an expression of their own agency' versus the 'agency of homes and their material culture'. By looking at the complex processes of negotiations between these agents, he draws on the concept of fetish, Bruno Latour's (1993) notion of the agency of non-humans, Alfred Gel's (1998) notion of distributed objects and Webb Keane's (1997) centring of material culture. Similarly, in chapter 4, I argue that the homes in Cadogan Square have vibrant personalities that were described to me by residents who lived inside or alongside them, and these personalities were above and beyond their current occupants (or lack of). Being empty or full was more linked to the personality or the character of the house than the physical state of being full or empty. This is why some homes whose owners were not always present, but their facades were maintained as sites of heritage were not piled in the same category as the homes whose emptiness was a glaring fact (through pigeon droppings, unmaintained back walls, lack of Christmas lighting in December). Emptiness and fullness described ways of belonging, which is why the discussion about empty homes is incomplete without a discussion on ownership and belonging and how these two categories relate to one another in the context of emptiness.

What Happens After Emptiness

The study of empty homes raises many concrete questions that begs for concrete answers. Like many other researchers, I learnt to shrug away the questions with claims of complexity and nuance. However, as my writing comes to a close, I find myself contemplating what my thesis has to offer. On one hand,

I think my thesis serves to clarify the complex patterns of emptiness in London. On the other hand, it brings together the conversations around the “global city”, which are often based on de-materialised places and time-space compressions, and the conversations emerging within material culture on how people engage with place. Finally, I think my work contributes to ethnographic methodology and writing practices within anthropology. My anthropological practice informs, and is carried on in, community work/activism as well as fiction writing. Beyond an intellectual endeavour, my work is also a craft embedded in the city. In my borough in London, I work for Advice4Renters, a local charity, where I mentor low-income tenants to deal with their landlords and other complex housing needs, while also documenting their everyday experiences into ethnographic fiction. I conduct monthly workshops with the organisation to record people’s experiences with the material conditions of their home, including mould, dampness and heating, and how they find makeshift ways of keeping their homes safe and comfortable in the face of neglect and apathy.

My work highlights the power of mapping in telling the story of a place. I borrowed from Danny Dorling and Carl Lee’s (2016) practices of map-making as narrative exercises, in which they shift boundaries of places to account for population, consumption, movement and waste. By doing so, they not only demonstrate the complexities of the world we occupy, but also challenge the fixity of cartographic lines. Similarly, Tim Ingold (2007) critiques modern mapping, in which the lines enclose areas that signify occupation and not habitation. He defines ‘habitation’ as the act of participating ‘from within in the very process of the world’s continual coming into being’ (Ingold, 2007; 47). Habitation, as a knowledge system, emerges from learning about the world by moving through it, whereas, occupation, as a knowledge system, is founded on the categorical distinction between movement and knowledge. Ingold thereby challenges disembodied technologies of mapping that turn places into closed, fixed categories, to be owned and governed. This tension between occupying spaces and inhabiting spaces relates back to the tension between ownership and belonging that forms the arc of this dissertation.

My collaboration with Concrete Action revealed the ways in which academics, architects, policy workers and housing activists can contribute towards a database of housing and housing movements in the country. I can only imagine the radical ways in which COVID-19 is going to leave the world changed forever. It has already raised many questions around the division between private and public, and between individualised and community living. In the UK, over half a million claims for Universal Credit have been filed in March, 2020, as many workers have lost their jobs in the lockdown (Brignall, *The Guardian,* 2020). While Lisa McKenzie (2020), a British sociologist, urged the UK government to requisition vacant homes of the wealthy, there is a growing number of questions being raised around the conditions of living of those confined within overcrowded flats and unsafe homes. The contemporary moment opens up a chance for addressing a crisis that has been present for a long time.

This crisis is not simply a product of financial capitalism, given that my thesis challenged the commonly held conception that attributes empty homes only to foreign investments. Instead, I reimagined empty homes across two field sites in Chelsea by juxtaposing an aristocratic landlord profiting of empty homes alongside a social landlord trying to decant a council estate in preparation for regeneration. The policy-focussed approach towards emptiness seeks to battle emptiness by re-framing homes as places of living, and not financial assets or housing units. But the problem becomes much more complicated when empty homes are, in fact, full of meaning and attachment, and these meanings and attachments grow increasingly divorced from the physical presence of people and the everydayness of living in homes. The current crisis beckons recognition of the growing gulf between what is promised and what is provided; between what is said and what is done; and between the discourse built around empty homes and the reality of emptiness that exists in many forms, some of which are normalised, ritualised and integrated into modes of living, moving and occupying places.

My methodological approach explored this richness of living and occupying places through collaborative practices of fieldwork, in which the

residents across both field sites were involved not just as characters, but as editors, critics, illustrators and audiences. In the course of the fieldwork, I became aware that I was not the only one curious about empty homes. Many of the people I interviewed had been maintaining their own personal archives, taking photos of spaces, making notes of damages/repairs/complaints, etc. My own research became part of these larger conversations in the Square as well as the Estate. During my first visit to the Brompton Cemetery with Chris, he affectionately patted his mum's gravestone and announced to her, 'Mum, this is Mayanka, and she is studying empty homes in the Estate'. I was a little hesitant at first, but over the next few visits, it became a routine to say 'hello' to Valerie's gravestone, and involve her in our conversations. During one of our visits, Chris took a photo of me as I crouched beside Valerie's gravestone, placing before her the fresh thyme that Chris plucked from the sunken garden. As he showed me the photograph on his camera screen, I reflected on the inevitable mutuality of ethnographic curiosity, and the longevity of the friendships built along the way.



Epilogue

Echoes of Emptiness // A Reflection

My home in New Delhi is located directly under a flight path, which meant that growing up, we were used to loud flights interrupting conversations, sleep and thoughts every fifteen minutes. As domestic and international travel was put on hold during COVID-19, one of the starkest sensorial shifts for my family was the background silence. While the silence by itself is not remarkable, it is the contrast that intensified it. This made me reflect on how my study of emptiness would have unfolded in the current context. How would the emptiness of the lockdown play out in areas already grappling with the dynamics of emptiness? During my fieldwork, many sounds were described to me in vivid detail: water flowing in vacant homes, boilers echoing in abandoned flats, the untraceable scream that led to Dorinda to call the cops, the returning echoes of the carol singing group gathered at the Square, and the reverberating footsteps of workers and builders inspecting homes and their futures. The echo emerged as a recurring description of emptiness across both sites, as it sensorially and metaphorically captured what it meant to live alongside empty homes. The echo also points to the fact that the emptiness that I study is enclosed, and not endless. Just as an echo needs a wall to bounce off, emptiness comes into focus against that which is considered not empty. So, one way to study emptiness was by seeing where it ends and what it is contrasted against. But does this contrast disappear in the present moment or become more heightened?

My study of empty homes unfolded in the spaces in between emptiness – spaces of fullness and sociality. My interviews took place in the sunken garden that was buzzing with people solving sudoku puzzles and feeding birds, children running with caterpillars crawling at the end of their sticks and the gardening group trimming overgrown branches to let the sunlight through. We moved from the garden to the pub, where we added extra chairs as more

residents from the Estate joined us, our tables covered in salt and vinegar crisps. On Fridays, I went to the cemetery with Chris, and we were often accompanied by other residents who came along for a walk, leaving the graves covered in fresh flowers and herbs. Before Barbara's bookshop closed, we hosted a poetry evening where many of the remaining residents of the Square came along to talk about empty homes, as we enjoyed the snacks prepared by Barbara, and many of the residents invited me for tea to their homes. From drinking soup with the army pensioners who narrated stories of Korea to meeting the Church group at the nearby church who were rehearsing for a play, my research unfolded in spaces that appeared to be the opposite of empty. Despite my conclusion that empty and full cannot be seen as opposites but as a spectrum, most of my research developed through the sensorial contrast between emptiness and fullness.

Even if the dichotomy emerged due the binary language of emptiness, COVID-19 has left me pondering over how much of my fieldwork was in fact dependent upon 'fullness'. The sensorial markers of emptiness – silence or the lack of movement of people – have become now applicable to all of London. On one hand, the contrast between a closed down bookstore and the luxury stores on Sloane street become less apparent if all shops are closed as people are isolating in their homes. On the other hand, the "essential stores", whose replacement by luxury stores had been a subject of lamenting during my fieldwork, gained a renewed relevance in these times of lockdown. Is the true nature of emptiness obscured because it relies on a contrasting fullness to make itself known? Or alternatively, does the emptiness of the lockdown amplify the emptiness that I looked at? For instance, Boris Johnson's speech specifically asked people not to move between their first and second homes, which reveals the emptiness of second homes in times when key workers are struggling for housing in the city.

In contrast, the residents of Sutton Estate meet each other for beers, standing on opposite sides of the garden or continue conversations across homes from their windows. This made Brian reminisce about the communal clothesline that used to stretch between the flats on the Estate, creating a

feeling of connectedness even without stepping out of one's home. Dorinda and Teresa have also been involved in relief efforts, delivering groceries to older people who might not be able to get out of their homes. The virus disproportionately affects older people, who also formed the focus of my study across both sites. While the residents in Sutton Estate draw on long friendships and neighbourly relationships, older residents find themselves more reliant on networks that have been made visible through the emptiness of COVID-19.



Across both my sites, emptiness was a cause of concern, even if not all empty homes were problematised in the same way by my interlocutors. Emptying as decanting (Sutton) and emptiness as disruption (Cadogan) created several uncertainties. In such conditions, storytelling played an important social function in grappling with the ambiguities unleashed by

emptiness. In Sutton Estate, stories were used as ways of establishing a relationship between people and places to counter the threat of displacement and erasure. In Cadogan Square, stories were used to populate empty homes with imagined owners and attribute meaning to the silence and the darkness of unlit windows. Similarly, in time of radical uncertainty brought on by COVID-19, stories filled in the gaps created by the mismanagement and lack of clarity. Many stories circulating on the internet captured people singing on their balconies in Italy, or people in New York holding up messages on windows for neighbours to see. The telling and retelling of stories was an important aspect of my methodology that helped me understand how people deal with ambiguities in their everyday lives.

Another tool for battling uncertainties was routine/ritual. This played out in Sutton Estate through the weekly rituals of gardening and visiting the nearby cemetery where the graves were regularly tended to, the flowers watered and the weeds removed. In fact, Chris's regularity of visits to his mum's grave left impressions in the soil. These rituals were important as ways of taking control in times of uncertainty created by the process of decanting and the delays in the planning permission decisions. On a more personal level, I realised the significance of rituals in times of uncertainty as I spent four months in Delhi, unable to get back to London as all flights stood cancelled indefinitely. After spending the first few weeks repeatedly clicking on the 'refresh' button on the COVID-19 info page and travel restrictions, I spent the remaining time doing gardening for my parents. I used the lessons and skills learnt from my gardening at the Sutton Estate, and called some of my participants on video call to show them the first signs of blooming from the seeds I had planted. The uncertainty of the lockdown led to rituals that helped establish the passage of time; from collecting fallen mangoes (as summer turned to monsoon) to playing badminton and scrabble every evening. I reflected on how my dissertation had also served as a project on uncertainty, asking how people grapple with not knowing, how they measure time in the face of disruption and how they make sense of change.

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