

## **On-edge in the Impasse: Inhabiting the housing crisis as Structure-of-Feeling**

### **Abstract**

PLACE/Ladywell is a block of modular and mobile “pop-up” housing, currently occupying a council owned site awaiting redevelopment in Lewisham, South East London. It houses 24 families on the borough's homelessness register. The development has received multiple awards, been highly praised in the media, and cited by the Greater London Authority as prototypical of pop-up housing as a ‘solution’ to London's housing crisis. Yet amidst the widespread excitement around PLACE/Ladywell, experiences of urban precarity persist for the families living there. In this paper we examine how resident experiences of being ‘on-edge’ are defined both by personal crises as they await permanent rehousing, by job losses, evictions and school moves, as well as by anxieties relating to the housing crisis as a wider structure of feeling, including fear after the Grenfell Tower fire and anxieties about gentrification. In doing so, we offer a timely conceptualisation of how experiences of urban precarity persist and mutate in a political moment defined by a growing sense of urgency around finding solutions to the housing crisis.

## Introduction

PLACE/Ladywell is a “pop-up” social housing development in Lewisham, South-East London. It houses 24 families on Lewisham’s homelessness register. An experimental approach to temporary housing provision designed by leading architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners (RSHP), it has been widely acclaimed by both City Hall and the media (NewLondonArchitecture, 2017; Osborne & Norris, 2016; Kollewe, 2016; Gavron, 2017; Marrs, 2017). What is seen as innovative about PLACE/Ladywell is that, as a ‘modular’ building, it can be rapidly assembled and dismantled, meaning Lewisham Council can move it between sites so that it occupies various land awaiting redevelopment, otherwise known as ‘meanwhile space’ (Lewisham, 2017). At a time of both a worsening housing crisis and immense pressure on councils to raise revenue through the private sale of land this ‘pop-up’ model of social housing provision is celebrated for its ability to address acute housing need without precluding selling sites to developers (Boff, 2016). PLACE/Ladywell and its residents have been in the media spotlight since the building opened. Other London councils and cities across the UK are watching closely, hoping to adopt the model themselves, and it has received glowing reviews in the media of its positive impact on residents’ lives, and promise of easing London’s housing crisis (BBC, 2017; Osborne & Norris, 2016).

In the midst of the housing crisis, PLACE/Ladywell seems a site of hope, both for those temporarily inhabiting it and for stakeholders seeking what they see as solutions that do not contest the neoliberal model. The current ‘housing crisis’ has been ongoing for many years in the UK, becoming what Berlant would call a state of ‘crisis-ordinary’; a normalized state of panic resulting from the loss of ‘genres’, or conventions, determining how to act and the lack of apparent solutions developing new ones (Berlant, 2011). However, the perpetuation of the housing crisis is, as others have argued, not because there are no solutions per se, but that there are no *neoliberal* solutions. In Berlant’s terms, then, the crisis-ordinary of the housing crisis can be read as a failure of the neoliberal genre to solve the problem, coupled with

resistance on the part of stakeholders to adopt genres for living that require more left-leaning politics, leaving us in a state of crisis with no clear way forward. The celebration of PLACE/Ladywell as a solution to the housing crisis can, in this context, be aligned with a sense of relief in finding ways of moving forward that seemingly sustains, rather than overhauls, neoliberal modes of producing urban life.

Berlant suggests that at times of crisis-ordinary perhaps the best we can hope for is an “impasse” (Berlant, 2011, p.5) which gives space to recalibrate, adjust, and coordinate feasible ways of moving forward, of building new “infrastructures for reproducing life” (5). Interestingly, Berlant uses the metaphor ‘temporary housing’ to describe such an impasse. PLACE/Ladywell can be considered as providing an impasse of this kind. As a literal ‘temporary housing’ it is intended to offer an impasse within the crisis-ordinary of tenants’ lives. Homeless families in London are regularly moved between different temporary accommodations while awaiting permanent housing. Most of these accommodations are not self-contained properties but rooms in shared properties or hotels, often substandard in terms of facilities and cleanliness. PLACE/Ladywell, however, gives families large, high-quality two-bedroom flats which they can stay in for up to two years, thus, while not a full solution, offering respite from much of the precarity of homelessness. PLACE/Ladywell alleviates immediate housing precarity, giving residents time to breath, bid for permanent social housing[1], and wait for that rehousing from a place of relative comfort. Yet, as we will explore, life for residents of remains pervaded by a feeling of being “on-edge”.

In this paper we argue that one key reason residents in PLACE/Ladywell are unable to relax in this supposed impasse is that they are subjects at the centre of the housing crisis which, despite the hope attached to PLACE/Ladywell, still dominates the affective lives of residents who do not have faith in its ability to solve their long-term housing problems. Residents’ daily lives are governed by atmospheres of anxiety in the housing crisis as structure of feeling, as well by their own personal uncertainties, worries and crises. We explore PLACE/Ladywell as

a site where collective experiences of being 'on-edge' in the housing-crisis-ordinary intermingle with the personal housing crises of residents. We examine how experiences of being 'on-edge' are defined both by personal crises through resident experiences of job losses, evictions and school moves, as well as by anxieties relating to the housing crisis as a wider 'structure of feeling', including fear about gentrification and their safety after the Grenfell Tower fire.

'Structure of feeling' is a term coined by Raymond Williams to describe 'social experiences in *solution*' (Williams, 1977, p.133). The term refers to the lived experience of emerging meanings and values (132) as distinguished from already articulated and codified ideologies of established social institutions. Anderson has described structures of feeling as 'an experience of the present that both extends beyond particular sites/occasions *and* is shared across otherwise separate sites/occasions (Anderson, 2016, p.746), emphasising that their affect is felt across broad demographics and territories while also being locally and individually experienced and differentiated. Importantly, structures of feeling, because still experienced nebulously, are often 'not recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating' (132). This paper makes a key contribution in examining how personal experiences of urban precarity are defined, in part, by collective affective experiences, such as the housing crisis. We contend that while structures of feeling are nebulous, pervasive atmospheres that govern ways life is encountered for publics over broad spatiotemporal scales they are "(re)enacted through and intensify in particular scenes/objects/figures" (Anderson, 2016, p.14). We examine PLACE/Ladywell as one such site of intensification and enactment of the housing crisis as a structure of feeling and argue that inhabiting such a site acutely subjects residents to its anxieties. While using the term 'structure of feeling' to refer to the housing crisis as a lived, affective condition that impacts broadly on the city, and nation, we use the term 'atmosphere' to highlight the intensification of this structure of feeling around particular sites, such as PLACE/Ladywell.

We explore how residents are acutely aware of their positionality as victims of the unequal power geometries (Massey, 2005) of the housing crisis. Furthermore, we argue that their acute experience of its anxieties is bolstered by PLACE/Ladywell being posited as a site of resolution and by their awareness that they are supposedly 'pioneers' of pop-up housing. It is a site of both hope and anxiety relating to the future of housing for both residents and the broader public.

After a further introduction to PLACE/Ladywell, its relationship to London's housing crisis, and our research methods, this paper's arguments develop across three empirical sections, all exploring how the intermingling of personal housing crises and collective housing crisis-related anxieties shape experiences of being on-edge for residents. In the first empirical section we explore the personal and collective optimism attached to PLACE/Ladywell; the building's acclaim and residents' sense of being lucky to be included in this innovative experiment. In the second section we explore how, despite understanding the building to be innovative in design, residents still experience fears over its safety, shaped by their sense of being at the losing end of London's housing crisis and therefore at risk of suffering a similar fate to those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. In the third section we explore how their anxieties are shaped by the felt presence of 'spectral others' threatening their access to housing, including the spectral presence of gentrifiers poised to displace them, and authorities scrutinizing their worthiness for housing. We argue that this anxiety reveals the extent to which the pressures of the housing crisis and stigma attached to social housing tenants have been internalized by and shape the affective lives of residents.

Our analysis speaks directly to the concerns of this special issue by exploring the unevenly distributed geographies of urban precarity. Precarity, within Geography, is commonly understood in relation to insecure conditions of work within Post-Fordist neoliberal labour economies (Lewis, et al., 2015; Coe, 2013; Reid-Musson, 2014; Gialis & Herod, 2014) including creative industries (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Banks, 2010; Banks, et al., 2013) and migrant

labour (Lewis, et al., 2015). Many geographers also follow Butler's exploration of precarity as an existential condition common to all life (Butler, 2009). Butler argues that precariousness is a pervasive condition because we are mutually dependent on and vulnerable to those we live amongst. For Butler, precariousness becomes *precarity* when the vulnerability of some is exacerbated through uneven power geometries within this relational social ontology.

More recently, however, precarity is being identified as a felt, affective condition within which life in the present takes place (Co-authors, 2018). Precarity is one example that Anderson gives of a structure of feeling, located in relation to the 2007/2008 financial crisis (Anderson, 2014). Berlant, likewise, identifies precarity as a pervasive experience in the post-2008 context, one that is defined by a realisation that the 'mass precarity that capitalism inevitably induces' applies not just to ordinary people but to the state itself which is 'in the same abject and contingent relation to private capital that ordinary people are' (Berlant, 2011, p.1). In this state 'the present is saturated with a sort of restlessness' and the future 'made uncertain and becomes difficult or impossible to predict' (Anderson, 2014, p.129). Importantly, identifying precarity as a structure of feeling implies that it is not just a socio-economic condition but also a mode of encounter. As Anderson writes, what 'characterises precarity and other structures of feeling is that they are forms of affective presence that disclose self, others and the world in particular ways' (Anderson, 2014, p.106). This paper advances such conceptualisations of precarity, developing the conjecture of the editors that atmospheres of precarity circulate around particular places and people, so that being 'on-edge' involves (metaphorically) 'breathing' a local atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty.

Relatedly, the paper also furthers urban and housing scholarship that has argued for the need to break down binaries of form and affect, explores the role of the relationship between the two in further embedding urban inequalities (Cook et al, 2016; Tolia-Kelly, 2006): as Lees and Baxter note, 'the force of the material needs to be taken more seriously' (2011, p.107). We explore how fear and awareness of being precarious are embodied and exacerbated through

particular forms of architecture and the socio-historical narratives surrounding them - as seen, for example, in the way PLACE/Ladywell's external cladding constructs fear and an acknowledgement of precarity for particular social groups.

### **PLACE/Ladywell and the Housing Crisis**

PLACE/Ladywell occupies a site left vacant by the 2014 demolition of Ladywell Leisure Centre. Whilst the site awaits redevelopment, PLACE/Ladywell was designed to use it in the meantime to respond to high demand for housing in the borough (Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, 2017). The development follows a 'meanwhile use' template. Meanwhile Use contracts were introduced by the Labour government in 2009, designed to facilitate the temporary lease of vacant sites and buildings to short-term users. Since its introduction, meanwhile use has become commonplace in urban development and place-making, but PLACE/Ladywell is one of the first instances of housing on a meanwhile site.

The building is 'deployable' and 'demountable', designed to be erected and dismantled rapidly so it can potentially be used over many years across different locations in Lewisham. Lewisham Council plan for PLACE/Ladywell to remain on its current site for up to 4 years. The ground floor also provides non-residential units including shops, office spaces and a cafe. The flats are designed to a high specification and exceed London Space Standards by 10% (Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, 2017).

### ***Figure One: PLACE/Ladywell***

The opportunities offered by PLACE/Ladywell's modular, mobile architecture has led it to be showcased in a Conservative GLA report entitled 'Pop-up Housing, a London Solution', heralded as the innovation needed in the face of London's housing crisis. The development

also features in the cross-party London Assembly report on factory-built housing and its role in solving the housing crisis (London Assembly, 2017). The GLA report describes how because it 'will take years' before many sold-off sites in London are developed, it is prudent to use them 'in the meantime' to provide 'a range of housing schemes whilst developers 'await long-term planning permission' (Boff, 2016, p.5). As the RSA think tank put it, PLACE/Ladywell allows temporary housing to operate 'on a time scale which doesn't compete with or crowd out other types of development' (Irvine, 2016). At a time of immense pressure on councils to sell land and generate revenue, it is no wonder that the scheme has been met with enthusiasm, seemingly offering a way to alleviate homelessness and pressure on housing stock while retaining the ability of councils to sell land for development.

As highlighted in the introduction, the excitement surrounding PLACE/Ladywell (which, it is important to remember only provides *temporary* housing) should be understood against the dire backdrop of the UK housing crisis. There is a growing shortfall in social and affordable housing and rising cynicism regarding the governments' incentive to address this issue, with the dominant understanding being that the government prioritise the interests of developers and overseas investors at the expense of providing homes for ordinary people; seeing property through its exchange rather than use value (Minton, 2017, p.7). Some of these issues were tragically highlighted in summer 2017 by the Grenfell Tower fire, a predominately social housing block in West London, which killed 72 residents. The Grenfell fire tragedy provoked painful awareness of the extent to which social housing and the residents it notionally shelters has been de-prioritised, de-funded and uncared for. Both the fact that Grenfell Tower was clad with combustible materials (allegedly to make it less of an eyesore for wealthy neighbours) and the fact that residents who publicly voiced the risks posed by the building were ignored, highlighted the structural disregard for social housing and its tenants and has led to a surge of debate around housing politics in the UK. The weight of the housing crisis in the collective imaginaries and emotional lives of London and UK residents justifies, we would argue, its identification as a key contemporary structure of feeling.



The housing crisis can be understood as a structure of feeling that is closely tied up with precarity as another, more generalized, structure of feeling, as well as with other affective atmospheres of austerity (Jupp, 2017, p.148) and crisis (Berlant, 2011) identified as definitive of the contemporary condition. Berlant argues that conditions of crisis are so entrenched and seemingly hopeless that we now inhabit a period of 'crisis-ordinary', a structure of feeling within which life continues as if on hold, as fantasies of 'the good life' become increasingly untenable and people struggle to find convincing objects to which to attach hope. One such untenable fantasy is the fantasy of homeownership and/or housing stability, an aspiration that many still attempt to attach hope to but which is now unattainable for the majority, including those on above-average incomes. The average cost of buying a house in London is 12 times the average annual wage (Colson, 2017).

If, for Berlant, the contemporary moment is defined by 'fragilities', 'unpredictability' and a 'mounting sense of contingency' (Berlant, 2011, p. 11); the housing crisis incorporates and exacerbates these feelings, simultaneously synthesizing a growing atmosphere of anger and distrust of those in positions of economic and political power and a rising awareness of how profit is being prioritized over the lives of ordinary people.

### **Researching PLACE/Ladywell**

Our year of research at PLACE/Ladywell was undertaken across 2016 and 2017. Research consisted of interviews with residents and stakeholders including members of Lewisham Council, architects from RSHP, local MPs, and the show-flat interior designer. We conducted interviews with 7 out of 24 households in PLACE/Ladywell.

Resident interviews were the focal point of our research. After becoming aware of PLACE/Ladywell we were struck by the lack of attention regarding resident opinions of it.

It was awarded the Mayor's Prize before anyone had moved in, raising questions about how a building designed to house homeless families could be so widely acclaimed before its impact on their lives was known. Our project sought to bring resident voices centre stage and explore what PLACE/Ladywell means to them.

To recruit residents (independent of Lewisham Council) we wrote a letter on university-headed paper including the purpose of our research and contact details and left these in residents' post boxes. Residents who chose to participate signed consent forms we had discussed together and were paid £40 to recompense for their time. In total we completed two rounds of letter posting, and when attending interviews took the opportunity to knock on other residents' doors to introduce ourselves in person. We encountered direct refusals along with time pressures of work and childcare responsibilities which meant that interviews were not desirable and/or feasible in all cases. Rather than being 'over-researched' by academics and experiencing research fatigue (see Clark, 2008) however, we understand levels of participation in our project to be the result of these logistic pressures and the direct benefits of participation being unclear in the context of perceived risks that might arise sharing experiences and fears over their still precarious housing situations long-term. We kept a spreadsheet to coordinate amongst ourselves to ensure that we did not repeat visit a household and inadvertently assert pressure to participate. Those interviewed were asked if they would like to meet in their own flats or somewhere locally. All interviewees invited us into their homes and would commonly initiate showing us around.

This paper draws on our audio-recorded interviews with residents, as well as with Lewisham Council's project manager for PLACE/Ladywell. The arguments of the paper are based on all the interviews conducted but in particular we draw out three residents' stories; Emily, Ashley, and Mary. The names of participants, as well as other identifying details, have been changed to help protect their anonymity.

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## **Investing hope in PLACE/Ladywell**

As highlighted in the introduction, PLACE/Ladywell has been acclaimed as an imaginative solution to housing provision in London. The celebratory atmosphere surrounding its creation is reflected in its design aesthetics. Clad in bright colours, it stands out on Lewisham's high street. The head of strategy for housing in Lewisham described to us how the council wanted this; to signal that social housing is not something to be ashamed of and that PLACE/Ladywell is an achievement.

The council's desire to celebrate PLACE/Ladywell is unsurprising given that the flats are of a significantly higher standard than other temporary accommodation experienced by its tenants. Their accounts described accommodation typified by damp, infestations, lack of heating and located in far-flung areas or places that didn't feel safe. For example, Emily and her family were made homeless following their eviction from a privately-rented house due to their landlord returning to live there. Emily described her frustration at finding that the council would not be legally obligated to rehouse her until the day of her eviction. She was instructed in the interim to pack up her things and either put them in storage or have them in a lorry, waiting, on the day of her eviction, to see where she would be put. Emily describes being placed in accommodation that was 'disgusting', damp and looked, in her words 'like a whore house.' She had been allocated a room in a shared property that had only been furnished with one double and one single bed for her and her three children, one of whom is disabled. Emily recounts how on seeing the room she 'had a meltdown,' not least because sharing an unclean room was completely inappropriate, particularly for her disabled child. After emailing her Housing Officer consecutively for 9 days, Emily was placed in a different property only to find that it was infested with ants. Emily contacted her MP who arranged for her to be moved again, only to end up in a third property where other occupants of the building smoked weed consistently, causing her child to become ill. Emily describes the numerous times she was reduced to tears in the process of trying to secure habitable accommodation for her family;

crying in the council office, and while writing emails to her MP, feeling that “I’ve always tried my hardest. I’m a single working mum and I feel like no-one’s got the time of day for me’.

Ashley, the father of a family of five, had had similarly difficult experiences. Ashley described how they had been ‘passed from pillar to post’ including being put in a single room infested with mice. Like Emily, Ashley was reduced to a ‘meltdown’, and described moments at which his capacity to cope was pushed to breaking point by the state of accommodation:

“When I found out we had mice it was on the bed and with my daughter, my daughter was sleeping and the mouse was right there next to her...I started noticing droppings everywhere...I just went mad, I ripped out the cabinet...and there was a big hole in the corner of the room...I took a picture of all the mouse droppings...I lost my job because I took the day off from work and I went up to the council, sat in the council for 4, 5 hours...I was going absolutely mad up there”.

Ashley and Emily’s experiences show the crisis-ordinary of temporary accommodation that homeless families inhabit; constantly hoping to be rehoused only to find that their next move comes with new threats to their families’ wellbeing. Against this backdrop residents’ excitement at being given a flat in PLACE/Ladywell is understandable. Rather than offering families a single room, the flats are two-bedroom properties with large living areas, store room and balcony. The white goods, walls and flooring are well- finished, and the flats are clean and damp-proof. While they have had some teething issues including leaks and malfunctioning boilers, PLACE/Ladywell is a far cry from what homeless families have been accustomed to and residents felt that they were ‘special’ properties that they were lucky to live in. One resident described how: ‘I was given the address...I saw this place and I was like, “no, it can’t be?!”’ Emily expressed her disbelief when she was told she would be moving into PLACE/Ladywell. She recounts being at a friend’s house and:

‘All of a sudden the phone went and this lady said....would you like to come and view...I’d already seen that they were building this, and when she said it, I just jumped, I didn’t know at the time it was temporary or anything, but I just, I was ecstatic, honestly, and my friend was like dancing with me, I was like ‘oh my God! oh my God!’.

The soon-to-be residents invested a great deal of hope in the move; what could be described as “a moment of promise amid the tangible and less tangible signs of crisis and defeat” (Anderson, 2014, p.2). As Coleman and Ferreday have argued in relation to feminism, ‘hope is central to marginal politics’ because it ‘sustains life in the face of despair’ (2010, p.15). Amidst the despair of their prior experiences, residents invest a hope in PLACE/Ladywell that sustains them as they await permanent rehousing. PLACE/Ladywell’s project manager also described how almost all London councils had contacted him, hoping to trial similar developments, and celebratory reviews of PLACE/Ladywell have appeared in the left-leaning press and think tank pieces (Osborne & Norris, 2016; Kollwe, 2016; Irvine, 2016). PLACE/Ladywell catalysed too then a collective atmosphere of hope evident from its revelry in the media, through architectural awards, by policymakers, and in the affective orientations of its inhabitants.

The residents we interviewed had a clear sense of PLACE/Ladywell as a much-celebrated development. One explained how:

‘I know they are already constructing something similar in another area. I don’t know what, but I’ve heard rumours...We’re the pioneers and they’re trying them out in a few places”.

This sense of being ‘pioneering’ shows how, as well as hoping that PLACE/Ladywell will ease their individual housing precarity, residents experience being part of pop-up housing as a pioneering ‘solution’ to London’s housing crisis on a collective level. Some residents had been

interviewed by the BBC about the development and many had appeared in RSHP's promotional video (PLACE/Ladywell, 2017), heightening their sense of being lucky to be part of this innovation. Coleman and Ferreday have summarized Berlant's reading of hope as suggesting that 'hope, dreams and optimisms are social and economic processes' (Coleman & Ferreday, 2010, p.319), so hope on a personal level is bound up with the problems and promises of a wider socio-economic field. This is important to recognise in relation to PLACE/Ladywell where the enthusiasm of residents is bound up with the promise of pop-up housing as a 'London Solution' (Boff, 2016).

Focus on council estates and welfare recipients in the media is of course commonplace. However, estates and their tenants tend to be cast in a negative light, as part of a 'sink estate spectacle' (Campkin, 2013, p.77; Slater, 2018) that presents estates as the scene of 'crime-ridden dystopia' (96). The inhabitants of these estates are cast as an 'underclass', a workshy, politically and socially abject group unequipped to contribute to the neoliberal social order (Welshman, 2013). As Tyler notes, the concept of the underclass collectivises 'an entire plethora of disenfranchised people into one stigmatizing category, denoting dangerousness and expendability' (Tyler, 2013, p.185). Campkin describes how residents of estates battle to resist dominant media narratives of 'hopeless blight' but come up against the overwhelming power of the media in shaping such representations and become used to being watched and perceived through this lens. As McKenzie notes 'the media have made much capital by writing about and screening what has been known as 'poverty-porn'', a genre of TV that delights in scrutinizing the undeserving poor' (McKenzie, 2015, p.12).

Campkin describes how as well as suffering from the weight of negative media representations estates are used as political vehicles by figures including Tony Blair, who made his inaugural prime ministerial speech at the Aylesbury Estate, and treated as academic curiosities, for example by Eton College who run field trips to the same estate 'as an example of urban blight' (Campkin, 2013, p.97). In this context, the overwhelmingly positive media attention adorned

on PLACE/Ladywell stands in stark contrast. Rather than being stigmatized, tenants are represented as deserving and long-suffering in media accounts and, far from a 'sink estate', PLACE/Ladywell is positioned as quasi-utopian.

Yet, despite the evidenced excitement, and the hope that PLACE/Ladywell offers, the next two sections show how residents remained deeply anxious about their futures as well as about their lives in the building. In her essay 'Cruel Optimism' Berlant (2008) worries that sustaining fantasies can be cruel if the object in which we invest hope actually directly impedes our flourishing. It is not clear whether PLACE/Ladywell is a site of cruel optimism. It may prove the case if, for example, the building encourages normalization of the meanwhile use format for social housing provision, thus undermining the creation of permanent social homes. But, as it stands PLACE/Ladywell offers real chances to residents, giving them a relatively long rental period in a clean, well-located property from which they can bid for permanent housing in a state of relative security. However, PLACE/Ladywell equally may well not solve residents' problems in the longer term, because it offers no guarantee that they will eventually be housed somewhere permanent that suits their needs. For Berlant, this kind of hope, while not necessarily cruel, is also problematic. Berlant (2008, p.21) raises concerns about what happens when we can't 'manage to keep [hope] magnetized to objects because those objects are insufficient to hold its weight'. This is applicable to PLACE/Ladywell, in which a great deal of hope has been invested despite its offer of only temporary housing, not the long-term solution that its residents, and London as a whole, need. This might explain why, despite being housed in PLACE/Ladywell for at least two years, residents still feel deeply anxious and on-edge. If, as Anderson argues, multiple atmospheres and structures of feeling can exist in combination or in tension with one another, then at PLACE/Ladywell the atmosphere of hope that has been attached to the innovative building seems, for the residents at least, to be somewhat overrun by the anxieties of the housing crisis as structure of feeling.

Indeed, while investing hope and optimism in PLACE/Ladywell, residents were also cynical and anxious about the building and the extent to which it was intended or able to help them personally, or the housing crisis more generally. The persistence of these emotions amidst the hope attached to the building was evident from Emily's description of the hype surrounding PLACE/Ladywell:

“Everybody is like “the pop-up village, the pop-up village”. I get it, pop-up...as in they're going to take it down again”

Here, Emily interprets the important part of 'pop-up' not as the popping up but the popping down, foregrounding that this is still only a place from which to wait for something more permanent rather than the solution itself. The building is therefore a 'temporary housing' (Berlant, 2011), offering residents a semblance of security in the meantime that is not promised long-term, and thus remains structured by feelings of being 'on-edge' that circulate within the housing crisis. The next two sections explore some of these circulating anxieties and how they shape residents' experiences.

### **“We Start to Panic”, Bringing Home Collective Anxieties after Grenfell**

It has been argued that particular events can evoke powerful affective atmospheres and crystalize structures of feeling as, for, example, in the aftermath of 9/11 (Wilhite, 2016) or the 2008 financial crash (Berlant, 2011). As suggested in the introduction, the Grenfell Tower disaster intensified the housing crisis as a structure of feeling. The cause of the rapid spread of the fire that claimed 72 lives in June 2017 was identified as the combustible cladding installed to the building's exterior by Kensington and Chelsea Council. Grenfell is the amalgamation of the decades-long neglect of London's poorest citizens, a horrific outcome of governance practices that deem the lives of low-income people as lacking in economic and social value, and therefore unworthy of secure, liveable homes. Such neglect of Grenfell and



its residents reveals an approach to housing that views worth of life as hierarchical: that, to draw on the work of Butler, some lives are more grievable than others (Butler, 2009). Those deemed to be on a low social rung elicit limited concern regarding access to safe, secure housing. As will be explored in this section, the fire and its political aftermath has produced a collective atmosphere of anxiety around housing that residents of PLACE/Ladywell experience acutely.

Some of our interviews were conducted before the fire, but almost all participants interviewed following the disaster brought it up in relation to their own safety. Mary described how;

“When the Grenfell fire happened we saw the risk and.. we start[ed] to panic. Honestly, I had this fear that...it’s not safe here, and that week of just sleeping with my eyes [*open*]...honestly.”

Similarly, Emily worried that PLACE/Ladywell had panelling like Grenfell. She had gone as far as to look inside the panelling, concerned that it looked similar. Indeed several participants had put a great deal of thought into how PLACE/Ladywell might be a fire risk and how they would escape in the event of a fire. Mary described how:

‘If you’re in bed, at least you can make your way to the staircase...but what if the fire is coming to the side...you can’t escape because you can’t get to the lift, you can’t get to the staircase’.

Interestingly, residents remained fearful after we pointed out that the building is unlikely not to be in keeping with fire safety standards, as the following exchange shows:

Interviewer: “I would hope, given this is meant to be the showpiece of the most famous architecture company in the world...I would have thought they were far more careful.”

Ashley: “But you think about it, all it would probably take is a resident...to have a few drinks, decide to flick our cigarette over the side, and on the roof there, if the cigarette’s lit and the wind’s powerful enough it’ll go into the corner, it can catch fire...it could happen, come and look, if I show you, down here, you can see where it’s flicked, it could happen, right?”

This exchange illustrates the power of Ashley’s fear about the fire safety of PLACE/Ladywell. His rapid dismissal of our conjecture that the building is likely safe, and detailed insistence that he has found a potential site of risk, demonstrates the extent of his anxiety in the wake of Grenfell. Ashley’s personal experience of the collective atmosphere of anxiety resulting from the Grenfell fire indicates his understanding of his own positionality within the housing crisis, his understanding that politicians are not looking out for him and his family because, as he puts it ‘all they see is that you’re benefits scum.’ While affect and representation are sometimes positioned as opposites in geography, Anderson has argued that representations function affectively (Anderson, 2014, p.14). Here, the affective power of stigmatising representations of benefits claimants is clear. While these representations are in some sense abstract, circulating in a broad structure of feeling and aimed at a generalized demographic, they reflect a ‘relational configuration’ of power that creates and expresses affects which ‘stick’ to individuals, impacting their experiences and capacities ‘within those formations’ of power (Anderson, 2014, p.11). Here, such stigmatizing representations make Ashley deeply anxious about his family’s wellbeing. The architecture of PLACE/Ladywell, too, acts as a compounding form of stigmatization, its external cladding a material point of anxiety: a reminder for Ashley and his neighbours that they are the ‘kind of people’ that horrific events such as the Grenfell fire happen to.

To return to Butler, Ashley’s anxiety regarding Grenfell highlights an awareness that he and his family sit at the bottom of a social hierarchy that demarcates their lives as not having the same worth as the wealthy and politically powerful. If structures of feeling are collective affects,

then experiences of them are differentiated across different settings and distinctive for different individuals. Ashley's anxiety illustrates the potentially uneven experiences of such structures of feeling. While the collective sense of crisis and despair following Grenfell is undoubtedly widespread, it has an arguably disproportionate impact on how Ashley encounters PLACE/Ladywell (which as the council confirmed to us, does not pose a fire risk) stemming from his reading of who he is and how he is valued within London's housing system. As Madden has argued, the Grenfell tragedy highlighted how 'the chances of being subjected to these conditions are distributed unevenly. Inequality is built into the urban fabric and infrastructure, such that many working class and poor people...are subjected to deadly risks from which the wealthy are protected' (Madden, 2017). Ashley's fear demonstrates his stark awareness of this uneven geography of precarity, highlighting that, as Anderson (2014, p.7) puts it "it is at the level of affect that the real effects of forms of power are felt and lived". At the crux of this paper, then, is the idea that collective anxieties circulating in the housing crisis as a generalized structure of feeling are experienced and internalized, disproportionately, by PLACE/Ladywell residents.

As well as fire risk, residents worried about the building's structural safety. Mary commented that 'we are so lucky and so blessed that we are not having Hurricane Irma[2]...if a hurricane was coming to London I'm sure our house would be one of those ones that would be flying like paper'. When we asked another participant if there was anything he thought we should research he suggested studying the safety of PLACE/Ladywell. These fears perhaps reflect residents' understanding of PLACE/Ladywell's architecture, which, as a modular and mobile building is constructed differently to 'normal' buildings (London Assembly, 2017). Yet while such building techniques are celebrated in stakeholder reports (London Assembly, 2017; Boff, 2016), for the residents they evoke fear and distrust.

PLACE/Ladywell is a contemporary iteration of a longstanding complex discourse regarding the use of modular, or prefabricated, building techniques for social housing provision. Modular

housing can be understood through a range of historical, social and economic lenses: from the epitome of modernity in post-World War II Europe (Leger 1985), to later associations with disinvestment, decay, and low socioeconomic status. These dichotomous conceptions continue in the present day and are often tied up in particular national contexts. In Japan, a state less culturally bound to traditional 'bricks and mortar' housing than in Europe, prefabricated housing connotes functionality, efficiency and modernity. Contrastingly, the prefab or modular-build, particularly in Anglophone Western countries, is more commonly understood as a failed architectural experiment (Aitchison and Macarthur, 2017). However, in large part due to austerity conditions restricting funding for house-building, modular construction is once again becoming more commonplace (Steinhardt and Manley, 2016).

Emphasis on its innovative, 'pop-up' design therefore connects PLACE/Ladywell to international discourse that frames modular housing as a modern, functional and efficient building method: a discourse that is reflected in residents' understanding of themselves as 'pioneers'. Simultaneous lack of engagement with the term 'prefabricated', which in the Western context often connotes low-quality, flimsiness, and degradation, attempts to rhetorically separate PLACE/Ladywell from this lineage. However, this is not entirely successful, as residents' anxieties around PLACE/Ladywell not being 'normal' housing reflects the continued relationship between material architecture and affective anxieties that are bound up in socio-historic constructions of modular/prefabricated housing.

The anxiety around the perceived flimsiness of PLACE/Ladywell perhaps reflects, then, not an anxiety *inherent* to impermanence or flexibility but the affects currently attached to such practices and materials for social housing tenants in Britain. Indeed, while the flexibility of building materials is celebrated and valued in other kinds of pop-up space such as container shopping malls (Author, 2015), for PLACE/Ladywell residents, flexible and temporary buildings are perceived to relate to a formation of power within which those with money get permanence and safety, and those without live in precarity. In addition to the worries stemming

from Grenfell these anxieties about PLACE/Ladywell's structural soundness show how residents feel on-edge in the building, despite its acclaimed status, because they experience the affective atmosphere of anxiety around housing in the housing crisis as an immediate and personal situation and are thus unable to be reassured by the values attached to the building by others.

### **Spectral Presences: Being Haunted, Being Watched**

In the previous section we explored how experiences of being on-edge for residents are shaped by collective anxiety around the safety of housing following Grenfell that, while not directly affecting them, they feel themselves to be at the centre of. We argued that residents have an acute affective experience of these anxieties, circulating in the housing crisis as structure of feeling, because of an awareness of their positionality within the power geometries of London's housing system. This therefore shapes and mediates their encounters with PLACE/Ladywell as a building. In this section we explore how another kind of collective anxiety in the contemporary housing crisis structure of feeling shapes the daily experiences of being on-edge for PLACE/Ladywell residents; anxieties about the imagined or future presence of others. Specifically, the spectral presence of gentrifiers, who residents are anxious will replace them, and, relatedly, the spectral presence of authorities watching and judging residents and deciding if they are worthy of decent housing. We explore how these spectral presences experienced by the residents relate to collective anxieties surrounding competition for housing and who does and doesn't deserve to be housed in the capital.

In referring to the imagined presence of others as 'spectral' we evoke a sense of feeling haunted; of the uncomfortable experience of feeling crowded out by others who, while not literally present are felt to assert claims to belonging on a place that undermine your own ability to settle there. Minton captures the sense of the spectral presence of gentrifiers as a pervasive affective condition in London when, after exploring the housing precarity of one woman she

describes how ‘in the adverts on the hoardings all over the city is another London, populated by smart-looking people and luxury...apartments’ (Minton, 2017, p.xi), a juxtaposition that evokes the sense of being on-edge inhabited by those in precarious housing, overlooked by spectral others threatening to arrive and displace them.

Several residents expressed a feeling that PLACE/Ladywell had not been designed with them in mind. One resident explained how, while she appreciated the calibre of the design, she didn’t feel the open-plan layout of the flats was appropriate for her and her family, commenting, ‘those things are really good for bachelors, but [not] if you’ve got little kids.’ Ashley described the flats as ‘almost like penthouses’, imagining them as similar to places ‘on the river’ that would be rented at extremely high prices to the wealthy. Other features of PLACE/Ladywell, such as the fact it has bike racks rather than car parking spaces, also made residents feel that it was not designed for them.

Similarly, Watt, in his analysis of the impact of the 2012 Olympic Games on residents of East London has described their sense that ‘the Olympics legacy is for others, not for them’ (Watt, 2012, p.99), intended to ‘improve’ the area for an incoming demographic of middle-class gentrifiers. Watt writes that ‘for them [residents of the Carpenter Estate in East London], such changes were associated with shifting class relations and a re-balancing of their estate and Stratford in a manner that did not include them’ (Watt, 2012, p.110). Watt cites a statement from one resident that ‘we’re not the type of people it seems they want in Stratford. They seem to want all the well-to-do people in from the City’ (110).

For residents of PLACE/Ladywell, this sense of the building and its promised future not being for them was bolstered by the fact that a show home remains open in the building. Emily explained her theory as to why it remained empty;

“They had somebody in and valued them...they’re a lot of money...I’m pretty sure it was close to...between £750k-to a million... that’s a lot isn’t it...But this makes you think, is that why this one’s empty, so they can keep showing it?”

Ashley also suspected that;

“That’s why they’re keeping the show home open. I think as we all end up moving out of here, they’re gonna privately rent them...you think a place of this standard you’d easily get 2 or 3 grand a month...it’s in a prime location...you’ve got Ladywell station, and you’ve got Lewisham, it’s all right there.”

Ashley’s language sounds almost like that of an estate agent, citing PLACE/Ladywell’s prime location, standard of finish and good commuting links as reasons for its desirability on the private market. His adoption of this discourse, despite it being a market he does not have access to, indicates the strong spectral presence of private renters and buyers in his imaginary of PLACE/Ladywell and its future.

Sakizlioglu, discussing the displacements caused by gentrification in Istanbul, describes how residents feel on-edge as they await impending displacement and how rumours spread regarding planned renewals and demolitions, causing intense uncertainty and anxiety. Sakizlioglu cites Bourdieu’s suggestion that ‘waiting is one of the privileged ways of experiencing the effect of power, and the link between time and power in which ‘the patient’ is subjected to ‘anxious powerless waiting’ (Sakizlioglu, 2014, p.213), to elucidate how waiting to be displaced makes tenants aware of their powerlessness in the face of Istanbul’s gentrification. Likewise, residents of PLACE/Ladywell, despite feeling lucky to be living there, also experienced anxiety relating to their imagined/foreseen displacement by the spectral other of the gentrifier who they assumed the flats were really for.

For Bourdieu, temporal consciousness is constructed through class positionality, as the amount of capital you have within a given 'field' structures what is likely or unlikely, rare or routine, possible or impossible (Atkinson, 2018,3-4). In his work on Algeria, Bourdieu explored how those trying harder to make ends meet were more likely to be short-term oriented, living without the luxury of a capacity to imagine and prepare for the long-term future, both because of a lack of mental space and because of a lack of certainty about their future conditions (Bourdieu, 1979). Yet, Bourdieu also explores how timings are imposed by external bodies over which one does not have control yet which structure temporal consciousness (Bourdieu, 2000). These include bureaucratic and institutional timings and can be extended to timings such as those imposed, or expected to be imposed, on PLACE/Ladywell residents, by councils, developers and gentrifiers. Residents therefore experience anxiety related both to the short and long-term, processes over which they have no control. Bourdieu's analysis of the social construction of time elucidates how anxiety felt by PLACE/Ladywell residents relates both to the short-term unpredictabilities of their lives (somewhat alleviated by their residence at PLACE/Ladywell), *and* to the longer-term unpredictabilities regarding what other, more powerful, actors will impose on them.

Indeed, Mary expressed her frustrations with the fact that the high-quality housing they had been allocated at PLACE/Ladywell would not be allocated permanently to them:

'When you have people who need accommodation and you've given it to them...why not just make it permanent? Why move it around? [*sighs*] 'I wish they would make it permanent *for us*.'

Mary's comment shows the frustration and anxiety caused by residents' awareness that the homes they have been given temporary access to will not be for them in the future, providing insight into the discomfort caused by inhabiting a future filled with promise, but that is not promised to *you*. It therefore elucidates why the impasse offered by PLACE/Ladywell is still one experienced through anxiety, precarity and a sense of being 'on-edge'.



While feeling haunted by the spectral presence of gentrifiers, residents also felt the weighty presence of authorities observing and judging them. Their acute experience of being at the centre of a collective, as well as personal impasse within the housing crisis is, as argued previously, augmented by the media presence at PLACE/Ladywell and residents' knowledge that they are 'pioneers' of pop-up housing. As well as being aware of the media presence, residents were preoccupied with other kinds of surveillance taking (or not taking) place at PLACE/Ladywell, specifically regarding the presence of CCTV cameras, but also a more nebulous sense of being watched and tested during their tenancies. Residents felt there was a lack of surveillance when they needed it for their own safety, but that they were being surveyed for other purposes.

McKenzie has explored how scrutiny is a feature of life in estates (McKenzie, 2015). She describes women's discomfort at having to regularly disclose personal information about their relationships with their children's fathers and how they have learnt to 'negotiate' their way 'around the welfare system'. She explains how 'knowing how to answer questions' is fundamental because if you give the 'wrong' answer it can result in your claims for assistance being refused. McKenzie details how women had to interact with 'local schools, Sure Start centres, community projects, housing offices, and benefits agencies' all of which made them feel 'scrutinized and 'looked down on' but all of which they needed to be able to negotiate in order for themselves and their families be able to get by (86). McKenzie's exploration resonates with a wider field of work on experiences of bureaucratic surveillance (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007; Dubois, 2010; Wacquant, 2001) which explores how, because poverty necessitates greater interaction with state services, the poor are disproportionately scrutinized and criminalized for minor acts of noncompliance with bureaucratic rules or processes, even though following many of these processes actively impedes their ability to get by. Surveillance becomes a spectral presence that structures welfare recipients' day-to-day experiences.

This sense of being watched was evident at PLACE/Ladywell, both in terms of surveillance and, as will be discussed, in terms of a sense of scrutiny and judgement being enacted through the benefits system. In terms of surveillance, one resident mentioned that many of them felt anxious because of the CCTV presence in the building. She stated that;

“My neighbours, they complain, “why is there camera everywhere? I’m thinking it’s protection, but other neighbours, they obviously don’t like it as much, they’re being watched...”

While she herself assumed the cameras were there for protection, many others in the building were more sceptical about their function. Indeed, some incidents showed that surveillance was not present in the building when it was needed by residents. Several described to us a recent intrusion when somebody had broken through the gates and tried to forcibly enter multiple properties. Mary described being in bed, hearing loud noises, then seeing a sign the next day warning residents to be careful as there had been an intruder. However, she explained that there had been no arrest made, possibly because the CCTV wasn’t working. She explained that the reason she thought the CCTV wasn’t working was because her husband’s bike had been stolen recently and he had asked to have the CCTV checked but “the man said, oh, sorry, it’s not working.”

Yet, while there was apparently no CCTV footage available when Mary’s husband’s bike was stolen, or when intruders entered the residential part of the building, Ashley describes how when there was a break in to the ground floor of PLACE/Ladywell, where the cafe and commercial units are, it was ‘like a fucking CSI crime scene down there, police everywhere.’ These situations provide insight into why residents might be suspicious of the CCTV cameras given that, as far as they have seen, their function is not to protect or assist them. They also further evidence how people are valued differently and become aware of those valuations. Is it any wonder that residents of PLACE/Ladywell are sceptical whether the building is intended

to help their housing precarity, when such scenes indicate that their lives and wellbeing are valued less than the businesses below?

McKenzie describes how residents at St Ann's estate in Nottingham felt scrutinized and tested by the benefits system. This sense of scrutiny has been bolstered by media content about benefits 'scroungers', including the many, previously mentioned, TV shows and news articles which delight in exposing the ways that claimants show themselves to be undeserving, or outright 'cheat' the benefits system by committing benefit fraud (Crossley & Slater, 2014; Haylett, 2001). This collective fascination with and distrust of benefit claimants had been internalized by PLACE/Ladywell residents. Emily described her frustration that housing seemed to be allocated based on informal assessments of worthiness. She recounted being at the council office and being told that the room she had come to complain about was one of their highest standard rooms. She described how she challenged the council employee;

“So you've got higher standard rooms and lower standard rooms? How do you then put someone into a category? Someone comes in looking a bit grubby, they should have low standard room? Someone comes in looking a bit fresh, they get a high standard room? Is that how it goes?”

This sense of being judged as an unofficial part of the allocation system was also expressed by Ashley who was depressingly suspicious of being given a flat that was so high-quality:

“I almost think that these are...a test, like, how nice can you keep these, 'cause they come round every 6 months and inspect the property. I kind of think it's a test to see how clean you keep your house - to see where they're going to place you”.

Here Ashley expresses his suspicion that being given a flat in PLACE/Ladywell is a test of his family's ability to live somewhere that is akin to 'what they have', therefore proving themselves

worthy of being permanently rehoused somewhere decent. Clarke has explored how women living in council housing in London felt the spectral presence of imagined others judging their homes and that those spectral judgements impacted on how they lived within their homes. She explores how one woman tried to curate a home that would be read as middle-class by men she might date (Clarke, 2001). Ashley described his struggles to keep the flat looking how he imagined the council wanted it to look, expressing, for example, his relief that the walls were wipe-clean and therefore wouldn't be stained by any of his young children, showing similarly how the imagined watch of others structures behaviour and feelings within the home. The internalization of this collective atmosphere of suspicion structures Ashley's experience of being on-edge. Although Ashley stresses how much he likes PLACE/Ladywell he remains on-edge, even in this comparatively luxurious and long-term environment, because of the affective experience of living amid collective distrust and scrutiny of benefits claimants.

This section has unearthed two key anxieties experienced by PLACE/Ladywell residents. Firstly, while they are excited to be 'pioneers' of pop-up housing they do not trust that they will be, in the long-term, the real beneficiaries of such developments and instead live with anxieties related to their imagined impending displacement that are intensified, rather than alleviated, by the public celebration of the building. Secondly, while they feel intensely scrutinized and judged, they also feel they are not seen or heard when protective surveillance is needed; a tension that reflects the broader contradiction embodied by the Grenfell fire, that while council estate tenants are routinely stigmatized in public settings they are not represented when it matters, such as when voicing concerns over their safety. In both, part of what makes residents anxious is their internalization of anxieties circulating in the housing crisis as a structure of feeling; anxieties around gentrification and around being labelled 'scroungers'. Although the homes they inhabit are clean, pleasant and allocated to them for a reasonably long period, these positive day-to-day conditions cannot alleviate the affective power of these collective anxieties. Residents are unable to relax because they feel crowded out by two forms of

spectral other; gentrifiers and council authorities, both of whom, in interconnected ways, have power over their housing futures.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has explored how the experiences of PLACE/Ladywell residents express collective anxieties circulating in the housing crisis as structure of feeling. We examined how PLACE/Ladywell is a site to which hope is attached at a time of 'crisis-ordinary' but argue that, for residents, the temporary solutions it offers cannot hold the weight of their hopes or alleviate their anxieties. We highlighted how even within this 'temporary housing', that offers them a chance to breathe and recalibrate, the everyday lives of residents are typified by anxieties pertaining to events and situations that do not immediately appear to affect them (such as the Grenfell fire or imagined future gentrification of PLACE/Ladywell) yet which they experience intensely. We have argued that the acute and disproportionate internalization of the housing crisis by PLACE/Ladywell residents reflects how structures of feeling develop and are experienced unevenly, intensifying in particular sites, and around particular people.

While none, to our knowledge, had friends or family in Grenfell, and while such a fire is unlikely to take place at PLACE/Ladywell, residents are aware of themselves as being, of the demographic more likely to be victims of such tragedies; those whose lives are deemed less grievable. Their anxieties thus reflect their real, relational precarity within London's housing system. Residents of PLACE/Ladywell have an acute and disproportionate experience of the anxieties circulating in the housing crisis as structure of feeling because they are acutely and disproportionately at risk from its injustices. In this paper we have shown what it is like to live in a setting and be a person around whom the affective atmospheres of the housing crisis congeal and develop unevenly.

While much work on urban precarity, and housing precarity in particular, focuses on precarity resulting from the lack or retraction of state support, such as life in informal dwellings (Munoz,

2017; Mould, 2017) or housing precarity stemming from regeneration and displacement (Watt, 2012), we have shown how affective experiences of precarity persist, and in fact accumulate around, the ‘solutions’ being rolled out in response to the housing crisis. This paper therefore makes a significant contribution to conceptualising how experiences of urban precarity persist and mutate in a political moment in which there is a growing call for, and sense of urgency around, solutions to end the housing crisis.

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[1] In the UK, people on social housing lists are allocated housing by their local authority according to a points system, with higher points being awarded for example to single parents, or people living in overcrowded accommodation. Each week local authorities release details of available housing online, and prospective tenants bid on properties that fall within their point category.

[2] Hurricane Irma was a powerful hurricane that affected large parts of Ireland and the western UK in autumn 2017.

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