

# Co-opportunistic Circumstances

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This brief research report provides an overview on a project that investigates co-operative social housing in London. It explores the material and socially binding ways in which a group of co-operative tenants appropriate space, relocate themselves and cope with domestic transience given the potentially short-life nature of their periods of residency. It also questions how they perform their senses of belonging through moving and short-term habitation in global urban environments. Methodologically, drawing from an 'archaeology of the contemporary past' in which everyday material culture is subjected to an archaeological gaze, we attempt to reconcile Owenite utopianism with Marxist-materialist positions, whereby alienability and inalienability regarding the home, inflect 'circumstances' with ideological concerns.

The Welsh utilitarian and founding father of the British co-operative movement, Robert Owen, was a utopian socialist visionary who notoriously stipulated that humans were creatures of circumstance. Seizing upon this idea and on Owen's interests in the social design for communal living, this research outline locates itself as a study of tenants in West London whose domestic circumstances present noteworthy attitudes towards the notions of home and mobility in the global city. The case study summarised here proposes to reconcile Owenite utopianism with more Marxist-materialist positions where alienability and inalienability, regarding the domestic inflect 'circumstances' with ideological concerns. Methodologically, the overall project evokes the archaeology of the contemporary past (see Buchli and Lucas 2001, Harrison and Schofield 2009) whereby contemporary material culture is subjected to an archaeological gaze. We will suggest instances where domestic materialities become valuable tools for understanding affective and effective dimensions of transient living in global urban environments.

Through an ethnographic case study of a co-operative social housing scheme in London, this project examines such issues as opportunism, alienability, domestic mobility, alternative tenancy, and placelessness. Membership of this co-operative requires a mastery of movement in order to accommodate temporary living. When examined through an archaeology of the contemporary, the tenants become domestic *bricoleurs* who dispose of, abandon, and repossess everyday objects and also leave behind items or fixtures for the next tenant to tinker with. The creative formulation of individual and community identities are central to the wider understanding and implications of residential instability, alternative lifestyles and the

general underlying ethos of such co-operative organisations.

The project investigates both the materially constructed and socially binding ways in which a group of co-operative housing tenants appropriate space, relocate themselves and cope with transient domestic alienability given the potentially short-life nature of their periods of residency. We thus question how they perform their senses of belonging through moving and short-term habitation.

This research outline will show that despite being largely marginalised in contemporary residential terms, the tenants of housing co-operative organisations have regained a sense of creativity and improvisation, if not production, over the means of procuring dwellings for themselves. The agency suggested in this process highlights some of the themes implicated in their behaviour as mobile creatures of circumstance.

## Alternative Housing

For nearly eight years, from 1999 to 2007, Patrick Laviolette was part of and helped to manage a small co-operative housing scheme of approximately 40 members in the West of the capital, from Notting Hill to Fulham. This co-operative was set up in 1981 by a group of students who were squatting in the city and discovered a consistent pattern of vacant properties owned by a small number of identifiable housing associations. The founding members had strong ideological views that were largely informed by non-conformity and the rejection of standard socio-political systems, particularly the ruling Conservative government of the time. Over the years such instigating ideological values have substantially shifted so that the main reason most of the recent members get involved is for cheap rent. It is

nevertheless clear that they have a different take on domestic temporality. In the words of one long term member in his early forties:

Freed from the burden of ownership, the need to worry about hideous bathroom decor, with mildew on the ceiling, or a dribbling fridge causing rotting floor tiles, escapes me completely ... I almost have affection for these eccentric features, where a conventional flat has lost appeal. What's best is you don't have a landlord coming around to whinge about anything, so you can decorate and adapt the place as if it were your own, yet if the ceiling collapses, you don't lose any sleep worrying about the cost of repairs ... the foibles of 'bourgeois' socialism.

Short-life co-operatives acquire flats from charitable Housing Trusts on the basis of temporary let tenancies, with indefinite agreements on the time spans for the residences. Renting directly from two Trusts under Licence Agreement, the co-operative functions as the legal landlord for its leased accommodations. The members act on its behalf as the custodians of the property in which they live. They are thus responsible for paying the rent and amenity bills as well as for moving out within a minimum notice period of 28 days once the Trust, for whatever reason, cancels the agreement. Accepting this transience is the means by which people who are not usually eligible for permanent accommodation by such Trusts or the local Councils can gain access to low cost social housing.

The co-operative has consistently managed from 20 to 30 properties at any one given time. Members join by referral from friends already in the co-operative. The gender ratio favours men marginally but not significantly. The background of members as far as age, ethnicity and economic diversity is concerned is remarkably homogenous, consisting almost exclusively of middle-class, white Anglo-Europeans between 25 and 45. Regarding children and pets, the organisation is generally absent of both.

In terms of transience, co-operative members are transient by choice compared to the cases of displaced people. On the whole though, given the current situations of people in this group, there is a certain paradoxical degree of 'imposed choice'. Most could not afford to live in London through the more conventional means of renting or buying. Indeed, the members are choosing

to live in London but there are certain constraints or scenarios whereby this choice factor is problematic. In some cases, it should be said that certain members are somewhat stuck, although we would not want to suggest the same type of parallel as forced migrants or the homeless for instance. The idea is nevertheless to demonstrate through this anomalous housing situation that residential choice is a complex matter.

So by couching some of the discussion in terms of circumstance and co-operative opportunism, this project seeks to explore some of these complex issues. When reading the work of anthropologists interested in mobility and housing, a distinction can be seen between residential flux and social flux. Such a distinction is not always useful but in the case of short-life co-operatives it is. By examining the changes of addresses, the pressure to move that weigh upon the co-operative members, the (desired/forced) displacements, we have witnessed certain changes in the residential flux.

Yet, it is equally important to point out that even though moving is a constant possibility, residential relocations are not constantly occurring even if there is a significant turnover of flatmates internally. This is where the distinction between the residential and the social flux is useful. It reminds us that there are many social relocations within the co-operative itself.

The media has widely reported the shortage of affordable housing in Britain's urban areas, especially in the rented market. Although it has been somewhat marginal in contemporary academic research (Crane and Warnes 2000), a rising interest in the UK's accommodation plight is currently taking place, particularly in London (Evans 1996). There is still, however, an extensive dearth of accurate information about social housing, especially alternative forms of providing cheap and flexible accommodation like housing co-operatives. The tenants of these types of housing organisations are often misrepresented in government statistics. They are seen as homeless and their properties are considered vacant. Or they are counted as permanent residents in order to underestimate the number of dilapidated lodgings or people of no fixed abode. Additionally, these residents are not able to obtain a level of statutory housing rights equivalent to those received by similar Council or Trust tenants. That is, they are often discriminated against when claiming certain types of housing benefit and are

rarely eligible for the same advantages given to regular 'sitting' tenants. The rather privileged and voluntary transience of these middle class co-operative members is a further angle of interest, especially given the potential comparisons with the imposed transience of asylum seekers, environmental refugees or other forced migrants.

Several scholars have investigated homelessness and social housing schemes (Cloke and Milbourne 2006). But relatively few anthropologists have been interested in the co-operative movement as such (Vargas-Cetina 2005; McAllister 2005; Laviolette 2008) and fewer still have empirically tackled the issue of transient co-operative residency, particularly from an ethnographic perspective grounded in an analysis of visual and material culture. Hence, this study looks at the relationships between domesticity, mobility and improvisational housing - all pertinent empirical issues related to the housing problems of urban areas.

## Oblique Mobility

Our approach towards understanding practices of residential instability of co-operative tenants face is informed by an archaeology of "the contemporary past" (Buchli and Lucas 2001). Traditionally, archaeology has been associated with the study of the deep past, couched on the notion of archaeology as methodologically based on conservative forms of excavation. However, the archaeology of the contemporary past offers a way to engage with the material culture of contemporary industrialised societies. Archaeology of the contemporary is informed by post-processual approaches to archaeology that turn to anthropologically informed material culture studies in order to contribute to an archaeology of the socio-cultural in the present. This methodology also brings attention to the ethical dimensions of 'doing' archaeology, as it pertains to the potential for exotisation of the past and the fetishism of society. As such, our research project suggests an inversion of the archaeological gaze and critiques the politics of archaeology by focusing on recently created traces of the modern experience. Consequently, we intend to make the familiar unfamiliar by subjecting the taken for granted and mundane dimensions of quotidian life and subjecting them to archaeological scrutiny.

In *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992) Anthony Vidler argues that an inherent connection exists between architecture and archaeology because

the building of the present needs to base itself and learn from the building of the past. Vidler suggests that the archaeological act is uncanny by definition because it reveals that which should have remained invisible. The uncanny effect is the result of repetition, a doubling through the simultaneous process of presenting and absencing (or distancing). This creates a residue which is there but not there - an absent presence. Archaeologies of the contemporary past expose this realm of the un-constituted, not simply the unsaid but the unspeakable, that which lies outside discourse.

In these cases house moving is able to emphasise methodological concerns which are not that interested in the discursive but focus on practice instead - what people do. So in being rather indifferent as to why people move, such work opens up the possibility for addressing such things as how they do so? Who does what and when? How are the tasks administered? Which objects are left behind? What social networks of assistance are called upon, spontaneously generated or ruptured through the event? These become significant questions in situations like short-life housing co-operatives where the reason for moving is usually predetermined by outside sources. Moreover, although it might be much more frequent, moving house is nevertheless still experienced as a stressful occurrence that is both intensely physical and highly emotional.

In terms of an anthropology and archaeology of contemporary housing therefore, we need to take seriously those less discursive issues such as the agency of domestic matter as well as the storing of memories or ancestral inhabitation. In his introduction to the edited collection *Home Possessions* for instance, Daniel Miller (2001) is as interested in haunted houses - the agency that some people give to ghosts or spirits - as he is in the physical objects that clutter the abode. His ambition is to draw attention to the ways in which homes come alive, whereby the domestic becomes a material expression of our human subjectivity in the world.

The flats managed by the London co-operative are not necessarily haunted, but we draw on the analogy in order to engage seriously with the traces that tenants leave as they traverse through the city. Tenants do minor repairs, paint the walls, and tinker with the fixtures of the apartments during their sojourn. Once they move from their lodgings, they leave items behind, which are re-used and re-contextualised

by the following tenant. An archaeology of the contemporary allows us to engage with the materiality of transient living in the contemporary global city. It also emphasises the living practices of global spaces, which are evidently constituted in movement. Placing an emphasis on practices of living can serve as a suitable way to transcend ideological divides regarding opportunism (in a Marxist sense) and

co-operativism (from the Owenite paradigm). Such an approach should also enable discussions on co-opportunistic circumstances. Ultimately, we see these *bricolaged* co-operative dwellings as a metaphor for understanding the connections and disconnections, absences and presences, that are characteristic of living practises in global cities.

## The Authors

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