

Is anyone home? Appropriating and re-narrativising the post-criminalisation squatting scene in England and Wales

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Abstract

This paper explores the political significance of narratives of home. Using the aftermath of the 2012 criminalisation of squatting in England and Wales as a case study, the paper traces the ways in which the concept of 'home' is deployed to both reinforce neoliberal ideals, and is utilised as a tool of resistance by squatters. This paper focuses on the ways in which particular narratives of home are utilised to shape and legitimise housing policy and legislation such as the criminalisation of squatting through moralising language that delegitimise anti-capitalist homes as 'nonhomes'. Following this, the paper goes on to explore how tropes and aesthetics of squatting are appropriated, re-narrativised and commercialised by neoliberal stakeholders. The remainder of the paper focuses on the methods by which squatters and other housing activists, too, utilise re-narrativisation tactics. Firstly, I highlight instances in which squatters have subverted assumptions of squats as 'non-homes' in order to make themselves invisible, and thus safe, in the urban landscape. Secondly, I explore linguistic methods utilised by squatters as a means of disassociating themselves from negative connotations through re-framing elements of the practice as 'occupation'. The paper concludes by calling for closer attention to be paid to the political potency of the homespace, and the ways in which narratives of home can be utilised in the pursuit of social justice and anti-capitalist housing models.

Keywords

Squatting, home, narrativisation, domicile, political rhetoric

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Introduction

In September 2012, section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act criminalised squatting in residential buildings in England and Wales.¹ Prior to this legislative change, squatting had remained a civil, rather than criminal, offence. The Ministry of Justice framed the implementation of section 144 as a legislative decision centred on providing increased protection for residential property owners. As Lucy Finchett-Maddock notes, the criminalisation of squatting is ‘a move that . . . symbolises the championing of enclosure and individual property rights over the rights of the community and the common good’ (2016a: 6). But beyond this, I argue, section 144 is an outcome of the strategic politicisation of language regarding *home*. The criminalisation of squatting sought to cement negative narratives of the already maligned practice, further segregating squats from imaginings of home. Rather, squats became consolidated as ‘non-homes’. Narratives of home have long been used to moralise and divide various social groups. However, and as this paper will outline, it is since the so-called ‘neoliberal turn’ of the 1980s that the home has been re-engineered as a function of the market and an emblem of individual economic success. In short, the aspirational home now consists of privately-owned property. In turn, forms of housing that do not fit into this ideological model are stripped of their legitimacy as homes through political rhetoric and subsequent policy and legislative change (Fox O’Mahoney, 2007).

Through an examination of the impact of, and response to, the criminalisation of squatting, this paper explores the ways in which narratives of home are deployed to both reinforce neoliberal ideals, and are utilised as a tool of resistance by squatters. Firstly, the paper highlights the power harnessed by governments and private stakeholders through their presentation of particular narratives of home. Especially concerning are the ways in which squatting tropes have been appropriated and commodified at the same time as the practice has been further demonised. As this paper outlines, the rise of phenomena such as property guardianships and the use of socialist imagery in private developer advertising campaigns indicate an erasure of anti-capitalist homemaking, whilst at the same time appropriating some of the key narratives attributed to politically left-wing housing activism.

I argue that the narratives deployed to celebrate some forms of home, and deride others, are especially important strategies to understand in the context of housing activism. As the second half of this paper explores, squatters and housing activists have, with varying degrees of success, themselves appropriated and repurposed narratives of squats as ‘non-homes’ and employed careful and targeted language use to protect and continue the practice of squatting in a criminalised landscape. To follow the legal scholar Finchett-Maddock’s argument, property increasingly sits at the intersection of the right to protest and the right to housing, and that these “. . . can increasingly be used interchangeably in relation to understanding the category of home” (2016b: 82). In short, the ways in which home is narrativised and understood is central in the ongoing struggle between rights to property, housing, and public space.

Central to this paper, then, is the role of language and strategic narrative in the politicisation of space. Whilst the study of strategic narratives and the relationship between language and power is a well-versed point of interest in geopolitics and international relations scholarship in particular (see Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006; Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017; Tuathail and Agnew, 1992), interest in the political influence of language has somewhat waned in recent years (Medby, 2019). Indeed, Ingrid Medby has, in the context of political geography, called for a ‘reappraisal’ of the role of language use and linguistic analysis in geographical scholarship. She argues that, although no longer considered

novel or at the ‘frontier’ of geographical theory, language, in its myriad forms including spoken, textual and corporeal, nonetheless remains an integral lens through which to examine the politicisation of space.

Similarly, the political potency of home was, until the relatively recent proliferation of feminist geography, especially neglected in the realm of the everyday. However, traditionally feminised spheres such as domestic and familial life have, particularly since the 1990s, been taken increasingly seriously as sites through which politics is both enacted and shaped (Brickell, 2012; Domosh, 1998; Enloe, 2011). And yet, to return to Medby’s call for a reappraisal of the role of language, the politicisation of narratives of home remains an under-examined element of critical geographies of home scholarship. It is this in part that this paper seeks to redress.

After outlining the research methods used, the paper considers the role of narratives of home and housing in governance practices, both internationally and more specifically in the UK context. Focus then turns to an examination of the ways in which such narrativisations have assisted in the delegitimisation of squats as ‘non-home’, and the subsequent criminalisation of squatting in England and Wales. Following this, the paper explores how tropes and aesthetics of squatting – ‘shabby chic’ and DIY interiors, and communal, ‘off-grid’ and ‘alternative’ lifestyles often associated with the practice – are appropriated, re-narrativised and commercialised by neoliberal stakeholders.

The remainder of the paper focuses on the methods by which squatters and other housing activists, too, utilise re-narrativisation tactics. Firstly, I highlight instances in which squatters have subverted assumptions of squats as ‘non-homes’ in order to make themselves invisible, and thus safe, in the urban landscape. Secondly, I explore linguistic methods utilised by squatters as a means of disassociating themselves from negative connotations through re-framing elements of the practice as ‘occupation’. The paper concludes by calling for closer attention to be paid to the political potency of the homespace, and the ways in which narratives of home can be utilised in the pursuit of social justice and anti-capitalist housing models.

Methods

This paper is based on findings from research conducted from 2014–2016 that explored the impact of section 144 on London’s squatting scene. The project examined both how illegalisation impacted squatters’ ability to secure and maintain a home, and the measures taken to resist their increased precaritisation. Although section 144 was implemented across England and Wales, London was the predominant research site. This is due to the remaining UK squatting scene being largely concentrated in the capital.

Methodologically, a multi-faceted ‘political ethnography’ approach (Schatz, 2009) was employed. This consisted of formal semi-structured interviews with ten squatters, along with visits to their squats; attendance at a range of housing marches, protests and activist meetings in the capital, and critical discourse analysis of political speeches, media reporting, advertising campaigns, and slogans and language used by activist groups that documented the criminalisation of squatting and related issues. Analysis of discourse was key, as the method seeks to deconstruct the ways in which social and political identities are affected, invoked and implemented, revealing a ‘buried ideology’ through analysing and critiquing the relationship between power structures, language and knowledge discourse (Machin and Mayr, 2012). For the purposes of this paper, I focus on a 2011 speech given by a leading anti-squatting campaigner, former Conservative MP Mike Weatherley, a 2019 advertising campaign by the property management company Tipi (see Figure 1), and an account of



Figure 1. Tipi ‘Rental Rebellion’ campaign (Source: Murray Allan).

housing activists’ utilisation of the term ‘occupation’. Through these examples, I elucidate the varying ways in which language is employed and co-opted to shape our understandings of acceptable, and non-acceptable, homes. Assessing these purposeful narratives of home (or in the case of the occupation example, ‘non-homes’) is, I argue, an integral part of better understanding the interplay between political ideology, power and rights to home.

The project’s multi-method approach enabled immersion in the field, producing research findings based on colloquial, as well as formal, encounters with squatters and housing activists. Such an approach centres on ascertaining the varying power relations and dynamics that both construct unequal socio-political landscapes, and explores the ways in which such dynamics are tested and challenged (Forrest, 2017; Schatz, 2009). This was befitting a research project that sought to understand both the ways in which the squat as homespace is undermined through legislative change, and the ways in which squatters seek to challenge this.

Narrativising housing policy

At the heart of section 144, and the struggles of squatters to keep the practice alive, are the ways in which stories of home – and indeed ‘non-homes’ – are deployed as strategies of governance. This section will explore the ways in which narratives of both *housing* and *home* – places that are interconnected yet distinct – are politically deployed. This is integral to the argument of the paper, situating narratives of UK squatting and its criminalisation within a broader context whereby rhetorics of home and housing are activated in the marginalisation, subjugation and control of usually already precarious groups.

The narrativization of housing is integral in shaping justification for policy and legislation. As urban and housing scholars such as Ruth Fincher have noted, narratives provide a set of reasons and circumstances by which to tell particular stories of best practice and legitimate governance (Fincher, 2004, 2007; Mumby, 1993). Such emphasis on narrativization helps to foster a shared set of beliefs and normalise a ‘moralised social perspective on who should live in housing of different kinds’ (Fincher, 2007: 633). This is applicable to a range of housing contexts. For example, Fincher traced the ways in which narratives of Melbourne’s new high-rise developments focused on fore-fronting imaginaries of a childless professional class suffering from a housing shortage. Fincher argues that this narrative was pursued in order to justify the construction of high-cost apartment developments in the city that purposefully did not include family-friendly amenities (Fincher, 2007). In Sri Lanka, Cathrine Brun and Ragnhild Lund have examined the ways in which the national government capitalised on ethnicity bias and identity politics in order to encourage Sinhalese people to populate new housing projects in the north-central region of the country in the

aftermath of both the decades-long civil war and the 2004 tsunami (Brun and Lund, 2009). Brun and Lund explored how new temples were built, and old ceremonies and rituals re-introduced in the area as a means of connecting the housing projects to an ethnically specific history of homemaking in the area. This constitutes a mobilisation of collective memory that is manipulated to fit particular goals in relation to housing policy and development. Indeed, as Mark Scott explores in the context of rural Ireland, this mobilisation of political identities to legitimise housing policy is a strategy regularly used by governments and developers. Scott's research examined how the mobilisation of nationalism and post-colonial narratives of Irish autonomy have proved integral in the justification of private housing development construction in rural areas. In this context, Scott argues, particular nationalist identities have been purposefully utilised by rural landowners campaigning for private property rights and the 'right to build' in the Irish countryside. Here, emphasis on Irish nationalism and autonomy enables justification for profiteering based on histories of oppression and limits to ownership (Scott, 2012).

Whilst scholars have considered the ways in which *housing* is narrativized for political and/or commercial ends, the narrativization of *home* in this context has received comparatively limited attention. This is not to say that the political potency of the homespace has not been considered. For example, the term 'domopolitics' was coined by William Walters (2004) to express the intrinsic relationship between imaginings of the homespace and statecraft. Narrativising the state as *home* rather than *household*, Walters argues, attends to a logic of governance that juxtaposes affectations of a homely nation-state against the external threats of the 'outside world'. This is a mobilising tactic that generates fear and legitimises the outcasting of marginalised groups. Walters examines this through the example of the USA's Department of Homeland Security as an explicit framing of the nation-state as a homespace in need of protection from unhomely external forces.

The Canadian geographers John Porteous and Sandra Smith also examined the relationship between home and governance, coining the term 'domicide' to define 'the deliberate destruction of home by human agency in the pursuit of specific goals (2001: 12). Citing examples from the destruction of civilian settlements as a strategy of warfare, to the 'resettlement' of indigenous populations from their homelands, the authors highlight the varying ways in which homes are deliberately destroyed under the auspices of political ideology and strategies of governance. Porteous and Smith's work provided a significant contribution to critical conceptualisations of home as a political tool. However, as I have argued in other work, it is integral to extend this concept further to consider the home and its destruction beyond the physical dwelling or settlement alone to consider the implications of what I term 'socio-symbolic' forms of domicide. By this I mean that the home does not consist solely of bricks and mortar, and can be destroyed in a variety of forms, including through the use of rhetoric and language (Nowicki, 2014). Following on from this, and with a focus on the UK context, I argue that it is integral to further understand this mobilisation of home as a powerful narrative tool. Specifically, this paper focuses on the ways in which particular narratives of home are utilised to shape national and local housing policy and legislation. As the remaining sections will highlight, the specific role of home, and binary depictions of the 'non-home', have become integral in the justification of punitive and marginalising housing policies.

Narratives of housing and home in the UK context

Home has long been a tool of British politics, historically utilised to construct binary narratives of the deserving and undeserving. Social, cultural and political narratives

around the concept of home, and in particular the “ideal home” have been integral in the formation of housing policy and legislation. Just as narratives of the ideal home are propagated, so too are depictions of particular groups as unwilling to engage with appropriate homemaking aspirations, and therefore undeserving of home (Nowicki, 2017).

Although rhetorics of home are not a new phenomenon in the UK, it was during the 1980s and the rise of neoliberalism that understandings of housing as primarily a financial product over and above a home became normalised (Aalbers, 2016; Nowicki, 2018). This important narrative shift refocused understandings of homeownership as not only intrinsically tied to notions of personal, and by proxy national, success, but also as the primary focus of legal protection regarding the home (Fox O’Mahoney, 2007). Whilst legal engagement with the terminology of home remains limited, Lorna Fox O’Mahoney notes that ‘ideologies of homeownership’ have encouraged increasing legal protections for property and landowners at the expense of non-owning ‘occupiers’, be they legal tenants or illegal squatters.

Indeed, such reconfigurations of the ideal home provided ripe ground for the delegitimation of social housing and alternative homemaking practices such as squatting (Fox O’Mahoney, 2007). This was in keeping with a growing orthodoxy of the time across Western nations, whereby the goal of national housing policies was largely the maximisation of homeownership above all other typologies (Hastings, 2000). Although this phenomenon is certainly not unique to the UK, it is not an over-assertion to suggest that Margaret Thatcher’s premiership (1979–1990) was a key factor in bringing about these mass social and ideological upheavals in relation to narratives of home, both in the UK and abroad. Thatcher’s Conservative Party during this period significantly restructured housing policy, firmly connecting housing tenure to citizenship construction and both individual and state morality (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013). The pivotal Right to Buy policy, introduced in 1980, cemented these already shifting narratives that centred homeownership as the aspirational form of homemaking. The Right to Buy enabled social housing tenants to purchase their homes for a fraction of their market value. This inevitably allowed wealthier tenants to transition into homeownership, leaving behind a residualised group in council housing (Burrows, 1999; Tyler, 2013). Alongside decimating the country’s social housing stock, the Right to Buy furthered the politicisation of tenure type (Blandy and Hunter, 2013). Homeownership became explicitly moralised, conflated with personal responsibility and economic productivity. Non-market oriented forms of homemaking were narrativized in opposition to this, with council tenants and other non-conformant groups such as squatters framed as socially parasitical and their homemaking choices lacking legitimacy. Finchett-Maddock identifies these processes as the active propulsion of home lives into the public sphere, whereby rights to home are publicly judged and altered through policy and law-making, and superseded by rights to property (2016b). To return to the concept of domicile, I argue that this shift in narrative foregrounded the legislative dismantling of squatters’ homelives by actively recalibrating the practice as criminal nuisance-making, rather than an expression of home-making.

From housing activists to home thieves: The re-narrativisation of squatting in the UK

This ideological climate somewhat inevitably impacted alternative homemaking practices in the UK such as squatting. A once-thriving squatting scene, particularly in England’s major cities, began to be dismantled prior to criminalisation through an increase in demonising

rhetoric. Contemporary narratives of squatting differ greatly from that of the post-war and 1960s/70s movements, which had largely garnered public support (Platt, 1999). In the immediate aftermath of the Blitz, mass squatting movements were established in London and other major cities as a protest against lack of government action in the development of affordable housing for returning servicemen (Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Platt, 1980). Squatting again became prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, aided by a high concentration of vacant local authority properties and a growing subculture that rejected capitalism and espoused collective living. During this time, squatter communities flourished, and it was not uncommon for entire streets of London to be occupied by squatters, such as Elgin Avenue in Westminster and Villa Road in Brixton (Reeve, 2015). During these periods, squatting was associated with addressing the capital's homelessness crisis, and the revitalisation of vacant areas of inner-city neighbourhoods. In some cases governments engaged with the practice, and squatter collectives often made deals with local authorities that they could remain where they were so long as they maintained properties themselves. It was during this time that squats became associated with collectivised, anti-capitalist living and a DIY attitude and aesthetic (Platt, 1999). The mid-twentieth century saw a period where understandings of home were not unquestioningly bound to property ownership, and a wider range of home-making practices were accepted as legitimate by many (Platt, 1999; Reeve, 2015).

Although squatting had always been a divisive practice, it was in the latter decades of the 20th century that vitriol against squatters greatly increased (Middleton, 2015; Platt, 1999; Vasudevan, 2017). The re-narrativisation of home as a first and foremost a financial product, coupled with increasing stereotypes of squatters as young, irresponsible and hedonistic, re-cast squats as antithetical to the concept of home, and squatters as guileful, anarchistic property thieves. As Steve Platt notes:

“It was one thing when squatting involved ‘respectable’ . . . cases of homeless families occupying empty council properties . . . It was quite another when the squatters were perceived to be less respectable – single people, ‘outsiders’, ‘hippies’, ‘dossers’ or drug takers . . . particularly if they turned their attentions towards empty privately owned properties.” (1999: 107).

This newly dominant narrative replaced a more nuanced understanding in prior decades of squatting as a practice connected to housing activism and shelter provision for those in need (Bailey, 1973; Reeve, 2015). Such constructions of squatters as inherently criminal was compounded further by the imposition of austerity politics at the beginning of the 2010s. Indeed, the criminalisation of squatting was framed by the 2010–2015 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government as a fair and pragmatic response to further protect homeowners during a time of economic crisis (Reeve, 2015). Such agendas were encouraged by fervently anti-squatting politicians, most notably the Conservative MP Mike Weatherley. Weatherley had for many years been campaigning for the criminalisation of squatting, and in 2011, arguably bolstered by a rising sense of national precarity post-2008, put forward an Early Day Motion² to the House of Commons calling for its criminalisation. In the same year he gave an impassioned speech effectively damning squatters as cartoonish societal villains intent on causing as much social and financial trouble as possible:

I wish to dispel the myth once and for all that squatters and homeless people are one and the same . . . In my experience, squatters do not fit the profile of the kind of vulnerable people that we should be looking out for . . . They run rings around the law. And what these professional

squatters lack in respect for other people's property, they make up for in guile and tenacity. They are organised and frequently menacing. (Weatherley, 2011).

By dismissing linkages between squatting and vulnerability as 'myth', and instead portraying squatters as guileful, hedonistic property thieves, Weatherley's campaign inverted assumptions of vulnerability, casting the victims of housing injustice as property owners whose homes are under threat, and detaching squatting as a practice from the need for home and shelter. Weatherley framed the proposed law change as a means of protecting the hard-working homeowner from such deviant figures. Weatherley's reference to their 'guile and tenacity' sought to frame understandings of squatters as not only criminals, but as particularly calculating and immoral ones seeking to violate a space understood to be integral to personal wellbeing and prosperity: the home. In this climate, then, rhetorics of home, and what or who threatens the homespace, were integral in establishing the socio-political conditions for section 144 to be implemented in 2012 with little-to-no resistance.

Appropriating the enemy: Commodifying the anti-capitalist home

Home, then, is an integral tool in delegitimising the homemaking practices of those who are antithetical to neoliberal logics of housing-as-capital. However, this is not where the role of home as a political narrative tool ends. Equally crucial are the ways in which elements of these same, now delegitimised practices, are then appropriated by stakeholders who seek to subvert and profit from them. Simultaneously to the dismantling of squatting as a home-making practice, so too have elements of squatting culture been repurposed for commercial gain.

Tropes of social justice, anti-capitalism and alternative living often associated with squatting have in multiple cases been inverted to fit neoliberal agendas. One notable example of this is the rise, post-section 144, of an increasingly popular housing typology: property guardianship. Property guardianship firms are private companies that install 'guardians' into disused (usually commercial) property, in part in order to keep buildings free from squatters (Ferreri et al., 2017). Landlords pay property guardianship firms a fee for finding guardians, and the guardians pay below-average rent to live in the property on the understanding that they do not have any tenancy rights and can be given two weeks' (sometimes less) notice to vacate. Simultaneously to their explicit role as an anti-squatting measure, property guardianship firms also promote the schemes as an opportunity to inhabit unusual and interesting spaces, and as an act of social responsibility through bringing empty property back into use (Ferreri and Dawson, 2018) – both attributes traditionally associated with squatting. Guardianship schemes are an appropriation of squatting's aesthetics and engagement with vacancy, whilst simultaneously being at total odds with the practice's anti-capitalist principles. This is part of a wider urban trend, particularly in the post-recession climate, that envisions temporariness and the repurposing of property through the capitalist lens of entrepreneurship and quirky creativity (Harris, 2015).

Developers and marketers of other forms of private, high-cost housing have also appropriated socialist and radical political language associated with squatting in order to sell distinctly neoliberal products. A recent example of this is the London-based build-to-rent³ company Tipi's 2019 advertising campaign. The campaign appropriated socialist imagery (red backgrounds, clenched fists held up in bold defiance) to sell its high-cost⁴ private rented apartments as a 'revolutionary' product (see Figure 1). The company invites tenants to 'join the rental rebellion' – the revolutionary act here being no deposits or agency fees (never mind the far above average rents). As with the rise of property guardianship, the

strategies deployed by companies such as Tipi further undermine squatting through cynically re-purposing anti-capitalist imagery associated with the practice for commercial means. This re-aligns the aesthetics of radicalism with neoliberal narratives, further separating them from their original intent.

Similarly, the 'DIY' and 'shabby' chic aesthetics associated with inner-city hipster neighbourhoods and their inevitable connection to gentrification (Hubbard, 2016; Le Grand, 2018), monetise a set of aesthetics that denote alternative lifestyles such as squatting. This is particularly evident in relation to vacant property usage in the post-2008 context. Vacant buildings and their temporary usage, once the realm of squatting and other forms of alternative city-making (see for example Mould, 2014; Tonkiss, 2013) have too been appropriated and re-narrativised over the last decade. This can be seen for example through the advent of 'pop-up' culture whereby temporary, interstitial leisure services such as bars, shops and event spaces are credited with re-animating urban high streets and embedding a cache of cool in recession-hit inner-city neighbourhoods (Harris, 2015, 2020). This has distinct parallels with squatted social centres and other radical, community-led methods of repurposing vacant sites (Finchett-Maddock, 2016a; O'Callaghan and Lawton, 2016). And yet, as with the previous examples, these social justice imaginaries are re-narrativised as commercial projects. As Ella Harris notes, temporary building use is 'increasingly being mobilized towards the creation of cities where critical and creative temporary uses of space are becoming both secondary to, and at times enabling of, processes of commodification, gentrification, precaritization and spatiotemporal control' (2015: 601).

These examples signify a creeping extension of the power of aesthetic and linguistic narratives in urban policymaking and regeneration. Through careful narrativization strategies, state and private stakeholders are able to at once delegitimise squatting, and at the same time appropriate elements of the practice that have the potential for commercial appeal. In sum, key narratives of anti-capitalist politics are increasingly being appropriated by neoliberal actors – re-worked and redeployed to promote forms of housing and lifestyles antithetical to their original meaning and purpose. The non-neoliberal home, then, is at once dismantled and re-constructed within the parameters of capitalist ideology.

Subverting re-narrativisation to resist housing precarity

However, just as housing and home have been re-narrativised to fit neoliberal ideologies, so too have these tactics been subverted and re-deployed by social justice activists. The political potency of home has been acknowledged and utilised by some groups whose homes have been delegitimised through these very same strategies. It is therefore integral that scholars seek to understand the ways in which narratives of home and housing are utilised in grassroots, as well as hegemonic, political strategies. As Paul Watt (2008) has noted, although discourse analysis has been a prominent methodology in studies of housing and urban regeneration in recent decades, this has tended to employ a top-down approach, focusing on, for example, policy analysis. He argues that this has been at the expense of "the texts and discursive practices of activists who contest the parameters set by policy makers" (Watt, 2008: 345).

As Watt traced through the case of the "Hand Off Our Homes" (HOOH) campaign in the early 2000s, housing activists, too, have utilised discourse-oriented tactics. In the case of HOOH, this manifested through careful decision-making regarding language choice in order to garner public sympathy for their cause. For the HOOH group, a grassroots campaign led by council tenants in Wycombe, south-east England, re-narrativising their homes was essential in building support for efforts to prevent their housing estate being demolished. HOOH

activists approached this through the purposeful curation of language in campaign literature and public speeches that emphasised the “ordinariness” of themselves and their homes. The term “ordinary” was chosen in order to distance the campaign from negative connotations of council housing tenants that have become increasingly entrenched in the UK since the 1980s. By distancing themselves from terminology that placed them as ‘other’ in dominant discourses of the ideal home (i.e. homeownership), the group were able to successfully position themselves as ordinary people at risk of losing their homes – a far more empathetic position than entrenched tropes of council tenants as abject ‘scroungers’ (Tyler, 2013; Watt, 2008).

Despite the valiant efforts of grassroots organisations and their supporters over the past decade, already vulnerable groups have nonetheless seen their housing circumstances become increasingly precarious (Brickell et al., 2017; Nowicki, 2017). As outlined above, this has been further compounded by the narrative tools once used to justify radical and politically alternative homespaces being appropriated and repackaged to neoliberal ends. It is therefore more integral than ever to consider the ways in which threatened communities such as squatters respond to and resist their increased precarisation, and the ways in which they subvert tactics used against them. Squatters are one such group that, in the aftermath of criminalisation, have made strategic use of language and aesthetics to subvert neoliberal re-narrativisations of housing and home. In doing so, they have contributed to keeping the practice of squatting alive and, more broadly, countering the normalisation of housing-as-capital taking precedence over housing-as-home. The remainder of this paper will explore examples of approaches taken by squatters that have focused on subverting and repurposing narratives of squats as non-home.

Hiding in plain sight: Re-narrativising the squat as non-home

As previously discussed, contemporary squats are largely depicted as dangerous, unhomey spaces. Squatters are increasingly narrativised as inherently criminal figures who pose a threat to the safety and security of private homeowners (Nowicki, 2017; Vasudevan, 2017). The criminalisation of squatting has increasingly detached squatting from understandings of homemaking – on the contrary, squats are constructed in political and popular media discourse as ‘non-homes’ – as sites of anarchy and chaos rather than security and belonging.

One squatter crew I met had made tactical use of such imaginings of the squat as a non-home through a decision to ‘hide in plain sight’. Remaining undetected can prove especially difficult for squatters in the post-criminalisation landscape, as the vast majority now live in commercial, rather than residential, properties. This shift in squat typology often leads to heightened visibility – in large part due the fact that squatted commercial properties tend to consist of larger crews that are inevitably more obvious. As commercial buildings are not ordinarily associated with live-in residents, any activity that indicates people are inhabiting a commercial property also makes squatting crews more visible, and as a consequence more vulnerable. Therefore, as the aesthetics and inhabitant numbers of squats have changed, so too have strategies of securing and maintaining home within them.

One crew I visited that were squatting a former pub in south London had combatted this increased visibility, and thus potentially the longevity of their home, through ensuring the squat remained within the bounds of non-home aesthetics. Rather than trying to make the property look empty, the crew instead repurposed its visibility by masking the building’s usage as something other than a home, therefore – they hoped – protecting themselves from immediate forced eviction and extending the lifespan of the squat. As Tariq,⁵ one of the crew

members, showed me when I met him outside the squat, this constituted making and mounting a sign over the doorway with an image of a road bike and 'Bike Curious' painted underneath. Tariq explained that: "*We're pretending that we're running a business... and the nature of the fake business fits into gentrifier and hipster aesthetics of the area.*"

Indeed, the intentions of the fake shop front were successful as far as I was concerned – the sign had caused confusion until Tariq had appeared, as I had thought I was in the wrong place for our meeting. Interestingly, the crew were actively employing gentrification tropes and re-appropriating them to protect their home through disguising it as a hipster business, and they believed that in part as a consequence of this the squat had received very little unwanted interest from local residents or police.

Through aligning the squat with hipster and gentrification aesthetics (Harris, 2012; Ley, 2003) – the road bike being one of the emblems of urban hipsterism (Lam, 2018), Tariq and his crew had made their homespace invisible. The group had utilised the very same socio-political structures that have led to the displacement (or threatened displacement) of many of inner London's low-income residents in order to construct and maintain a homespace for themselves. This was achieved through making efforts to ensure that all external semblances of the squat as a home was removed, somewhat ironically enabling the crew to better establish and protect their home. Indeed, once inside the squat and safe from the public eye, Tariq was keen to show me all the ways in which they had modified the building to make it more homely – for example by building internal walls to construct bedrooms and creating a living room and relaxation and exercise space in the basement. Rather than fearing the growing precarity that inevitably arose from the increased visibility and demonisation of squatters, Tariq and his crew chose to subvert their precarious condition by hiding in plain sight. The crew's method mimicked now common imaginings of inner London, whereby gentrification has brought about the displacement of many residents, and 'shabby chic' hipster aesthetics, often ironically drawn from squatter culture and style, have decimated and commercialised many of the cultural practices they have been inspired by. By engaging with and appropriating these very same socio-political conditions, the crew were ultimately able to protect themselves from the threat of forced eviction. In short, through engaging with narratives of squats as 'non-homes' and emphasising the very aesthetics that have been appropriated by private developers and other neoliberal stakeholders, the crew were able to retain their right to home in the city, at least for a time.

"I see myself as more of an occupier": Re-appropriation as resistance

Tariq's crew had protected their home through disguising their squat as a 'non-home'. Such methods of repurposing narratives of squats as 'non-homes' have also been utilised by squatters and activists in relation to language use. When I asked another participant, Harry, a question relating to his experiences of being a squatter, he responded, unexpectedly, that he in fact did not like to define himself as one: rather, he saw himself as an 'occupier'. He felt this difference in language use was crucial, as *'it can really change the preconception of what someone is doing and why'*. Harry saw squatting and political protest as intrinsically linked to one another, and felt that this was something that should be emphasised when discussing squatting, rather than maintaining a focus on squats as homes. He argued that re-constructing narratives of squatting in this way better portrayed the practice as a social justice movement, rather than solely a low-cost alternative way of living. Harry understood this assumption to be detrimental to squatting's image, tying the practice to unsympathetic connotations of "scroungers" and "getting something for nothing" associated with low-income housing in general.

Indeed, the majority of the squatters I spoke with over the course of the research were very much politically active, with activist contributions ranging from the Occupy movement, to anti-Heathrow Airport expansion groups, to the Radical Housing Network.⁶ The strong links between squatting and political activism are unsurprising considering that, as highlighted earlier in the paper, squatting movements in England and Wales have historically emerged from grassroots responses to housing crises. The ties between squatting and activism remain strong, with demand for housing accessibility and citizenship rights continuing to be fundamental components of the squatting movement (Dee, 2014; Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Reeve, 2015). However, in the aftermath of section 144's implementation, terminology pertaining explicitly to squatting is increasingly being abandoned by activists. This is in part a response to narratives of squatting that have become ever-more vitriolic, with longstanding implications of squatters as criminal, anarchic and abject figures further concretised by the law change (Finchett-Maddock, 2014). Therefore, in a newly criminalised climate, squatting as a political movement has in some circumstances been re-appropriated, with elements of the practice redeployed in occupation-focused protests. Such forms of occupation have in particular been utilised as a protest tactic against punitive housing policy and legislation.

This recent trend arguably began with the 2013 occupation by the direct-action collective Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth (HASL) of the UK's most expensive council house on the eve of its sale by Southwark Council for nearly £3 million. In their engagement with the media, HASL specifically referred to their actions as an occupation in protest of Southwark Council's decision to sell much-needed social housing in the midst of a housing crisis in the capital (Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth, 2013). Although media coverage of the protest did not entirely abolish references to the group as squatters, the event was largely termed an 'occupation', and HASL members framed as protesters (O'Mahoney and Fox O'Mahoney, 2015). The HASL members also made it clear in interviews with the press that they did not intend to live in the property, that they all had homes to return to, and that the purpose of their occupation was purely political.

The actions of HASL sought to use squatting methods to bring to light housing injustice. The collective also sought to set a precedent of protecting squats in residential buildings in the short-term through presenting them publicly as occupations. By connecting squatting in a residential building with protests centred on the wider housing crisis, whilst at the same time detaching it from understandings of home and homemaking, squatters are potentially able to circumvent arrest under section 144 if they can prove they have a registered address elsewhere (as the legislation states that it is illegal to squat in a residential building *if you intend to live there*), both keeping the practice alive (albeit in very short timeframes – occupations tending to last days, weeks at most) and using it as a visceral method of housing activism. Indeed, at a meeting I attended in a squatted social centre in south London in 2014, members of HASL were present and, referring to their occupation of the Southwark council house the previous year, explicitly suggested during a discussion that protest can be utilised as a tactic in the protection of residential squatting. They told the audience that when they had squatted the £3 million council house, they had largely been left alone by the police even though they were in a residential building because they had framed their actions as 'protesting' and 'occupying' rather than 'residing'. They argued that its public nature and emphasis on political occupation had made the police more cautious about forcibly evicting the group. This indicates that such re-narrativisations of squatting as occupation are the consequence of purposeful tactics that place discourse as central in political subversion and the reclamation of squatting as a practice.

Another of my participants, Rob, a former London squatter, also utilised the squatting-as-occupation tactic in 2014 when he and his crew had opened up a vacant residential building in central London in broad daylight and in full public view. This had been in order to set up an ‘anti-conference’ protesting MIPIM (a four-day annual real estate exhibition usually held in Cannes, but hosted in London in 2014 and 2015). The ‘anti-conference’ was widely attended and received press attention, the audience predominately consisting of a mix of activists, academics and sympathetic politicians, including then-Green Party leader Natalie Bennett. Despite the very public nature of the residential building’s use, the event ran relatively undisturbed by police for two days. Again, here arrest appeared to be circumvented on the basis that the building had been utilised by the group for the purposes of political protest, rather than because they intended to live there. The fact that some people had been sleeping in the building in order to ensure that it could be used for the anti-conference the following day appeared to have gone unnoticed by police, perhaps due to the fact that it had been opened up so brazenly and was very clearly hosting a public event. This suggests that, even though police were within their legal right to forcibly evict the group, the building’s very public use as a protest event discouraged them from doing so.

As a final example, this squatting-as-occupation technique was also utilised in a well-known London case by the grassroots campaign group Focus E15. The group used squatting as a method of direct-action activism in order to bring the trauma of forced eviction further into the public eye (Watt, 2016). Focus E15 originally consisted of a group of homeless single mothers housed in a hostel in the borough of Newham, East London. When the hostel began evicting tenants in 2013 due to public funding cuts, residents were told that they would be moved as far from Newham as Birmingham and Hull, many miles from their jobs, children’s schools and familial networks. In response, the soon-to-be evicted group began protesting regularly outside Newham Council’s offices. The group gained widespread media coverage and public empathy, eventually being rehoused in-borough by the local authority (Finchett-Maddock, 2016b; Watt, 2016). In the wake of this victory, Focus E15 became involved in housing activism more broadly, and became ubiquitous in the struggle against gentrification and displacement in East London and beyond, running a weekly street stall and organising protests, public meetings and other grassroots modes of resistance. In 2014, they engaged in their most well-known campaign, occupying a disused block of former council flats on the Carpenter’s Estate in Stratford. The block had been earmarked for demolition to make way for private development. However, despite these plans collapsing (in part due to the controversy surrounding resident evictions), Newham Council continued to decant residents from their homes. This was under the auspices that demolition and regeneration of the site would eventually occur (Watt, 2013). During the two-week campaign, empty flats were occupied and opened to the public in the form of a social centre, hosting a daily programme of events. Unlike the HASL occupation of the Southwark council house, the actions of the Focus E15 group were not referred to in media coverage as squatting (see for example Amara, 2014; Dubuis, 2014). Despite the fact that an entire block of flats was occupied for two weeks with high levels of press coverage, and one member was arrested on suspicion of squatting before being released due to being able to prove that she was registered at an address elsewhere (Booth, 2015), none of the campaigners were charged under section 144. Furthermore, when Newham Council took the group to court in order to evict them, Focus E15 won the right to remain in the flats for the duration of their planned two-week protest.

These examples are indicative of the ways in which squatting has been repurposed beyond the capitalist agendas discussed earlier in the paper. The utilisation of squatting tactics in

activist occupations highlight the ways in which the practice can be appropriated for use in public protest. Although the examples given are shy of squatting in the legal sense (as occupiers were registered as living at other addresses), what they highlight are the ways in which activists are repurposing elements of squatting, and detaching the practice from understandings of squats as homes, in order to highlight housing injustice.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the role of narratives of home in shaping and legitimising housing policy and legislation, with a focus on the criminalisation of squatting in England and Wales. In particular, I have outlined the ways in which neoliberal logics of housing as predominately a financial product simultaneously enabled the reframing of squatting, an alternative, anti-capitalist iteration of home, as an illegitimate form of homemaking: a 'non-home'. Through the examples of property guardianship and a build-to-rent advertising campaign, the paper went on to trace the ways in which this delegitimisation of squatting coincided with an appropriation of elements of its aesthetic for commercial purposes. Finally, I explored the methods employed by London squatter crews and housing activists to subvert these very same tactics of appropriation in order to protect the practice of squatting in the post-criminalisation landscape. Through methods that foregrounded narratives of squats as 'non-homes', squatters were able to 'hide in plain sight': their homes concealed through careful decision-making regarding language and aesthetics. Linguistic shifts that re-constructed squatting as predominately concerned with political 'occupation' also enabled elements of the practice to continue to exist, albeit in a different guise.

To conclude, the concept of home has a political potency that should not be underestimated. For more than forty years, presiding narratives of home have been told through the prism of neoliberalism: that homeownership is the aspirational form of tenure, and that those who do not prescribe to this are societally parasitical (Tyler, 2013). Squatting, as the homemaking practice perhaps most antithetical to notions of the home as a financialised product has, through its criminalisation, been effectively delegitimised in public narratives. And yet, as the actions of squatters detailed in this paper have attested to, narratives of home have the potential to be used to protect, as well as dismantle, alternative forms of homemaking. The inherent responsiveness of squatting to its political surrounds has enabled crews and activist groups to repurpose damaging narratives of the 'non-home' as a protective, rather than destructive, measure. This is emblematic of squatting's ability to keep the channels of anti-capitalism alive even in hostile political environments. As Vasudevan notes, squatting 'points to the possibilities – complex, makeshift and experimental – for extending, improving and sustaining life in settings of pervasive marginality' (2015: 354). As the examples in this paper have highlighted, within its very confines as a precarious and marginal practice, squatting ekes out alternative forms of belonging and rights to homemaking (Vasudevan, 2015). To return to Finchett-Maddock's assertion, struggles over the right to home have become increasingly intertwined with the right to public protest, with squatting sitting very much at this intersection (2016b).

Such challenges to normative narratives of home are invaluable in a political landscape that has confined definitions of 'appropriate' members of society to those who subscribe to neoliberal ideals, side-lining, rejecting and actively precaritising those who seek out different modes of belonging in the city. This is not to say that squatting and other alternative forms of homemaking do not remain greatly endangered by presiding neoliberal constructions of home – rather, that scholars and activists should be cognisant of the political potential in seeking to actively re-narrativise the concept.

This paper has focused on squatters' battles for home. But this is just one example of the ways in which narratives of, and language pertaining to, home have been weaponised in order to curtail the rights of marginalised groups. Social tenants, migrants, indigenous communities, Travellers – any who do not conform to the neoliberal home have borne witness to a now decades-long dismantling of their ability to secure and maintain a home-space, and the right to belong, in an increasingly hostile socio-political climate. The home, then, needs to be taken seriously and interrogated by scholars as a powerful tool in political and activist armouries.

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Notes

1. Squatting has been a criminal offence in Scotland for over 100 years. Squatting in Northern Ireland remains a civil offence.
2. Early Day Motions (EDMs) are submitted by debate to the House of Commons by individual MPs. Through attracting the signatures of other MPs, EDMs can be used to demonstrate parliamentary support for a particular cause or issue. However, it remains rare that EDMs are debated in Parliament, and rarer still that they lead to policy or legislative change (Parliament UK, n.d.).
3. Build to Rent refers to, usually large-scale, property developments designed for private rent rather than sale. This is a rapidly growing sector in the UK housing market, with a 20 percent increase in the number of BTR homes completed or under construction from 2018–19 (British Property Federation, 2019).
4. For example, a one-bedroom Tipi apartment in Wembley, west London, costs approximately £1,900–2,000 per month. This up to 100 percent higher than the rental cost of standard one-bedroom flats in the same area (Rightmove.co.uk).
5. For the purposes of anonymity, all participant names have been changed.
6. A conglomerate of London-based housing activist and campaign groups, see: <https://housingnotprofit.org/all-members/radical-housing-network/>

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