

# From Grenfell Tower to the Home Front: Unsettling Property Norms Using a Genealogical Approach

Samuel Burgum

*Department of Urban Studies and Planning, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK;  
s.burgum@sheffield.ac.uk*

**Abstract:** The Grenfell fire was symbolic of an unequal urban landscape closely tied to material and aesthetic norms around property ownership and entitlement. The aim of this paper is to unsettle these norms by advancing a novel genealogical approach. Through systematic review of government archives seldom studied by property researchers, historical comparisons are mobilised to challenge the taken-for-granted way in which we approach property and ownership today. It is shown how, in the face of a comparable housing crisis and direct action, both Churchill's and Atlee's post-war governments temporarily overlooked property norms by extending wartime requisitioning powers. Going further, however, the paper argues that by revisiting history, we can also rediscover a legacy of "forced entry" that might open up political possibilities in the present. By advancing a genealogical approach to ownership, the paper contributes to wider discussions around property norms, concluding that we have before (and can again) enact property differently.

**Keywords:** Grenfell Tower, Home Front squatters, squatting, housing crisis, requisitioning property

## Introduction: A Tale of Two Cities

At 12:54 am, 14 June 2017, a fire was reported at a 24-storey tower block in North Kensington. A refrigerator had caught fire on the fourth floor and the flames spread rapidly up the outside of the building, trapping those above, and killing at least 72 people. Yet, even before the smoke had cleared, it was apparent that this had been an avoidable tragedy. One year previously, to give the concrete tower "a fresher, modern look" that would fit in with the "overall aesthetic" of the area (Rydon 2014), colourful panels had been added to the external walls, creating a cavity which acted as a chimney, sucking the flames upwards and preventing burning material from falling away from the building. In addition, under pressure to keep costs down, a decision had been made to downgrade insulation to a less fire-resistant material in order to cut a mere £293,000 off an original £9.7m budget (*Independent* 2017a). Through these revelations, Grenfell Tower has quickly become a symbol for the spatialised inequalities of global cities like London, a beacon for the violent effects of neoliberalism and post-crash austerity, and emblematic of "a social crisis, in which access to housing symbolises inequalities between poor and rich, young and old, black and white" (de Noronha 2017).

In the weeks that followed, Grenfell was repeatedly compared with the wider housing context in Kensington and Chelsea. A freedom of information request revealed 1,857 empty properties (the highest proportion in London, and some of the highest in the country, despite it being the UK's wealthiest locality) with 696 vacant for more than two years (Who Owns England? 2017). Investors in these vacant properties included super-wealthy speculators, such as Dmytro Firtash (who purchased Brompton tube station, a one-time war command centre for Churchill, for £53m in 2014 to develop multiple flats); former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg (who purchased a seven-bedroom listed mansion for £16m in 2015); as well as property mogul Christian Candy (whose development company purchased Dukes Lodge for £85m in 2015, with the intention of turning these 26 homes into five interlinked luxury villas with two-floor basements and underground parking). Such empty properties and urban speculations are justified and protected by a taken-for-granted sovereignty of property ownership, treating houses as cash deposit boxes rather than for use as shelters or homes, with the consequence of artificially inflating property values and increasing housing inaccessibility and insecurity for those unable to exercise property ownership.

Such norms have been shown to play a key role in maintaining and ideologically justifying urban inequalities, as legal protections and cultural norms that are designed to defend owners mesh "with wider projects of financialisation and the privileging of the wealthy" by "legitimizing the projects of market excess and freedoms which must be protected alongside the rights of private enjoyment of property" (Atkinson and Blandy 2016:12–13). I will begin this article with an outline of such property norms, before briefly setting out a genealogical approach for unsettling them using archival material. First, we turn to extraordinary calls after the Grenfell fire to "requisition" empty properties in order to house survivors. Such proposals were immediately rejected as undermining fundamental rights of property ownership and yet, through historical comparison, it can be shown that requisitioning has been used before to address the UK housing crisis which followed WW2. By reviewing archive materials seldom studied by researchers of property, including cabinet minutes and government memos, we therefore uncover a *precedent* for overlooking taken-for-granted protections of ownership, *unsettling* property norms which persist today and form the context of the Grenfell fire. In the second half of the analysis, we will then turn to unequal aesthetic distributions which intersect with property ownership. Following Ranci re (2010), it is argued that the residents of Grenfell Tower formed what he calls "the poor" insofar as they were deprived of meaningful voice and appearance in the run-up to and aftermath of the fire. Yet, by returning to cabinet minutes which discussed post-war squatting movements, this paper seeks to recover a tradition of "forced entry" which can make denied voices and appearances heard and seen. Here, our historical comparison suggests that such direct actions offer the potential to both gain material concessions, as well as go some way to overcoming unequal aesthetic distributions in the city.

Grenfell Tower encapsulated divisions and inequalities in contemporary London that are both material and symbolic, and which converge upon property ownership norms that dictate who is able to access security and safety within the home,

as well as who is heard and seen as possessing meaningful language and appearance. The ownership model is accepted as common sense and justified along “rational” market-driven logics; yet this paper demonstrates how such automatic protections of property are not a given. Instead it is argued that, through historical comparison, we can undermine contemporary property norms while at the same time rediscovering the aesthetic force of direct housing action. By advancing a genealogical approach to property, the aim is to make a timely, urgent, and *unsettling* intervention into taken-for-granted ownership norms and aesthetic distributions which persist today, concluding that we have before (and can again) enact property differently.

## Enacting Property Norms: The Consequences of Ownership and Entitlement

While this paper utilises case studies rooted in the legal and historical context of property in England and Wales, it has potential significance for similar questions around property ownership and entitlement in other cities, as well as campaigns and actions seeking to unsettle property norms elsewhere, such as squatting movements (Cattaneo and Martinez 2014; Martinez Lopez 2018; Vasudevan 2017), but also a wider terrain of alternative property institutions that challenge individualised ownership, such as co-operatives or community land trusts (Bunce 2018; Ehlenz 2018). This section therefore positions the paper as a contribution to wider debates around the impact of property norms on urban inequalities, with a specific focus on the way in which notions of ownership entitlement position property as *sacrosanct*. Property ownership is shown to be enacted in a number of ways, including: (1) legal entitlements of property owners to exclude others and be protected from intrusion (by the state or otherwise); (2) the equation of ownership with individualised security and safety in the context of a retreating neoliberal state; and (3) the intersection of property ownership with aesthetic and representational distributions of voice and appearance. These are illustrated by examples surrounding the Grenfell fire in order to allow us to *unsettle* these property norms in the rest of the essay.

In *Unsettling the City*, Blomley (2004) outlines what has now become an influential model for thinking critically about pervasive norms surrounding property. For him, certain ideas around what constitutes “property” have become legally, culturally, and economically “settled” and accepted as fixed, stable, and unchangeable. In particular, Blomley highlights the dominance of an “ownership model” which forecloses possible alternative conceptions of ownership, as all iterations of property (including public, private, and any possibilities outside this binary) are reduced to a private model, in the sense that there is always considered to be a “solitary owner exercising exclusionary rights over a bounded space” (Blomley 2004:xiv). The ownership model, in other words, assumes an individual who is sovereign within a given space and fundamentally *entitled* to exercise “quiet enjoyment” of that territory, as well as assert their autonomy and control through an ability to “exclude all others” (whether they be criminals, trespassers, or the state). This reflects a precedent of property rights as they have been

established in British common law and maintained through cultural norms, including Coke's well worn dictum that "a man's home is his castle" (asserted in a 1644 court case that emphasised the right of the homeowner against state forces); but also a legal belief that the essence of property ownership is the ability to exclude all others (as asserted by Blackstone in 1768,<sup>1</sup> but which also extends beyond the realms of specific properties to domo-political ideas of the *nation* as an exclusive home for those who "belong"; Walters 2004).

Blomley goes on to argue that such notions of a property owner as naturally entitled to automatic legal and cultural protection from the intrusion of others are constantly being re-enacted and reasserted. Despite being treated as a constant framework for settling property distributions and disputes, the ownership model is repeatedly being policed and "continually settled" (Blomley 2004:xvi), and we can find a clear example of this in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire. Responding to criticism that survivors from the tower were not being housed quickly enough, the government turned towards "St Edward" (a new multi-million-pound luxury development in Kensington). Their proposal was to house survivors in units which had been designated, as part of planning permission, for social renting (50% market rents); yet this created a moral panic based on a mistaken belief that refugees from Grenfell would be receiving luxury flats for free. This panic played out across various media platforms:

I'm very sad that people have lost their homes, but there are a lot of people here who have bought flats and will now see the values drop. *It will degrade things*. And it opens up a can of worms in the housing market. (*The Guardian* 2017)

I would feel really resentful if someone got the same thing for free. I feel sorry for those people. But my husband and I *work very hard* to be able to afford this. (LBC 2017)

*North Kensington is not this Kensington*. They should be in a place where they are happy, but not here. I don't want *them* here. In the circumstances, they can't all expect to be rehoused in these parts of London. (*Independent* 2017c)

Emphasis has been added to demonstrate the enactment of property ownership norms here, defending the "deservedness" of current residents to live in St Edward (summoning up notions of "hard work" entitling them to this area) and their right to exclude the "un-deserved" from Grenfell (the implication being that "they", i.e. "the black and poor from North Kensington", did not belong *here*, reflecting a history of racialised prejudice towards the north of the borough; Moore 2013). In response, the developers (Berkeley Group) were quick to reassure the public that these units would actually be "basic" (not luxury) and thereby swiftly re-established and re-enacted property owner entitlements in the aftermath of the fire.

The consequences of such re-enactments of entitlement are wide, for they imply that the ability to *own* property has become a deciding factor in the *quality* of housing you are able to access. In the case of Grenfell Tower, it is clear that this access goes much deeper than who is entitled to luxury, but stretches to an inequality around who is (and is not) entitled to basic security and safety within

their home. As Atkinson and Blandy (2016:42) have argued, access to physical, ontological, and financial security has become deeply entwined with the ability to own property, as the neoliberal state withdraws from welfare responsibility and promotes home ownership “as a means to build up individual welfare security and to offset pension shortfalls in retirement, thus reducing the burden on the state and by extension, upon tax-averse affluent households”. Such equity-based welfare individualises responsibility for household security and safety, relieving perceived burdens on state resources, while necessarily generating “inequalities in security and exposure that relate to income levels, wealth and tenure” (Atkinson and Blandy 2016:112). This reflects a marked decline of a mid-century consensus around the state’s role in housing provision in the UK, with social housing peaking at one-third of total stock in 1984, but diminishing ever since as an “ideology of homeownership that has come to predominate in England, which privileges the market and admonishes pro-social and collective attitudes towards the provision of housing” (Powell and Robinson forthcoming).

Under “austerity urbanism”, this trend has continued apace through a continuing “roll back” of the neoliberal state and a move towards “devolved governances and downloaded responsibility” (Peck 2012:647). A cleaver has been taken to provisions of secure shelter, including for the homeless (with a 134% increase in rough sleeping since 2010 (National Audit Office 2017); refugee housing and services (including cuts to legal aid); and the social housing sector (with a 97% drop since 2010, and fewer social houses being built now than since WW2; Ireland 2017). Through policies like “Right to Buy” and the deregulation of mortgages and rent, more and more people have found themselves either channelled into the poor quality housing of low-end private rentals, or into mixed-tenured social housing blocks (like Grenfell) where building management is increasingly privatised, fostering a “value-engineering race-to-the-bottom environment of doing ‘more with less’ ... in which a cheaper, flammable cladding was chosen to meet spending targets” (Hodkinson 2018:10). In addition, the state has sought to relinquish responsibility for building safety regulations, with policies like David Cameron’s prophetic “bonfire of red tape” (*The Guardian* 2012) justified along neoliberal lines as reducing legislative burdens on both business and the state by “placing a strategic responsibility upon local authorities” (Carr et al. 2017:15). The responsibility for the safety and security of tenants (i.e. non-owners), therefore, is no longer something mutually assured through state resources, but something landed upon the shoulders of austerity-stricken local authorities and subsequently on “the most vulnerable, both socially and spatially” (Peck 2012:626). As Madden (2017) has concluded, such moves against housing provision and regulations clearly demonstrate how “inequality is built into the urban fabric and infrastructure, such that many working class and poor people, and people of colour, are subjected to deadly risks from which the wealthy are protected”.

But such inequalities surrounding property ownership—in which the super-wealthy are able to keep properties empty as an investment while the urban poor are unable to ensure basic safety measures—indicate more than a material divide between who can and cannot access secure shelter; they are also indicative of a

longer history that links property ownership with an aesthetic power to be heard and to appear within the city, as property enactments become “caught up in the creation of particular landscapes that are simultaneously material and representational” (Blomley 2004:xvii). While property ownership hasn’t been a legal requirement for franchise in the UK since 1918 (men) and 1928 (women), there nevertheless persists an historical legacy in which “distinctions have been drawn around who is included and excluded from mainstream political and economic life ... [which] have long been deeply connected to housing tenure” (Atkinson and Blandy 2016:28). As Ananya Roy has argued, therefore, while *material* inequalities come down to questions of “who owns land and on what terms, who profits from land and on what terms, and how ownership, use, and financialisation of land is governed and regulated by the state” (2017:A2), these also intersect with *representational* disparities, which means that “[a]longside the questions ‘What is to count as property?’ and ‘Who can count as the subject who can claim home and land?’ is this question: ‘Who is the authoritative interlocutor of politics?’” (2017:A10).

Spatialised material inequalities, which are reflected in patterns of property ownership, must therefore be understood as intersecting with aesthetic inequalities around who is and is not able to make their voices heard and their appearances seen within the city’s political landscape. As well as the wealthiest, Kensington and Chelsea is one of the most economically and racially divided boroughs in the country. For example, the Lancaster West Estate (where Grenfell is located) has the borough’s highest proportion of BAME citizens (62.1%) in addition to a large majority of socially rented tenures and an average (mean) household income of £30,956 (which can obviously be skewed by a minority of high income individuals). But if we compare this with the richest area in the borough (Royal Hospital Ward), then the *average* household income here is £136,977, in addition to being 1 point from the *lowest* proportion of BAME citizens in the borough (10.4%) and 1 point off the *highest* proportion of white residents (88.6%).<sup>2</sup> With the hindsight of Grenfell Tower, we see clearly how these economic and racial divisions within the borough intersect with *aesthetic* distributions around “what is visible and what not, of what can be heard and what cannot” (Rancière 2010:36), as residents had repeatedly attempted to raise their concerns around fire safety in the building in the run up to the tragedy, but found their voices ignored while their appearance on the city’s landscape was hidden behind panels and cladding.

For Rancière, power and politics are fundamentally intertwined with aesthetics, because “if there is someone you do not wish to recognise as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politics, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse” (2010:38). Following Aristotle, he argues that to be “political” is, by definition, to bear meaningful voice and appearance, and that power therefore operates via a distribution that can either recognise or refuse to recognise voice and appearance as meaningful. Power, on the one hand, is a normative distribution of the sensible, where some are recognised as visible and articulate, while others—who he calls the “poor”—try to voice their grievances but are met with “a tendency for

their speech not to be heard as rational argument ... [it is] not heard as meaning-bearing language" (Davis 2010:90–91). In contrast, therefore, Rancière argues that politics must by definition entail an "intervention in the visible and the sayable" (2010:37) which makes "what was unseen visible, in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech" (2010:38). It is this definition of politics—as an aesthetic intervention of the "poor"—which I will attempt to recover through a comparison with the squatting movements that sought to make themselves audible and visible after WW2.

This section has sought to develop connections already made by many commentators between what happened at Grenfell Tower and its wider context, including the large number of empty properties within the Kensington and Chelsea borough. It has been argued that taken-for-granted property norms—such as an owner being entitled to "freedom from any form of intrusion [which] is seen as a cornerstone of liberal democracies and enshrined in legal statutes" (Atkinson and Blandy 2016:58)—have created a wider economic and political landscape in which some are able to treat properties as investments, able to access secure and safe shelter and recognised as possessing meaningful voice and appearance; while others are denied this opportunity by virtue of their non-ownership. These distributions are made to appear unchallengeable and permanent because of the dominance of such property norms; yet "if property appears settled, perhaps this is more a 'reality effect' of the ownership model, than an accurate mapping of property in the world" (Blomley 2004:xvi). Therefore, by taking a genealogical approach, we can find examples where these supposedly inalienable rights of ownership have been previously overlooked in times of crisis, and the aesthetic denial of the poor has been directly challenged by a politics of forced entry.

## Advancing a Genealogical Approach

This paper utilises archive data from UK government cabinet meetings and communications during the post-war period, including official minutes and memos which recorded discussions around housing and property in the face of post-war squatting movements. My review has focused on both the wartime coalition (led by Churchill from the end of the war in May 1945) as well as the first Labour majority government that succeeded them (led by Clement Atlee after the election of July 1945). The archives of both these cabinets have been chosen because of their decisions made on both the post-war housing crisis *and* squatting actions which sought to protest and address this crisis. What is important for this essay, in the shadow of the Grenfell fire and its wider context, is that this often-overlooked part of UK housing history presents a comparable housing crisis informed by similar enactments of property ownership; but it is also an example of two distinct governments deciding to temporarily overlook ownership norms in the face of crisis and direct action.

The benefit of a genealogical approach is twofold. First, it can help us to reveal the historicity—the contingency and context-specificity—of taken-for-granted norms in the present. Using this approach, the aim of this paper is to upset contemporary property entitlements and related aesthetic distributions of voice and

appearance by questioning “the very rationality which ground the establishment of a regime of acceptability” (Gordon 1980:157–158). In this way, the paper partly responds to calls to understand “the conditions, practices and attitudes that the fire and its aftermath revealed” in order to refigure Grenfell as “a moment of possibility: the possibility of anger, challenge, and contestation” (Clarke 2017). Second, as argued by Benjamin, a genealogical approach can help us revisit accepted narratives of the past, because “to articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was’ ... it means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger” (2007:253). Whether the victims of the Grenfell fire or the squatters of 1945/46,

we inherit not “what really happened” to the dead, but what lives on from that happening, what is conjured from it, how past generations and events occupy the force field of the present, how they claim you, and how they haunt, plague, and inspirit our imagination and visions for the future. (Brown 2001:150)

By re-remembering forgotten traditions of direct housing actions which gained material and aesthetic concessions via a politics of forced entry, such historical comparisons have the potential to open up possibilities for similar actions today.

There are, of course, limits to using archive data. While offering valuable insights into decisions made around the housing crisis and direct actions of the post-war period, it is important to recognise that all archives are not objective accounts of the past, but always *constructed* by “the cultural and social mores of the time” and through the viewfinder of our current position (Hamilton et al. 2002). While it could be suggested that confidential minutes and secret memos are perhaps less amenable to problems of selective archiving as, say, more public archives (which are subject to the whims of the archivist); even these recordings will have been “the product of a judgement ... which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded” (Mbembe 2002:20). This might include, for example, decisions made by the scribe to omit certain comments or by ministers to keep something “off the record”. Yet this isn’t to say that the data which *were* recorded are useless, as they are nevertheless revealing and useful as a point of comparison with property norms today.

A further limitation of archive data is the unavoidable politics of a claim to authority in retelling the past and defining collective memory. Yet, while many rightly point to this as problematic (Hamilton et al. 2002), others have also argued that this authority might be utilised on behalf of the disenfranchised in order to unsettle dominant memories and advance alternative histories which have otherwise been silenced. Such “activist archives” when used “strategically and directly” can “intervene in dominant discourses, claiming the authority and rights to represent themselves” (Pell 2015:34), creating opportunities for empowerment, self-determination, and produce alternative forms of knowledge.

While there exists a literature that seeks to understand stubborn property norms that have material and representational consequences for urban inequalities (as outlined in the previous section), this paper seeks to advance a novel approach to *unsettling* such norms using genealogical analysis. Through a review of government archive data rarely utilised by researchers of property, this historical



comparison demonstrates an alternative approach to property in the context of a comparable housing crisis and direct action. Their decision to even temporarily overlook property norms illustrates clearly how (a) current property norms are not fixed or permanent but can be unsettled, and (b) direct housing actions can make ignored voices and appearances known through a politics of forced entry.

## A Precedent for Requisitioning: Overlooking Property Norms in a Crisis

Kensington is a tale of two cities. The south part of Kensington is incredibly wealthy, it's the wealthiest part of the whole country. The ward where this fire took place is, I think, the poorest ward in the whole country ... (Jeremy Corbyn, quoted in Cowburn 2017)

Carrying momentum from a general election the week before—which had seen the biggest swing towards Labour since 1945—leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, pointed out the spatial inequalities surrounding the Grenfell fire, highlighting a “large number of deliberately kept vacant flats and properties all over London” where “people with a lot of money buy a house, buy a flat, [and] keep it empty” (Corbyn, quoted in Hope 2017). Yet what was particularly extraordinary was Corbyn’s contention that the government might address this through “compulsory purchasing or requisitioning” such properties, or that the Grenfell survivors should “occupy” them, arguing that “in an emergency you have to bring all assets to the table in order to deal with the crisis and that is what I think we should be doing in this case” (Corbyn, quoted in Hope 2017). For a mainstream and prominent politician to be advocating that the state should redeploy empty private properties through compulsory purchasing and requisitioning, and that owner sovereignty should be overlooked in the face of a crisis, was controversial to say the least. Subsequently, his comments were met with dismissals along the lines of property ownership norms, such as Andrew Bridgen MP who argued that this “fit in with [Corbyn’s] hard Marxist views” (as if this was a self-explanatory reason to ignore him; Steel 2017), as well as an official response from Downing Street which snubbed the idea: “We don’t support proposals to seize private property, our focus is on rehousing people as quickly as possible, in the borough and the neighbouring borough, and that still stands” (*Independent* 2017b). There is a presumption of self-evidence in this statement, with the “we” clearly meaning Theresa May’s government, but also suggesting a wider *normative* extension of Thatcher’s “democracy of property-owners” and owner sovereignty over property being legally defended and culturally accepted. Despite a YouGov (2017) poll which suggested that 59%<sup>3</sup> of the public supported the idea, therefore, the proposal was dismissed via an appeal to an ownership model which “presumes clarity and determinacy in the definition of what property is, and tells us which relationships between people and scarce resources are to be valued as such, and which are not” (Blomley 2004:xiv). Here, the sanctity of property ownership is taken as inalienable and pre-given (even over empty properties in a crisis) and yet, through historical comparison, we can find a *precedent* in the UK for requisitioning vacant properties and (temporarily) overlooking such property norms.

As part of emergency measures pushed through parliament in 1939, local authorities were given powers to requisition properties for hospitals, offices, as well as housing refugees and workers engaged in the war effort. In the face of a bombing campaign that compounded an already severe urban housing shortage, these powers were then extended in August 1943 to allow authorities to “requisition, repair, and adapt empty properties for the purpose of providing housing accommodation for persons at present inadequately housed” (Watson 2016:37). During the blitz, 218,000 houses were destroyed and a further 250,000 damaged as to make them uninhabitable (Webber 2012), while house-building stalled as two-thirds of the skilled building force were enlisted. By 1945, the housing situation was further worsened by the demobilisation of 3.5 million ex-servicemen and a baby boom, forcing many to choose between rough sleeping, overcrowding, or punitive rents as landlords sought to capitalise on demand.

Yet, as with Grenfell Tower and the current housing crisis, this situation had a much longer history, as cities like London had never really coped with mass urbanisation since the industrial revolution, struggling to improve sanitation, mitigate overcrowding, and maintain a liberal *laissez-faire* commitment to property and the market (with fears of state intervention creating welfare dependency and de-incentivising work ethic; Watson 2016). Only after a set of cholera epidemics and rising concerns over crime and moral degeneracy was there support for state intervention to improve housing. But even after the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890 (which gave councils permission to build and rent houses for general needs), government funding remained scarce and was only really available for slum clearance programmes. Between 1880 and 1914, council housing accounted for less than 1% of total construction, with moves to improve the social housing stock by Labour minorities in 1924 and 1929 being short-lived (hamstrung by economic crisis and undone by subsequent Conservative administrations).

In this context, and despite war-time promises of adequate housing for all, ex-servicemen and their families faced a severe housing shortage, a lethargic pace of house building, and little hope on council waiting lists. In response, a Brighton group called the “Vigilantes” took it upon themselves to squat hotels being kept empty by landlords speculating on holiday rents. In a confidential memo to the cabinet on 15 July 1945, we find evidence that this action struck a nerve, as Churchill expressed his frustration with the squatters:

I deeply regret to see the continued prominence of the Vigilantes, as reported in the newspapers. This is a matter of considerable importance and lawlessness should not be allowed. The law officers and the police should consider all means of putting an end to these pranks; and the newspapers should be induced as far as possible by the Minister of Information to curtail their publicity. (Churchill 1945)

In contrast, however, Brighton Council responded by criticising the government, pointing out that many local authorities had previously requested that war-time requisitioning powers be extended in order to use empty buildings to address the housing crisis, but had been ignored. In the face of direct action, Brighton

Council now demanded “immediate steps to empower councils to requisition any empty properties they deem necessary in order to alleviate the distress as present prevailing” (Watson 2016:41).

Despite the 1943 wartime extension, requisitioning had not really been utilised to alleviate the housing situation of the urban poor. To give a pertinent example, only 192 out of 5750 empty properties in Westminster, Hampstead and Chelsea had been requisitioned for housing purposes by 1945 (Watson 2016) and, in a cabinet memo by the Minister of Health, he suggested that the reason for this had been a requirement to gain owner consent before requisitioning a property. This had “rendered the power of little practical value” as owners quickly developed fictitious tenancies, organised hasty sales, or simply moved back into large properties that might have been used to house many more people. The minister added that:

It seems to me essential that in “a period of national emergency” the houses should in other cases be used to meet the greatest need and this can only be determined by the responsible Local Authority ... moreover, the fact that unoccupied houses are not being used for those in greatest need and can be exploited must lead to discontent and criticism of the Government. (Willink 1945:2)

The cabinet therefore agreed that “in order to prevent any further lawless action” alternative accommodation should be found for the Vigilantes and wartime requisitioning powers should be temporarily extended in order to “bring back into use for the accommodation of homeless families any available empty houses”.<sup>4</sup> They subsequently announced that, until the end of 1945, councils could requisition empty habitable buildings, giving owners only 14 days’ notice to explain their intentions for the building in advance. This was one of the last acts of the wartime coalition before the general election.

What this gradual extension of requisitioning powers throughout the war and post-war period demonstrates is that the protection of property ownership norms has been considered optional under emergency circumstances, and that the decision to uphold them today is therefore also a choice and *not* an insurmountable limit of property use. The cabinet discussions archived here demonstrate how, in the face of the Vigilantes, the government decided to temporarily overlook accepted owner-entitlements to keep property empty in order to address the post-war housing crisis, and were forced to recognise that “experience, particularly in London, had shown that by requisitioning it was possible to secure that available accommodation was used to the full”.<sup>5</sup> Corbyn’s call to use requisitioning powers and encroach upon ownership norms in order to address housing needs post-Grenfell, therefore, was perhaps not as controversial or ridiculous as the normative response suggested. In the context of a previous UK housing crisis, such powers which were originally justified by the war effort *were* extended in order to redeploy empty buildings and, as the Communist Party pointed out at the time (Watson 2016): if requisitioning powers which defiled the sanctity of private property could be justified as part of the collective war effort, then why not as part of a collective effort to ensure access to housing?

## The Poor: Voice, Appearance, and the Politics of Forced Entry

We know that people that campaigned against the council ... were vindicated in death ... And that is the most tragic part of this situation, that people were not heard in life, and even now they're not heard in death. (Lowkey 2017)

In a televised interview outside the still-smouldering tower, and using language reminiscent of Rancière, activist and musician Akala stated that the Grenfell victims had “died because they were poor”:

We are in one of the richest spaces not only in London but in the world, *repeated requests were ignored*, there is no way that rich people live in a building without adequate fire safety. Everyone I spoke to who was out there couldn't hear alarms, there was no sprinkler system ... *It was an eyesore for the rich people living opposite*. So they put panels, pretty panels, on the outside, so that the rich people opposite wouldn't have to look at an horrendous block. (Akala 2017)

At least since 2013, the Grenfell Action Group (GAG) had been raising fire safety concerns with the tenant management organisation (TMO), pointing to “alarming evidence of serious negligence over several years” (Grenfell Action Group 2013) yet received little response or action. In a particularly disturbing post from 2016 entitled “KCTMO-Playing with Fire!” the group prophesised that “only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders” (Grenfell Action Group 2016). After the fire, angry and distraught residents continued to be ignored, and were forced to storm council meetings to demand “justice” (*Independent* 2017d). In footage of the altercation which followed, councillor Matthew Taylor was caught on camera mouthing the words “don't let them in” (*Independent* 2017e), a fitting demonstration of aesthetic denial towards Grenfell's residents. Both this incident, and GAG's repeated attempts to make their voices heard before the fire, indicate a profound inequality of voice and a refusal to acknowledge the residents as possessing legitimate “meaningful” grievances.

Such blatant refusals of voice can also be linked to a further denial of the very *appearance* of “the poor” in the borough. As a (since-deleted) planning report outlined in 2014, one of the explicit aims of the fateful regeneration project had been to “make the flats look better from the outside” when seen from local conservation areas and luxury North Kensington flats (Rydon 2014). The report recommended panels as a low-cost way to “improve” the aesthetic of the building, whilst “ensuring that the character and appearance of the area are preserved and living conditions of those living near the development suitably protected”, and such masking of decaying and neglected social housing projects in austerity Britain, as it turns out, was by no means restricted to London, as subsequent investigations revealed at least 111 other tower blocks (90 of which were run by a local authority or housing association) had been renovated using the same material. The aesthetic distribution which forms the context of the Grenfell fire and the

wider housing crisis is one in which legitimate voice and appearance is associated with property ownership, as those associated with other forms of tenure are ignored. As such, when GAG attempted to make their voices heard, or when the decision was made to prioritise covering up the tower with panels in order to make it “look better” for wealthier neighbours, this can be interpreted as attempts to deny the voice and appearance of the poor in London. Yet, if we once again return to the often-overlooked squatting movements which emerged after WW2, we rediscover a tradition of direct action which challenged such aesthetic norms, as well as able to gain some material concessions from the state.

After the war, Atlee’s Labour majority had been elected on a wave of hope and expectation, establishing a welfare state based upon universal access to education, health and housing, whilst replacing “Poor Law” provisions and philanthropy with a national insurance system (Renwick 2017). The new Minister for Health, Nye Bevan, inherited a destroyed and long-neglected housing stock, as well as wartime coalition promises to provide a separate dwelling for every family that wished to have one. For him, *quality* (larger, better built and equipped) social housing was as important a *quantity*, yet it was this very commitment to improving standards (including a rejection of “pre-fabs” and regenerating decommissioned military bases as temporary solutions) which made progress so incredibly slow. By August 1946, the majority of local authorities had not completed a single house (some carrying seven- or eight-year waiting lists) and many remained reluctant to use requisitioning powers to address the housing shortage. Because the extension of requisitioning powers by the wartime coalition had not carried a statutory *duty* for local authorities to use them, many authorities were unwilling to invest in buildings that might eventually be handed back to their owners.

By May 1946, perhaps inspired by similar actions in Scotland, a Scunthorpe cinema projectionist named James Fielding (who had been living in his place of work) decided to take matters into his own hands and move his family into an officer’s mess at a local abandoned radar base. An interview with Fielding was then shown in cinemas nationwide, stirring up resentment and frustration with the housing crisis, and sparking a national movement to squat empty military bases. It seems that “once people realised that it could be done, it was done, all over the country” (Burnham 2009:2), and cabinet minutes record the Home Secretary reporting 931 camps occupied by the end of September, with some estimates putting the total number of squatters at over 40,000 in England and Wales (Watson 2016:1). The immediate public reaction was sympathetic, with mainstream media—including even right-wing tabloids who were keen to frame squatting as representing a failure of the socialist welfare state—portraying the action as continuing a blitz spirit of “robust common sense”, self-determination, and pragmatism (Watson 2016:70). For many, like the *Nottingham Evening Post* (1946), the squatters were morally justified because “empty houses constitute a provocation to desperate, homeless workers”, and they called upon “the Government to legalise the position by requisitioning all properties taken over by the squatters and thus fulfil their election pledge to house the people”. The squatters also found support from the Communist Party (who had criticised government plans to use camps for housing prisoners and Polish troops who did not want to

return to USSR-occupied Poland) and even from within the Labour Party itself (such as Alderman Henry Hennessey [Bristol] who celebrated the squatting as “requisitioning by the people”; Watson 2016:94).

Such public support for “Home Front squatting” in decommissioned service camps, however, was in direct contrast with the actions that followed. Less than half an hour walk south from Grenfell Tower is Duchess of Bedford House where, on 8 September 1946, elected Communist Party councillors took the risky decision to escalate the squatting by moving residents from Kensington’s poorest communities into luxury flats. Bedford House had been previously requisitioned during the war to house Gibraltarian refugees, but was now empty and had been offered back to the Conservative-dominated Kensington council in order to help alleviate the post-war housing situation. Yet they had refused the offer, instead opting to return the house to their legal owners (the Prudential Assurance Company who, incidentally, are one of the key backers of the St Edward development today) in order to re-let them at upmarket rents (Watson 2016). The action—which became known as “The Great Sunday Squat”—sought to draw attention to this, as well as put pressure on the government to make it a *duty* for local authorities to requisition properties for temporary residential purposes. Attracting around 1000 people on the first day, overflow squats were later established in Marylebone, Regent’s Park, Buckingham Palace Road, and the Ivanhoe Hotel in Bloomsbury. Reflecting some local sympathy, squatters were offered food, stoves and camp-beds from local organisations (such as the Women’s Royal Voluntary Service) and there were even reports of police helping to move furniture.

For the Communist Party activists, it was simply unacceptable that empty buildings were not being utilised in the middle of a housing crisis, and they declared that “if no immediate steps were taken by the council to requisition properties it would assist the homeless to take them over” (Watson 2016:90). This was also a continuation of Party-led actions which took place before and during the war that, while stopping short of industrial action, maintained pressure on the government to address housing inequalities. In one fascinating example, perhaps one of the most iconic images of the home front—London’s citizens sheltering from the blitz in underground stations—was *itself* a result of Communist squatters who defied Churchill’s orders to lock station gates and broke-in to allow the public to shelter there (it was only after this action, a month later, that using stations for public shelter become government policy). In another particularly daring instance, Party activists squatted the luxury bomb shelter at the Savoy Hotel, making “the political point of contrasting the provision that was available for wealthy people with that available for the working class” (Watson 2016:35). As with the unequal distribution of safe and secure shelter in London today, as revealed by the Grenfell fire, such actions sought to highlight the material and representational inequalities of the city in 1946.

The Great Sunday Squat also echoed notions of housing entitlement today, such as the moral panic around the St Edward flats. The occupation of the luxury apartments at Bedford House was similarly criticised and did not receive the same moral support as the military camps, seeming to overstep some hallowed limits of property entitlement. While Bevan, for instance, had reluctantly allowed the

squatted military camps to remain in occupation—albeit with some open criticism for misdirecting valuable resources and “queue-jumping” waiting lists—cabinet minutes record the government’s position that squats in luxury flats were one step too far, and that “it might be necessary to use a certain amount of force to secure respect for property”.<sup>6</sup> Attempts were also made to reassert property norms by the media, with *The Sheffield Star*, for instance, commenting that the Kensington squatters were a threat to “the sanctity of private property” that “if left unchecked could only result in chaos” (Watson 2016:107). The cabinet therefore decided to restore “the premises to their rightful owners” and that, unlike the emergency reconnection of utilities at some squatted camps, “no facilities for cooking, etc. should be given”.<sup>7</sup> Resurrecting 14<sup>th</sup> century laws around “Conspiracy to Trespass”, five Communist Party councillors were arrested and charged as part of an attempt to send a clear message to would-be squatters which, according to a cabinet memo by the Attorney General on 16 September, may have had “a depressing effect on those who were organising further activities”, including a plan to occupy Kensington Palace (Bridges 1946).

And yet Labour were also careful to be seen as having “sympathy for ‘ordinary people’ seeking to put a roof over their head in order to avoid the danger of creating Communist martyrs” (Webber 2012:140), and there is evidence that the cabinet saw the squatters at Bedford House as enough of a threat that they should be listened to, recognised, and treated with caution and calculation (especially as they symbolised wider grievances with the post-war housing situation). The cabinet agreed, therefore, that alternative accommodation should be found for the squatters and that their position on the all-important housing waiting list should not be affected. For the activists, these material concessions were taken as a victory, and they vacated Bedford House on 20 September to a marching band, before being bussed to temporary accommodation at dormitories, hostels, and a disused retirement home.

In addition to these material concessions, however, there is evidence from cabinet minutes that the actions of both the Home Front squatters and the Great Sunday Squat were also effective in raising the voices and appearances of the urban poor, putting pressure on the government to both encourage local authorities to actually *use* requisitioning powers, as well as speed-up the national house-building programme. Following the decisions on how to deal with the squatters, the cabinet minutes note that “in the course of the discussion recorded in the previous minute, *the Minister of Health* drew attention to the gravity of the housing situation in London”.<sup>8</sup> Apparently compelled by the actions, Bevan pointed out that the government’s target of 750,000 homes was not progressing uniformly across the country and that, in London especially, there was now a serious housing shortage. He subsequently made two requests to the cabinet. The first was that some empty London hotels which were being de-requisitioned might be taken over by local authorities for temporary housing (which had been the Communist Party’s position all along). Chancellor Dalton, however, rejected this, pointing out that hotels would be needed for buyers as part of the export drive and the 150,000 tourists they were hoping to attract to London in 1947. Housing, it seemed, was not even a priority within the Labour Party, with Dalton

commenting on a separate occasion that the government's priorities should be "first exports, second capital investment, then the needs and amenities of the family" (Webber 2012).

Bevan's second proposal, however, was to speed up the process of moving state departments out of properties requisitioned during the war, so that they might be used for temporary housing in the city. He added that "the low priority given, in de-requisitioning, to flats normally let at high rentals should also be reconsidered",<sup>9</sup> suggesting that the squatters had been somewhat successful in making the case for even empty luxury properties being utilised for housing. Subsequently, an additional 6000 requisitioned properties were used for temporary housing in London over the course of the next year, as licences for private building work were reduced, and Bevan instigated a "Put the Roofs On" initiative to complete 30,000 homes already under construction by Christmas (Watson 2016:116). According to Burnham (2009:4–5), such decisions suggest the squatters "contributed to the high priority of housing ... specifically council housing in public policy in the ensuing years and decades" and it wasn't until the Conservatives returned to power in 1951 that Harold Macmillan "cleverly responded to the need for numbers of new houses" by "cutting standards, incentivising high-rise, promoting the 'residualisation' of council housing, and replacing true direct investment with council borrowing" (2009:9).

This cabinet reaction to the post-war squatting movements demonstrates that, *despite* the domination of property ownership norms (as enacted, for example, by the different ways in which the Home Front and Bedford House squatters were treated, or the reluctance to use empty luxury flats for emergency housing), direct actions can heighten the voices and appearances of "the poor", offering the potential to break through dominant property distributions, and act against material and aesthetic norms by creating an "intervention in the visible and the sayable" (Ranci re 2010:38). In the middle of a housing crisis which is dominated and perpetuated by property ownership norms that justify speculation on empty properties and tie together tenure with political power, direct housing action (like squatting) holds the possibility of demonstrating a "world in which their argument counts as an argument ... for those who do not have the frame of reference enabling them to see it as one" (Ranci re 2010:39). Through re-remembering the post-war squatting movements, we therefore rediscover a politics of *effraction* or "forced entry" which "carries something of the violence of a revolutionary tradition ... in refiguring the division of the sensory to allow the speech of [the poor] to be heard" (Davis 2010:99). Put differently, a politics of forced entry is that which allows an "irruption of the so-far invisible, unheard, part of no part" (Bassett 2016:287) or a politics which can "make non-sense appear" (Burgum 2018) and, by rediscovering this tradition, we might well open up the possibility for similar actions in the present.

## Conclusions

Grenfell Tower was symbolic of an unequal urban landscape, closely tied to (material and aesthetic) norms around property entitlement, ownership, and who can



stake a claim to security and safety in the city. This paper has sought to unsettle these norms through a genealogical approach, making cutting historical comparisons with a post-war housing crisis which, in contrast, saw such property norms temporarily overlooked by the state in the face of crisis and direct housing action. This demonstrates how normative claims that we simply cannot redeploy empty properties for fear of intruding into property rights are not fixed, but context dependent. In the post-war period, it was instead considered a national *scandal* that empty properties might be protected in the middle of a housing crisis, and for the squatters, the “ownership of property was a secondary consideration to the fact that it is empty” (Watson 2016:101). While post-war governments were certainly reluctant to undermine property entitlements, the archives suggest a recognition that if empty derequisitioned properties were simply allowed to return to the market (as had been the plan for Bedford House) then “only the most wealthy would get consideration” (Watson 2016:106).

This paper has also sought to address the way property norms intersect with aesthetics, insofar as tenure is linked to the ability to be heard or seen on the city’s political landscape. “After the war”, claims Webber (2012:144), “the acts of the squatters were as close as Britain came to revolution”, and through comparison with these movements, it has been the intention to rediscover an often-overlooked legacy of direct action. By returning to these actions which gained some material and aesthetic concessions we might open up possibilities for the return of a “politics of forced entry” in the present. It has perhaps not been a coincidence, at a time when property ownership has become such a major source of division and inequality (particularly since the financial crisis), that attempts have been made to close down such possibilities. The 2012 criminalisation of squatting in domestic properties, for instance, could be interpreted as

... an attempt to protect the ongoing commodification of housing at a moment when many people are looking for alternatives that reassert the cultural, social, and political value of housing as a universal necessity and as a source of social transformation ... seek[ing] to uphold the sanctity of private property and defend the interests of ‘hard-working homeowners’ against squatters. (Vasudevan 2017:7)

But through a genealogical approach, we can recover a tradition of direct housing action, as historical comparisons enable us to realise that we have before (and can again) enact property differently.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Atkinson and Blandy (2016).
- <sup>2</sup> All census data from the London Data Store.

- <sup>3</sup> n=5321. This poll also found differences along party lines, with 81% Labour voters in favour, but only 40% Conservative voters.
- <sup>4</sup> CM(45)15 (1945) "Cabinet Conclusions." <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9170970> (last accessed 7 December 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> CM(45)15 (1945) "Cabinet Conclusions." <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9170970> (last accessed 7 December 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> CM(46)80 (1946) "Cabinet Conclusions." <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D7662967> (last accessed 7 December 2017).
- <sup>7</sup> CM(46)80 (1946) "Cabinet Conclusions." <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D7662967> (last accessed 7 December 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> CM(46)82 (1946) "Cabinet Conclusions." <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-i28-6.pdf> (last accessed 7 December 2017).
- <sup>9</sup> CM(46)82 (1946) "Cabinet Conclusions." <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-i28-6.pdf> (last accessed 7 December 2017).

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