



Water #Failures and Social Housing

written by Caterina Sartori
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Public and media discourses about housing estates are replete with highly problematic narratives of failure, riddled with classed and racialised tropes that cast estates, and especially modernist high-rise housing estates, as “failed buildings inhabited by failing people” (Campkin 2013). Such narratives are at the basis of arguments to demolish these buildings, a phenomenon that is widespread across London and Britain and which more often than not results in the displacement of working-class communities that inhabit them (Lees *et al.*, 2008,



Slater 2009). It is my aim to recast such narratives and develop an ethnographically informed understanding of what failure is from the point of view of residents who live on a modernist housing estate in south London where for the last five years I have been researching the politics of urban regeneration, gentrification and demolition of social housing.

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Running through my research are stories and experiences about the failures of the water infrastructure: I was literally inundated by them. Observing how my neighbours and friends are engaged in a daily ongoing collective work of cajoling, encouraging, pushing and forcing the local authority to maintain a dry, warm and clean physical environment in and around their homes, whilst also witnessing the failure of the institutions to maintain a functioning water infrastructure, encouraged me to put water centrestage. Whilst residents have little control over how their water infrastructure is maintained, they assert their agency and influence on a daily basis, with mixed outcomes.

Infrastructural approaches

The anthropological literature on infrastructure (e.g. Larkin 2013) teaches us that infrastructures are steeped in political and social dynamics and do not exist outside of them- an ethnographic look at water infrastructures provides me then with a critical lens with which to tackle these two notions, 'housing estates' and 'failure', and locate them historically and politically.



The building's water plan

A further reason why water infrastructures are a useful tool for this project is because they speak of the past, present and future of the estate: they were central to the architectural concept of the estate when it was built; they are central to the lived experience of those residing on the site and relying on those infrastructures in their daily life; and they are also central in the narratives around the estate's demolition. A close look at this particular infrastructure therefore affords an insight into the arch of emergence and demise of modernist housing estates: a historical trajectory that links the drive of the State to provide quality council housing to working-class Londoners, to the withdrawal of that responsibility through the privatisation of housing provision and public land. In the telling of this history through water, I move away from an idea of council estates as failing spaces home to failing people, to a historicised view of institutional neglect and managed decline; and of the practices imbued with agency of dwelling within neglect.



A bit of background

The estate where I conducted my research was built in the 1960s-70s to house about 7000 people. It is constructed in a modernist style, founded on principles of functionalism, the use of exposed raw concrete and a preference for system-building. Central to architectural modernism's concern are principles of flow, connection and social cohesion. At its heart was a drive to construct functional and inexpensive buildings for housing large sectors of the population. Today, most of the residents on the estate where I work continue to be social housing tenants, and a minority are private owners who bought their flats at a discount thanks to the 'Right to Buy' government scheme. It was a matter of fact that at the time of building, the estate would be fitted with all modern mod-cons, including running water, sanitation and heating: the new housing estates were to be modern and healthy buildings, as opposed to the Victorian tenements and terraces they were replacing, which were described in a 1973 documentary film as a "higgeldy piggledy mess of deplorable little houses", "mean little streets crammed full of houses", and families living in "murky drafts", enveloped in smoke and bad smells. The architectural features of the modern buildings represented a revolution in lifestyle that projected the urban working-class into the future, into a new era of salubrity and comfort.

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Almost since it was built, the estate was however described as a failed building in the architectural and general press: an architectural, urban planning failure based on a distorted modernist vision, doomed to fail as a social experiment of community building and provision of inexpensive housing for working-class Londoners. In the decades after its construction, the estate was structurally neglected, subject to chronic underinvestment and a practice of managed decline,



and the narrative of failure came to encompass buildings and people alike. This history is not particular to the estate I research in. The decision to regenerate the estate in the late 90s is also not particular to this building complex, as is the 2005 decision to demolish the buildings entirely rather than refurbish them, as previously planned. Since 2005, therefore, the estate has been under a 'demolition' regime, with works progressing very slowly. The general feeling among residents is that the estate has been in urgent need of care and repair for decades, but that the proposed plans will not benefit the current residents, who will be displaced by the project. The local authority agrees on the state of disrepair of the buildings, and argues that they have reached the end of their lifespan – they are beyond repair and they should be demolished. Beyond the debates about responsibility and blame, are the lived experiences of those who experience living within disrepair on a daily basis.



The roof garden.

Water, interrupted

I used to visit my neighbour Victoria often, but one particular visit is vivid in my memory: it was a cold winter's afternoon, and as I entered her welcoming and homely living room, she hugged me and we started catching up on what had been



happening over the last few months while I had been away. I asked her about the state of the heating and the hot water – had they been cutting out regularly, like the previous winters when I lived nextdoor to her, or had there been an improvement? Victoria rolled her eyes, reassured me nothing had changed and went on to recount about one particularly distressing January evening that she spent huddled under a blanket on her couch, wearing a hat, scarf and two pairs of trousers, the heating off once again, thinking about “how the council want to take our homes away from us”, and despairing about the next steps in her life. She is normally a cheerful and optimistic woman, and it was painful to see her so despondent. The lack of heat becomes more than a temporary physical sensation, however uncomfortable: it is an existential threat that encompasses the very idea of dwelling and living emplaced in a flat or a building, in a neighbourhood and a community (Fennel, 2015).

The breakdown of the water and heating systems becomes a dehumanising experience that increases the sense of insecurity and precariousness as the shadow of demolition darkens.

When I started my research it quickly became clear that water management was and remains a major issue impacting residents’ lives. Water leaks and floods are incredibly common. During the two winters I lived on the estate, district heating system interruptions were weekly occurrences, leaving entire buildings devoid of heating and hot water for days on end. It has become standard that during Christmas, the services will be off – they have been for three years running now. At the worst of times, the entire water supply is curtailed to allow for maintenance to be carried out. Residents spend vast amounts of time and energy dealing with these issues, in groups and as individuals, and talk about them almost incessantly, in the lift, with friends, in groups. Often it is the first questions that they ask each other when meeting: “Is your heating been working?” “I haven’t had a shower today, the water supply was off”.

The breakdown and dysfunction in a system that is meant to seamlessly deliver



water and warmth without drawing much attention to itself, is for the residents more than a simple lack of material comfort. It becomes a dehumanising experience that increases the sense of insecurity and precariousness as the shadow of demolition darkens. It creates an unequal hydraulic citizenship (Anand 2017) which deprives them of the fundamental provision of water and in so doing makes their homes not fit for living in. The local authority argues that the system is beyond repair, and a reason to demolish the complex. Residents like Victoria argue that the local authority is purposefully neglecting the upkeep of the infrastructure, making their homes unlivable so that residents will move out fast and make the buildings available for demolition. Many think that the council is withholding repairs as a tactic to grind people down and force them out by exhaustion.

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Victoria thinks it important to hold the local authority accountable – she regularly reports any breakdowns, leaks, heating interruptions and other problems to the phone repair line, although this often means spending half an hour or more on hold waiting for a skeptical attendant to register the complaint. With the help of the self-organised group of homeowners she is an active part of, she decided that a more public approach was needed, and submitted a question to the local cabinet meeting in their slot allocated to questions from citizens. As we waited to enter the meeting room, Victoria was nervous. Going over her papers she needed reassurance; what supplementary questions should she ask, if she gets a chance? We attended as a group, myself with a video camera to witness the event, and others to give her moral support, but when she was called, she had to get up and sit alone in front of the assembled cabinet, a room full of public observers behind her. Her voice trembled as she broke the rules of the assembly and rather than asking a supplementary question, she explained again how upset she was at having to spend days without running water, without receiving any support from the housing officers who work from an office at the foot of her building. Whilst



she spoke most cabinet members buried their head in their papers and Ipads. The councillor for housing responded with sentences Victoria and her neighbours had heard time and time again: the council takes its responsibility as a landlord seriously, it is unacceptable that there are so many outages, but the system is old and centralised, and it cannot withstand severe weather. Promises of more funding for repairs were made. Victoria would have liked to say more, especially about compensation, but the leader of the council cut her short and advised her to argue for a policy change in regards to how compensation would be granted in another forum. The next agenda item was called. Victoria had heard similar statements of good intentions before and was skeptical of what by then felt like mere lip service: the problem never seemed to go away, and the recurring mood of these interactions is one where her interlocutors grossly ignore or brush aside the gravity of the situation, leaving residents with the distinct impression that their access to a basic service such as water is not of vital and fundamental importance.

Conclusions

Victoria and many other residents who organise themselves in tenants & residents associations and informal residents networks, speak of being engaged in an everyday battle with the local authority to maintain a functioning, safe and clean environment in and around their homes, especially in relation to the management of water. Their engagement in this sense takes many different forms, of which Victoria's holding the administration publicly accountable is just one.

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The residents' daily labour of living within and battling against a system of 'managed decline' is in their understanding closely related to the demolition



regime which they are subordinated to. The ethnography of a failure to deliver services related to a basic necessity – such as water – therefore centres and questions the ‘urban regeneration’ project itself, the allocation of maintenance funds and services, and the influence (or lack thereof) that social housing residents’ voices have in the management of their homes. Such an ethnographic approach asks us to fundamentally question the trope of housing estate failure as a failure of a social project, an architecture and its residents, and centres instead the failures of the administration to maintain and deliver vital services, and the agency and commitment of residents to safe housing.

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