A Matter of "Co-opportunism": (In)Alienability in London Social Housing

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of temporary urban residency. It looks at the relationships between domesticity, mobility and improvisational housing – all relevant to Britain's housing crisis. Hence, I offer a reflexive ethnographic description of 'short-life' co-op living based on a five year account of managing vacant properties that await refurbishment or re-development by two major Charitable Housing Trusts based in West London. In questioning how tenants deal with the constant threat of having to move, I ask how members of a short-life housing co-op create their own sense of self and stability through a temporary form of accommodation. My goal is thus to investigate how these co-op tenants appropriate space, relocate themselves and cope with transient domestic alienability. The creative formulation of individual and community identities are central to the wider understanding and implications of residential instability, alternative lifestyles and the general underlying ethos of co-operative organizations.
[Keywords: alternative residency; mobility; co-operatives; opportunism; alienability; London UK].

Man is the creature of circumstances.
Robert Owen (1813)

With these often cited and contested words, the Welsh utilitarian and grandfather of the British co-operative movement reminds us of the importance of opportunism in defining our very humanity. This paper is about seizing opportunities and "making do" in the context of the difficult financial circumstances of residing in London for people on low incomes. It is also about "Reclaiming the Economy" insofar as it explores the vernacular improvisations within everyday home economics. The paper provides an

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ethnographic and autobiographical account of being part of, and helping to manage, a small co-operative housing scheme of approximately forty members. It outlines some of the versatility needed to cope with an alternative form of short-life tenancy in order to temporarily obtain social housing through semi-official channels. My objective is to examine how a small group of West Londoners are involved with reclaiming the informal economy of vacant, sub-standard properties whilst these dwellings await refurbishment prior to being redistributed to their sanctioned Housing Trust tenants. Through a series of conceptual associations that deal with the ways in which co-op members negotiate various tensions between alienability and inalienability, the paper provides a broad overview on a form of transient urban domesticity. In this sense, it is largely a thought piece on the nature of what I am calling residential "co-opportunism."

Methodologically this paper grounds itself in an ethnographic study with autobiographical undertones (Okely and Callaway 1992; Okely 1996; Radin 1963; Reed-Danahay 1997). Edmund Leach who defended such an approach towards the end of his life and whose Lancashire ancestry in Rochdale had such important connections with the onset of the co-operative movement noted "ethnographers must admit the reflexivity of their activities; they must become autobiographical" (1987:12). Despite the heightened discourse over reflexive issues, it is remarkable that twenty years later so few anthropologists have produced autobiographical descriptions of ethnographic scenarios that are of empirical and political significance (Holman-Jones 2005; Norman 2000).

My fieldwork on co-op housing in London involved a participation in the day to day experiences of an organization to which I belonged as a member for seven years and was the treasurer for the last five. This included sharing flats; accompanying and helping several members in their relocations; attending administrative meetings, working with the executives and playing a part in decision making processes; conducting semi-structured interviews with members; and finally, keeping a photographic record and video archive (with the eventual aspiration of collaboratively making a short documentary film).

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I initially joined the co-op out of necessity, not with the intention of studying it. This study is autobiographical in terms of my own circumstances – I never went to the field for this project, it came to me. Yet within weeks of joining I was already implicating myself as a participant observer, too tempted by the prospect of better understanding this unorthodox residential situation.

Many scholars have investigated homelessness and social housing schemes (Clapham and Kintrea 1991; Cloke and Milbourne 2006; Fitzpatrick and Pawson 2007). But few anthropologists have been interested in the co-operative movement (McAllister 2005; Vargas-Cetina 2005) and fewer still have empirically tackled the issue of transient

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co-operative residency. Cooper and Rodman's monograph (1992) on housing cooperatives in Toronto still remains one of the exceptions. The present study looks at the relationships between domesticity, mobility and improvisational housing – all pertinent empirical issues related to the housing problems of urban areas. In questioning how tenants deal with the constant threat of having to move, I ask how members of a short-life housing co-op create their own sense of self and stability through a temporary form of accommodation. In so doing, I examine how these co-op tenants appropriate space, relocate themselves and cope with domestic transience. The question of how people deal with feelings of alienation in relation to the home has significant theoretical precedents in British social anthropology, especially in the work of Wallman (1984), Miller (1988; 2001), Rapport and Dawson (1998) and Chapman and Hockey (1999).

Figure 1. Caption: Sieving through the objects left behind after a member abandoned his flat (Photo A. Snow, 2005)

With this background in mind, I embarked on a personal reflexive ethnographic description of short-life co-op living and management. In exploring the complex dynamics of temporary urban residency, my conceptual focus is to understand dwelling through movement, residency via relocation and the reified conceptualization of the home vis-à-vis an unstable but flexible low-cost living arrangement. I argue that the tenants are largely domestic "bricoleurs" and that most members achieve an inalienable mastery of movement.

Co-op background

The shortage of affordable accommodation in Britain's cities, especially in the rented market, has been widely reported in the media and official government reports and academic analyses (Bramley et al. 2000; Cave 2007; Evans 1996). A rising interest in the UK's housing plight is currently taking place, particularly in London (Smith et al. 2001). The onset of the present social housing study coincides with the growing con cern for the sustainability of urban environments which is at the center of popular attention, not only in the South-East but also nationally and even internationally (Satterthwaite 1999). There is a

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plethora of contradictory information about semi-official forms of social housing schemes like short-life housing co-ops which provide an alternative route to accessing cheap and flexible accommodation (Crane and Warnes 2000; Raimy 1979). The tenants of these types of housing organizations are often misrepresented in government statistics. They are seen as homeless and their properties are considered vacant. Or they are counted as permanent residents in order to understate the number of dilapidated lodgings or people with no fixed abode. Additionally, these residents are not able to obtain a level of statutory housing rights equivalent to those received by similar Council or Trust tenants. Hence, they are often discriminated against when claiming certain types of housing benefit and are rarely eligible for the same advantages given to regular "sitting" tenants.

Of course the tenancy of short-life housing is based on this *quid pro quo* model – that is, relatively cheap rent and easy access to what is generally a highly rigid and formalized housing system at the expense of limited tenancy rights. Given the legal rights of its sitting tenants and the complexities of re-housing them as well as the significant costs involved in the structural refurbishment of a large dwelling with many separate units, several of the more decrepit residences owned by a Housing Trust will be taken out of official circulation each year once the tenant voluntarily leaves or dies. To prevent such sub-standard flats from being vandalized or squatted and to obtain some revenue from them, most Housing Trusts have devised various management strategies. These range from leasehold selling through to negotiating short-life tenancy agreements with housing co-operatives which become Trust tenants as collectives but whose individual members acceptingly waive the possibility of being personally recognized as official Trust residents. As a result, the background of the average short-life co-op member is not one that originates from the most economically vulnerable sectors of society. Hence, these people can often afford to opt out or at least generate alternative means of coping with such constraints. This rather privileged and voluntary transience of what is effectively a middle class cohort of residents is a further angle of interest.[1]

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In 1974 the Labour Government's Housing Act signalled a new era of expansion for housing associations as publically funded inner city regeneration agencies. One outcome was the large-scale acquisition of rundown dwellings from private landlords; the intention being to progressively upgrade the stock concerned, with access to tenancies subsequently being determined according to relative housing need (Malpass 2000). Tenant-controlled housing organizations based on co-operative principles became popular in the wake of these developments. There was a significant propagation in the capital during the 1980s. The co-op for my case study was set up in 1980/1 by a group of students, many from Imperial College London who were studying on an MSc course entitled "Social and Economic Aspects of Science and Technology in Industry."

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Until recently one of the founding instigators, now a reputable bioengineer, had listed the following community involvement in his online CV:

> A sideline whilst at Imperial was the development of techniques for living in luxury at minimal cost! I established a company – the "X-Housing Co-operative Ltd" – which licensed squatting, and thus lived in trendy Notting Hill for £3.50 per week.

This co-op has consistently had between twenty and forty members and has managed from twenty to thirty properties at any given time. Members join through word of mouth, often by referral from friends already in the co-op. There is a rather balanced gender ratio, and the background of members as far as age, ethnicity and economic diversity is concerned is remarkably homogenous, consisting almost exclusively of middle-class, white Anglo-Europeans between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five.

The organization is of "fully mutual" status which means that collectively the membership provides all skills and resources for its own administration. It has a formal constitution and rules for members which have been officially registered with the UK's Friendly Societies Association (FSA). The founding member quoted above noted in a recent email to me that:

> Being a student collective imparted a fairly radical, anti-Thatcher ethos. The funding for Registration under the Friendly Societies Act came from the College itself, and part of the impetus came from the Student Welfare Officer, both concerned with the problems of housing students in London. Initially the houses were from Richmond Churches Housing Trust.

Since the co-op is legally accountable to the FSA through the provision of an annual financial return verified by a certified accountant, it is potentially open to a full audit and its three managing secretaries are liable for fraud. Other than that, the co-op does not have any dealings with or obligations to any other official body, save the two Charitable Housing Trusts in West London from which it acquires its properties.[2] This occurs on the basis of temporary let tenancies, with indefinite agreements on the time spans for the residences. These are predominantly Victorian terraced flats that range from small studios through to four-bedroom lodgings. The co-op, which rents directly from these two Trusts under Licence Agreement, functions as the legal landlord in the renting of these accommodations. The members act on its behalf as the custodians of the property in which they live. They are thus responsible for paying the rent and amenity bills as well as for moving out within a

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Figure 2. Caption: Moving networks (Photo by author, 2000)

minimum notice period of twenty-eight days once the Trust, for whatever reason, cancels the agreement. Accepting this transience is the means by which people who are not usually eligible for permanent accommodation by such Trusts or the local Councils can gain access to low cost social housing (Pawson et al. 2000).

Presently most members are not students largely because, as the founding membership finished university, they began introducing an older cohort of work colleagues to the co-op. Only recently from my own involvement as a managing secretary has the co-op's student numbers increased from two or three in 2000 to about eight or nine in 2007. A significant point about ideology needs to be addressed at this stage because, in a sense, there is both little regard for the ideological principles of the co-operative movement amongst the current membership and too much consolidation of these principles into the opinions and ideals of a select few. This is relevant since historically the co-op was founded on strong ideological grounds which were informed by non-conformity and the rejection of standard socio-political systems, particularly the ruling Conservative government of the time. Over the years such ideological positions have substantially shifted and the main reason most of the recent members get involved is the cheap rent. This provides an interesting contrast to the work of the urban social geographer David Ley (1993) on housing co-operatives as moral landscapes. It is nevertheless clear that current members have a different take on the alienability of temporary domesticity. For example, Oscar (38), a veteran of co-op living who works freelance as a media advertising consultant, remarks about his twelve years of experience:

> Nobody likes getting evicted and the constant shifting around can limit the sort of projects that you get on with where you live. Things like gardening are harder to commit to if you don't

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> know if you'll be somewhere for a week or five years. But for many of us there's no doubt, London's the place to be if we want to progress in our careers so we have to put up with these kinds of drawbacks until we crack through or, well, I hate to say it so bluntly, until we come into some inheritance money.

Co-op members are obviously transient by choice compared to displaced people

Co-op members are obviously transient by choice compared to displaced people. Though, as Oscar reveals, the current situations of people in this group includes a certain paradoxical degree of "imposed choice." Most could not afford to live in London through the more conventional means of renting or buying. They are choosing to live in London but there are certain constrains or scenarios whereby this choice factor is problematic. Some members are somewhat "stuck," yet not like forced migrants or the homeless. One point here is to reveal through examples of this anomalous housing situation that residential choice is a complex matter. So by couching much of the discussion in terms of circumstance, (in)alienability and co-operative opportunism, this paper seeks to address some of these complexities.

Deconstructing the home

In earlier years and other cultures, the boundedness of home and houses was not so readily discernable. Indeed, it had been more versatile (Buchli et al. 2004). Like the notion of the liberal autonomous self, to which the house and the home are bound up in Western traditions, boundaries around the concepts of home and housing are delineated, manifested and contested in many different ways. Since these are largely Western constructions, it is worthwhile looking at ethnographic descriptions to examine contexts that lead to the "modern" formulation of these notions. Using this term modern, one should see it in inverted commas as it is worth keeping in mind that many of the assumptions inherent in concepts we use to found our arguments can be turned around to reveal a completely different paradigm (see Latour 1993). This is also the case for how modernity relates to the social constructions of domesticity and the everyday.

It is important to briefly review and challenge the existing theoretical literature on the house/home since much of it is founded upon a set of assumptions about domesticity that urban transient co-op residency questions and ultimately re-problematizes. The 20th century modern model of European housing was intended by its urban bourgeois and professional creators to provide locations for domestic activities that would include minimum spaces for eating, cooking, resting, bathing, socialising and leisure pursuits, while providing basic amenities for hygiene and health. Undifferentiated space was chaotic and wasteful. The proposed ideal minimum consisted of a room for family collective

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activities (lounge/dinning room), a small efficient kitchen, a bathroom, and rooms for parents and children of each sex. Many European governments developed plans for working-class housing schemes that did not even meet these standards. Through post 2nd World War mass produced housing, the home ceased to be a place of production and instead became a locus of consumption. The domestic was commodified (Miller 1988).

The notions of house and home have frequently been conflated in recent times by the media as well as the building and real estate industries as a means of promoting home ownership. The governments of advanced capitalist economies have actively endorsed the conflation of house, home, and family as part of broader ideological agendas aimed at increasing economic efficiency and growth. There is a shift in European modernity regarding the welfare state's burden of responsibility to its citizens, away from governments towards the home of the nuclear family. In light of this social restructuring, owner occupied housing has increased, public housing has decreased and discourses of housing tenure have started to feature in the meaning of what homes and houses actually are. Scholars who examine home ownership state that the abode is a source of identity and status as well as a source of ontological family security, especially in terms of financial investment (Anderson and Sim 2000).

Amongst the many interesting things that early studies on homelessness reveal is that home, houses and domesticity are highly contested places. Indeed, the concept of homelessness raised in Mary Douglas's and Aaron Wildavsky's (1982) work on risk is rich in meanings and symbolisms. For instance, danger and comfort are simultaneously present. This hints at the development of hugely important structuralist approaches in the study of housing such as language-like models, influenced by developments in semiotics (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; de Saussure 1916). This resulted in the post-structural interest in deconstructing the notion of home, where dwelling became an active, not passive, phenomenon (Duncan 1981). House or residence is where we live, but the concept of home is much more about how we live.

Home is a process always in the making

Home is a process always in the making. It is a constant work in progress. It is routine and part of the everyday yet also concerned with the performative in the sense of knowledge being enacted through action and relationships. Thus, home is always embedded in a series of tensions. It may evoke security in one context and seem confining in another. Scholars who employ such an approach in understanding the meaning of home are not setting up oppositions but dialectics. They merge tensions to create a new unexpected outcome – unseen pathways or avenues of thought and experience (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 1999; Miller 2001; Pink 2004).

Some of the recent lessons about mobility from phenomenologically influenced conceptualizations and approaches are that the com-

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plexities and dialectics of the domestic arena grows in terms of dealing with concerns for the embedded and the embodied (Winstanley et al. 2002). Delineating the domestic in a phenomenological framework is a deliberate attempt to map out the life-paths of human beings as a progressive move from "home" to "world," or from hearth to cosmos as the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1996) says. With time, people grow into a larger world. In all cultures, one's stages of maturation are celebrated, because at each stage one enters into larger spheres of activity, responsibility and mastery (Jackson 1995). A judgment against patriarchal societies is that women are made to stay in the domestic realm. Similarly, a judgment against hierarchical societies is that members of the lower classes are confined to limited spheres of interaction and subjected to forced migrations, while elites have the possibility of enjoying the world without the fear of forced displacement. They are privileged in being both cosmopolitan and grounded (de Beauvoir 1964). The ideals of co-operative societies seek to extend this privilege to more and more members who once suffered constraint but no longer need to feel that the edge of their home is the edge of their world.

This link, I argue exists between a co-operative ethos and a phenomenological approach, is one that emphasizes empathy. It highlights a concern for being sensitive towards, and thus drawing attention to, people's negative experiences. Thinking in terms of embodiment and agency, the notions of forgetting things as well as the ritual destruction of home have been important in debates about domestic spaces (Bartlett 1932; Forty and Küchler 1999). Ideas about alternative homes such as squatting, house-sitting, narrow boats or barges, caravans and traveller settlements have also been debated (Aiken 1981; Okely 1982; Smart 1985). I situate this paper in these discussions that strive to understand the social significances of alternative housing schemes.

A recent example of highlighting potential inequalities and injustices in the home sphere comes out of considerations for the surveillance or panoptical effects of so-called technologies of well-being (Laviolette and Hanson 2007). Wardhaugh's (1999) work on women's homelessness in Wales is another case. The home then becomes the site where the ego is not only produced but is also contested. Moral subjects are forged, represented, enacted, pathologized, witnessed and judged. Similarly, the focus of interest shifts towards what is taken for granted, the mundane. The everyday is a site of social importance and so are objects that are discarded, not noticed or ridiculed as trivial and meaningless. Wallpaper and waste are heralded for their primal cultural significance. They have as much significance as artefacts said to be powerful, spiritual or special.

The notion of the agency of things is crucial (Gell 1998). In the study of built form, scholars have given precedence to architecture as an end in itself once the physical realization of the design has occurred. In "How Buildings Learn," Stuart Brand (1994) laments this myopic per-

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spective. Inspired by a material culture perspective that takes seriously the histories and agencies of artefacts, he points out the complex social lives of architectural realizations, the biography of buildings.

Share and share dislike

It is interesting when anthropologists share informants, particularly when they are not working in the same field site. This happened when Liz, who had introduced me to the housing co-op, became the informant for a colleague, Jean-Sébastien Marcoux,[3] who had worked on house moving. Liz was a member of the housing co-op in question since her undergraduate days in the early 1990s. She had moved out of the co-op for several years when she went to live in Africa. She later returned to the co-op in the late 1990s. When Liz found out that I had been living with a friend in Northampton upon returning from fieldwork in Cornwall because I could not afford London, she told me about the co-op. I attended a few meetings and eventually got a short term flat in Hammersmith with four other students. Several months later we lost this flat and I had to move into a smaller two bedroom flat in Shepherd's Bush which I shared with one other member. Liz had received a "Notice to Quit" on her place the previous month and had just temporarily moved in with us. We agreed that she would move into the new place with me, especially since we had no particular desire of living with either of the four others who would also need re-housing. The new flat, which the co-op was told would last for some time, was offered to us for a number of reasons: our quick decision of accepting to live together; Liz was a long term member who had just had the bad luck of having to move the previous month; and finally I would speculate that I was shown some favouritism because of the imminent departure of the co-op treasurer – a role (it would soon become clear) that I was being set up for and soon assumed.

Jean-Sébastien and his partner Hélène helped me clean, paint and set up the new flat. Once it was ready, after an intense week of physical labor, Liz helped me move my things with her car. She had a change of heart a couple of days later, when it was time for her to move. She had a difficult time writing and re-adjusting to London so decided to pack in her Ph.D. and return to Africa where her partner was still living. As she prepared to move her things into the loft of her mother's house, I assisted. Jean-Sébastien was also nominally invited because she knew him enough to realize his professional interest in the moving process (Marcoux 2001; 2004). She quickly became a source of information for him. She also became an interesting hindsight informant for my own co-op project because she ended up revealing a certain disinterest in the significance of short-life dwellings.

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Some residents see such flats as disposable commodities which become alienable forms of accommodation

Some residents see such flats as disposable commodities which become alienable forms of accommodation (Weiner 1992). Moving into them is downplayed and internal moves (from one co-op flat to another) are taken for granted. These types of residences are obviously different and Liz's departure was articulated as a serious event, a lifelong, lifestyle choice. Wallman (1998) suggests that such moves away from the co-op become a move away from one opportunity towards another. Yes, it was something she had done before when she had left earlier. But there is a sense in the co-op that leaving burns certain bridges, that there are many diminishing returns. Liz's move was indicative of accepting a considerable change of circumstances.

What happened to me after this can be summarized as a series of fairly rapid flatmate transitions for the next three years. Some I got on well with and others less so. The first, a revived dandy and shoe maker, fits into the latter category mostly because he moved his elderly father into the flat after about a month without officially advising the co-op. He had initially said that it was a temporary measure but months passed. Only when Jean-Sébastien joined the co-op and moved in for a few months before his return to Montreal,[4] Gene did ask his father to find another place. The two new flatmates did not get on especially well either. One night Jean-Sébastien left a note about washing-up etiquette on a dirty saucepan for Gene to discover upon his inebriated return at 3:00am. The next morning, with both of them mysteriously absent, I awoke to find a bloodied stage-prop foot in the same saucepan). Soon Gene was offered his own flat which he had requested even before this incident.

When Jean Sébastien left London a couple of months later, I ended up hosting one of his acquaintances who wanted to do some research in London. Jill (28) had recently completed her M.A. and was exploring options for further study. She noted about her desire to join the co-op:

> Although I need some private space to sleep, be alone, be with people, be untidy, I don't really need sole use of a kitchen, bathroom, washing machine, etc. I'd prefer the next phase of my life to be about shedding rather than accumulating these kind of things, and putting time, income and attention into creating a home with other people who don't have to be the same age as me, nor does it matter if they're single or couples. I've lived communally in various ways at different times – generally that's been very enjoyably. I'm also aware that the conventional wisdom about property ownership, mortgages and long term planning doesn't really work for me [. . .] and provides a route to security which in any case is not available to a huge number of people.

She seemed to neatly fit the co-operative ethos. Her interests in poverty issues and social welfare lent themselves to thinking about the co-op as

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a potential research project. Eventually we began interviewing some co-op members to find out more about their backgrounds and to draw up inventories of possessions and movements. Unfortunately, due to difficulties in coping with London and finding out about a serious family matter, Jill returned home.

Upon the recommendation of a friend Toby (27) moved in and stayed for six months. Nothing significant occurred to sour the living relationship with him. Toby was not very concerned with co-operative values. When Darren (41) a long term member who had been unlucky enough to lose three flats within the year, needed a space, Toby considered a flat we had been offered in White City which was close to his work.

However, he decided to move out of the co-op altogether at the prospect of future transience

However, he decided to move out of the co-op altogether at the prospect of future transience. Since this is the main framework for the functioning of the co-op, I was not forthcoming in suggesting that our flat could be stretched into accommodating three people (which it had in the past) and that he could stay if he wanted. This example reveals one of the constraints that weigh upon members: they are forced to change places, live a transient way of life, and they might also frequently change flatmates. The domestic includes different types of social relations, some internal, some external and others in between given the dynamics of the co-op which means that estranged members might become flatmates.

Move and improve

Another interesting example of moving and co-op decision making concerns a one-bedroom basement flat in the West London borough of Fulham. Nathan, in his late thirties, was the single occupant there for about four years. Fairly unexpectedly, he announced to the co-op that he had had enough of London and was moving to the Dorset countryside within a fortnight. He paid all his bills and returned the keys in early December 2004. Just a short time before the Christmas holidays, things were quiet and we could not arrange a replacement until the second week of January. Nathan had explained that the boiler pipes had recently been leaking and that a crack in the kitchen roof extension which he had mended a couple of years previously had reopened and was occasionally letting in water during extensive rain fall. At the beginning of the New Year I contacted Terry, a friend in his early forties who had been my football coach at college. We had discussed the co-op on occasion in the past and he had always been keen for a cheaper place. But as an unfurnished single flat at £300 a month plus bills, this was not much less than Terry's current furnished bed-sit. His ears perked up, however, when he found out that the option was in Fulham since he had recently joined the community program of the

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Fulham Football Club. I proposed that the place would be cheaper if he agreed to share it with another college student who had recently shown interest. Terry agreed to have a look. We visited the place in the third week of January, now about six weeks after the keys had been returned.

The flat smelt of considerable moisture and was flooded in some areas

The flat smelt of considerable moisture and was flooded in some areas. The crack in the kitchen roof had worsened from the month's neglect and was letting in a considerable amount of water, as was the leaky pipe from the boiler. Terry nevertheless agreed to take the flat if Alan, the student, was also interested. The rent would then drop to £230 each a month and the bills would be shared. He proceeded to try to end his lease early. A week later Alan (37) also saw the place and agreed to move in temporarily, until something else came up. His main interest was joining the co-op and knew that "this is a good first step, even if it means roughing it a little." They agreed to move in by mid-February because Terry wanted two more weeks to strip the walls from the front living room which he had claimed as his room because it was larger than the bedroom. This wall suffered considerably from rising damp, but he felt he could mend that. They inquired whether the co-op could pay to have the leaky kitchen roof sorted out.

The membership secretary Phil agreed that something could be arranged to fix this without involving professionals but rather by using the expertise of co-op members. Phil, who had changed his career from being a TEFOL teacher to painting and decorating, decided that he and I could do a makeshift patch up. We spent a fairly dry early February afternoon doing this. He knew exactly which products to buy and how to lift the tarred felt roof cover to locate the crack. We returned during a subsequent rainy morning to find that the leak had been successfully stopped. There was now, however, a gaping mouldy dank hole in the kitchen ceiling which Phil suggested could be sorted out by the two new tenants with some chicken wire and plaster. I nodded knowingly but without the foggiest idea about how they could go about this.

After a few days Terry had de-plastered the dampest wall in his room down to the bricks. But one day just before they were to move in, Alan found the room completely ransacked with torn painted wallpaper, chip board and plaster dust lying everywhere. Finding the task beyond his patience and DIY abilities, Terry had abandoned his refurbishing plans and rang me up to discuss pulling out of the whole deal. Something else had also come up in his life – an opportunity in the summer to go to America as a college soccer trainer. He would not need the flat for long enough to warrant any more repairs and decided "mate, it makes more sense to put my things into storage now and couch surf for a few months. I'm sorry 'bout this but I really need this job and have too much to do before going to deal with this flat".

Fortunately I could tell him that it was not a serious problem. Another friend from college, Jim, a temporarily unemployed researcher,

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had expressed an interest in a co-op flat, although he was taken aback by the sight of this place. He accepted to move in with Alan, with the stipulation of it being a temporary measure. About six months later an interesting opportunity presented itself which would require a complicated series of relocations. The co-op was offered two large and fairly nice flats in Notting Hill. The biggest, a three bedroom flat, would be ideal for Alan and Jim plus one of their mutual friends who was hoping to join. Who, however, would then take the decrepit Fulham flat? The co-op toyed with the idea of returning it to the Trust as uninhabitable. This, however, is something that we always tried to avoid because we did not want to give the impression that we are not able to find needy tenants. Phil explained this on several occasions at our regular meetings (every six weeks). The words he used on one occasion struck me "we need to be seen as always hungry."

Then my flatmate Darren returned from his annual four month stint in Nicaragua. We had always got on fine but he had moved in as a temporary emergency measure because the co-op lost his flat the year previously. He had always said that "ultimately I'd like my own place again since I'm a loner, quite stuck in my ways and used to having my own space." He was away for a few weeks when the Fulham flat first came up so had missed that opportunity. But when the chance presented itself again, he was thrilled to take it, despite its condition. Having been involved with the co-op for about fifteen years Darren was one of the longest term members. He is from a well-to-do professional family but has never wanted to buy into mainstream society. He has been a landscape gardener in West London since leaving school, Eton no less. He is happier working for himself, earning around £12,000 a year and not being accountable to anybody. His solitary work-life is mirrored in his retiring home-life. When he was given the choice he has always opted to live on his own, even if this meant moving flats unnecessarily, even into places which are more substandard than the average co-op property. I had the opposite attitude. Having seen the new two bedroom flat in Notting Hill, I too thought that I could move. The area and flat were much nicer than the current place in Shepherd's Bush, and I could move in with whomever I chose. This would leave our two-bed flat available for two people from our waiting list who wanted to share. Everyone agreed that this made much more sense than splitting them up by fitting one of them in with me and the other alone in Notting Hill. Four people where relocated and four new people joined the co-op and everyone got what they wanted.

All that was needed for this win – win situation was some flexibility and spontaneity in relation to residential mobility which is not often provided in the mainstream rented market. This is nurtured in this short-life housing co-op through a membership which by necessity is accustomed to transience. Only the assumption, that one does not move unless one has to, needed to be overcome. This was done through

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discussing options, a process available to this small community. Some payoffs and the cutting of corners, however, occur: carpets are removed but not replaced, floorboards are painted but not sanded or stained, walls are painted but rarely ceilings. Yet due to the necessary domestic improvements involved in co-op living and the indeterminate length of time that they will live in a flat, such tenants are constantly engaged in producing homes for themselves in ways that differ from what the average tenant experiences.

Conclusion

In anthropological work about mobility and housing, a distinction can be seen between residential flux (where one lives) and social flux (with whom). In the case of short-life co-ops this distinction is very useful. By examining the changes of addresses, the pressure to move that weigh upon the co-op members, the (desired/forced) displacements, we have witnessed certain changes in residential flux. It is important to point out that even though moving is a constant threat, residential relocations are not constantly occurring. Rather, there is a significant turnover of flatmates internally. Perhaps, this is where the distinction between the residential and the social flux is useful. It reminds us that there are many inalienable social relocations within the co-op itself. The examples described above are about the versatility needed to negotiate domestic relocation. They show ways of fostering a system of "accommodating" improvisation. In order to improve their longer term circumstances, co-op members seize and appropriate certain housing opportunities that are made more or less hap-hazardously available to them. In doing so, they reduce their level of alienation from producing their own accommodation. In other words, the opportunity of house moving here can be seen as work on the home – a way of adding value to an available and under exploited resource within the social housing sector, even if this resource is sub-standard and fleeting because the time span on it is unpredictable.

There is another interpretation, one opposed to the idea of creative opportunistic "home building" that I described. Here the very notion of home as a haven is problematic (Brindley 1999; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Possibly, home is what certain co-op members are not attempting to construct by virtue of their transience. In such a case, home is situated elsewhere or put on hold altogether. Regardless, co-op members are actively involved in at least producing temporary residences for themselves, even if they do not conceive of these ephemeral spaces as "homes." By examining house moving it is possible to emphasize methodological concerns which are less concerned with the discursive, and focus on practice instead. Being rather indifferent as to why people moved, this work opens up the possibility for thinking about questions

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as to how they do so. Who does what and when? How are tasks administered? Which objects do they leave behind? What social networks of assistance are called upon, spontaneously generated or ruptured through the event? All these are interesting questions in situations like short-life housing co-ops where the reason for moving is usually predetermined by outside sources. Additionally, although moving house in the co-op might be much more frequent than in the private sector, it is still experienced as a stressful occurrence that is both intensely physical and highly emotional.

This case study explored the dynamics of alienation and asked how tenants performed their senses of inalienable belonging through moving and short-term habitation (Rapport and Dawson 1998). My larger goal is to apply some of these lessons to an investigation of the general underlying ethos of co-operative organizations. Such a study would help raise the profile that such accommodation schemes have in alleviating the economic housing strain for people with alternative lifestyles. Returning to Marx's (1887) ideological concerns through the lens of the introductory quotation by Robert Owen, this paper exposed some of the relationships between circumstance and the notions of domestic alienability and inalienability. Despite being largely marginalized in contemporary residential terms, tenants of housing co-ops such as the one described here, have regained a sense of creativity and improvisation, if not production, over the means of procuring dwellings for themselves. This situation demonstrates ways in which they have reified co-opportunism and truly revealed their colors as creatures of circumstance.

Notes

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[1]The idea of "voluntary transience" exists in the comparative context whereby situations of imposed transience come to afflict asylum seekers, environmental refugees and other forced migrants in different ways.

[2]Most UK housing Trusts are non-profit registered charities. Many were set up by wealthy philanthropists in the early to mid-20th century to alleviate the socio-economic conditions of the working classes by provision of dwellings and community organizations.

[3]All names are pseudonyms except for Jean-Sébastien Marcoux who gave his consent.

[4]Jean Sébastien and Hélene were expelled from their student accommodation which was scheduled for refurbishment prior to being sold. Hélene moved in for only a couple of weeks before rerunning to Montreal in advance of him.

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