



Resisting gentrification on its final frontiers: Learning from the Heygate Estate in London (1974–2013)



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ABSTRACT

The state-led gentrification and social cleansing of low income tenants from inner London has been ongoing since the late 1990s and continues today. Publicly owned and managed council estates have become the key target of what has been aptly labelled the 'new' urban renewal. Council estates are one of the final gentrification frontiers in London, housing low income tenants in the face of the total gentrification of the city. In this paper we focus on the resistance to gentrification that emerged in and around one of these estates: the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, inner London. The research and some of the activities discussed formed part of a Scholar- Activist project. We discuss three forms of resistance: local civil society network organising to support open master planning through active engagement with planning; self-organised activities to keep the estate open and accessible during the displacement of its residents; and the legal challenges to the Compulsory Purchase Order of the last remaining properties in the form of a CPO Public Inquiry. While unsuccessful in saving the estate from demolition, each form of resistance and their interrelation succeeded in exposing the degree to which the regeneration of Elephant and Castle and its centrepiece demolition of the estate, was/is not in the 'public interest' and in discrediting the local authority's 'regeneration spin'.

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1. Introduction

In 1959, Ruth Glass, the British sociologist who coined the term 'gentrification', was studying the decanting¹ that was happening as part of the post-war slum clearances in North Kensington in inner London; rumour has it that she actually used the term 'gentrification' for the first time then and not in 1964 (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008:4). It is interesting then that over fifty years later, as we write this paper, slum clearances and gentrification are being linked again in inner London, but this time it is the state-led gentrification of council estates that are 'constructed' as 'slums' by local councils and the media in order to impose new programmes of urban renewal, that is gentrification, on them (see Lees, 2014a). Ruth Glass (1964) said nothing about resisting gentrification, but she did say that she wanted neighbourhoods to remain as they were. In fact there has been very little written about resistance to gentrification in London, and only a little in other cities; compare this to the detailed literature out there on pioneer gentrifiers resisting the bulldozers of post-war urban renewal, especially the fight between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses in New York City (see Flint, 2009; Jacobs, 1961; Zipp, 2010). The latter resistance to urban renewal forms

a floating comparator for the issues to be discussed in this paper, for the C21st state-led (or state-facilitated) gentrification of public housing (known as council housing in the UK), the bulldozing of council housing estates and their rebuilding as new-build, mixed income communities (see Bridge, Butler, & Lees, 2011), has very aptly been labelled the 'new' urban renewal (see Hyra, 2008; cr. Lees, 2014a). Indeed, as Hackworth and Smith (2001) state: 'systematic gentrification in the US context dates back to the 1950s and was to some extent part of post-war renewal ...'.

The state-led gentrification and social cleansing of the final gentrification frontiers in inner London – both council estates and low income tenants – have been on-going since the late 1990s and are escalating today (Lees, 2014b). Fenton, Lupton, Arrundale, and Tunstall (2013) argue that in London we see the 'circular nature of commodification and its effects on claims of rights: first the provision of housing to low-income households is opened up to private profit; this in turn legitimates the application of market logic to the rules by which that provision is organised, and the setting of those rules such that poor households are displaced from the city' (p. 378). As recently as 2008 Ley and Dobson identified publicly subsidized housing as a 'barrier to gentrification'. Writing about gentrification in London Butler with Robson (2003: 21) observed that the social housing 'dappling the map of inner London' breaks up gentrification. A decade later and council housing, which constitutes a large portion of social housing in the capital, is under direct threat of gentrification because the contrast between

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¹ In British housing policy, the term 'decant' designates the 'process of moving residents from their homes while improvements are carried out'. See: Glossary, *Inside Housing*, <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/social-housing-glossary/6504654.article>

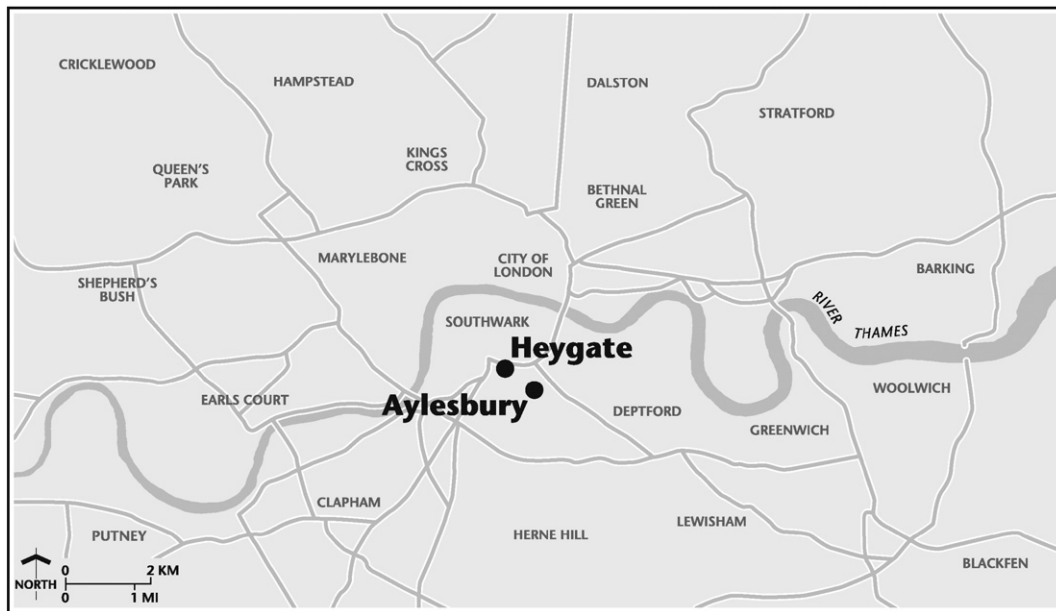


Fig. 1. Map locating the Heygate Estate in London.

disinvested local authority stock in London and the highly valuable land it sits on has created a 'state-induced rent gap' (Watt, 2009a: 235) with massive capital accumulation potential.

In this paper we focus on one example of state-led gentrification of council housing in London: the case of the Heygate Estate, a medium-sized purpose-built council estate in the London Borough of Southwark, just south-east of Elephant and Castle (see Fig. 1). The estate was built on 'slum' cleared land and completed in 1974. Only 30 years later, in the 2004 masterplan for regenerating the area (Southwark Council, 2004a), it was slated as a 'slum' for demolition. The site of the estate is located in an area immediately adjacent to the much prized 'zone 1' of London, as understood by the underground map as well as by real estate investors. In 2007 Lend Lease, an Australian property development company involved in large-scale projects, such as the much criticized redevelopment of Melbourne's Docklands (Shaw, 2013), with a global portfolio (including the London 2012 Olympic Athletes' Village – now East Village) and a controversial track record (Rashbaum, 2012), were chosen as the developers for the new-build, 'mixed income community' set to replace the Heygate Estate.

In contrast to public housing in, for example, the US, the population of council estates in the UK is often made up of a combination of council tenants on secure or insecure tenancies; alongside leaseholders and at times even freeholders, who own their own homes. The position of owner-occupier leaseholders, many of whom were formerly secure tenants who exercised the Right-to-Buy (Jones & Murie, 2006), is particularly complex since legally they are simultaneously property owners and local authority tenants (Cole & Robinson, 2000).² The position of different tenures and the differential treatments they are subjected to in the processes of displacement and rehousing is a relatively understudied issue in relation to resistance to public housing redevelopment (for an exception, see Watt, 2013). Right to Buy has substantially altered the social composition of council housing estates in London by creating a new axis of fragmentation and division along tenure lines, and it could be argued that the tenure-based differential treatment

experienced by residents is seeing the displacement of this divisive scheme itself too, with significant implications for organised resistance.

In many cases, and the Heygate Estate can be seen as a paradigmatic example here, the impact of tenurial differentiation in the displacement caused by council housing demolition is not only a question of different legal rights to rehousing and compensation, it also has a temporal dimension, as property owners often remain as the last residents living in nearly vacant estates. It is therefore understandable that towards the end of the displacements of both secure and insecure tenants from the Heygate Estate, from 2010, resistance in and around the estate mainly focused on helping property owners (leaseholders) to gain fair compensation, while also raising awareness of the process of displacement and trying to influence future plans for the area. It is this period of resistance, which was very active, that we focus on in this paper. After a brief overview of the literature on resistance to gentrification and of the Heygate Estate's regeneration history, we consider three different forms of organised resistance that emerged in and around the estate during its last three years of existence: civil society organising to influence planning, direct action to keep the estate accessible, and legal challenges to the 'public interest' of the demolition; and what we can learn from these.

2. Resistance to gentrification

'...we were surprised by how few academic studies there were on resistance to gentrification. The process may have produced one of the largest literatures in urban studies, but it did seem that focused analyses of anti-gentrification protests, struggles and activism had been sidelined by all the attention to (and debate over) cause and effect' (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2010:525).

Academic discussions of resistance to gentrification have been few and far between to date, but they are growing internationally. A decade or so after Jane Jacobs (1961) fought the federal bulldozer in NYC (furthering the gentrification of Greenwich Village) American urban scholars and activists were fighting gentrification. In the 1970s and 1980s there were, according to Hackworth and Smith (2001), 'intense political struggles' (p.467) over the displacements caused by gentrification. The 1970s was a period of fiscal crisis in the US and this resulted in intense citizen mobilization towards tenant and neighbourhood protection. This was symbolized nowhere better than by Chester Hartman's scholar-activism in San Francisco. Hartman's (1974) *Yerba Buena: Land*

² The presence of owner-occupiers within British council estates has been the result of the much-discussed incentives towards home-ownership through the right for secure tenants to purchase their homes at a discount, particularly since 1980 when the so-called 'Right to Buy' (1980 Housing Act) became a national policy of the then Conservative government. According to some estimates, as many as 2.75 m properties were sold through the 'Right to Buy' between 1980 and 2009 across Britain (Hodkinson & Lawrence, 2011) (on right to buy and council housing in London, see Watt, 2009b).

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