The emotional and psychic impacts of London's 'new' urban renewal

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Abstract
Removing people from their homes in the name of regeneration is something that potentially impacts on their mental and physical well-being, but this is rarely explored via an experiential perspective that focuses on people's own understanding of how their life-world has been disrupted. In this paper we consider the emotional and psychic impacts of recent council estate renewal on those displaced, or being displaced, from six London council estates. Our paper reveals what it feels like to be displaced, and how these feelings – of losing one's home and community - affect individuals' psychological and indeed physical health. We conclude that displacement is often experienced as a form of slow violence which entails periods of waiting and uncertainty that cause multiple conflicts and anxiety, and that suggest that the benefits of renewal may never outweigh the costs for those who are displaced.

Keywords: estate renewal, gentrification, displacement, psychological health, stress, depression

INTRODUCTION

> 'Gentrification can be hazardous to your health…hospitalization rates for mental illness – including schizophrenia and mood disorders – are two times as high in displaced people versus those who stay in their neighbourhood'[1]

Displacement matters because it severs the connection between people and place. Some describe this as 'domicide', using this term to refer to 'the planned, deliberate destruction of someone's home, causing suffering to the dweller'.[2] Mindy Fullilove tellingly uses the metaphor of 'root shock' to describe what happens when homes are destroyed en masse, and a neighbourhood suffers a traumatic stress reaction related to the destruction of their 'emotional ecosystem'.[3] Recent work has also suggested that such episodes of chronic urban trauma can become 'hard-wired' in place, with memories of the neighbourhood that once was periodically enacting episodes of 're-traumatisation'.[4] 'Un-homing' is then a central concept in contemporary urban studies, used to explore a range of material or immaterial, deliberate or unintentional, forced or accidental, fast or slow, permanent or temporary, displacements, involving both the individual and collective loss of home spaces.[5]

There is now a substantial literature on the traumas of un-homing and the long-term damage done to communities whose neighbourhoods are sacrificed in the name of progress or modernisation. The paradox here is that the supposed social good which derives from obtaining a new home can become a form of 'systemic violence', one that 'operates anonymously, systemically and invisibly through the very way society is organised'.[6] Chris Philo argues that it is vital that we conceptualise the 'geographies of wounding' that result from such structural processes, rather than considering them as individual happenstance.[7]

Inevitably this encourages a focus on the intersection of processes of urban development with racialised capitalisms which often sacrifice non-white and working class communities in the interests of capital accumulation.

Yet oftentimes, accounts of un-homing deal at a level of generality, and mourn a loss of place that is experienced differently by different residents within these broad categories of disadvantage. To document 'domicide' is one thing: to begin to trace the differential impacts on those individuals and households displaced is another thing, something that involves sensitive and contextually-nuanced attempts to explore questions of mental and physical well-being that does not inflate or aggravate feelings of loss. Measures of morbidity and health indicators cannot necessarily capture the impacts of un-homing on individuals, as these impacts will be felt differently, and some will be less able to cope with these impacts than others. Some individuals may be 'resilient' and may even seize re-homing as an opportunity to improve their lives, but others will experience anxiety, loss, and even depression, as they see their 'lifeworld' transformed.

To these ends, this paper considers the emotional and psychic impacts of council estate renewal in contemporary London. This issue has attracted much discussion, not least as it is seen to involve forms of 'social cleansing' that have classed and racialised imprints: Paul Watt's recent documentation of the impacts of eviction on working-class women living on a council estate in East London also shows that the impacts of enforced displacement are gendered.[8] However, beyond a broad condemnation of the removal of disadvantaged social groups from estates where they have been resident over many years, the impacts of this renewal on the well-being of *individuals* has been little explored. Hence, in this paper we draw on in-depth research from six council estates across London which have been earmarked for, or are undergoing, redevelopment where we have interviewed residents waiting to be rehoused or removed. Noting that removal is an ongoing process whose impact can stretch over many years rather than a one-off 'event', we argue that the effects of displacement are potentially felt even before the actual physical moment of 'un-homing'. We hence focus in this paper on what it *feels* like to be displaced from a resident's perspective, noting that this needs to be understood contextually.

COUNCIL ESTATE RENEWAL IN LONDON

England's council estates are currently undergoing a 'new' urban renewal that, ironically, threatens to repeat many of the mistakes of post-war urban renewal which disrupted local communities and exacerbated the social problems slum clearance was meant to solve.[9] Now it is large inner city estates, particularly high-rise council estates from the 1960s and 1970s, that ministers have slated for demolition. Such estates are stigmatized as sites of concentrated social dysfunction and yet also coveted for their untapped redevelopment potential in the context of London's real estate boom. With austerity limiting their ability to bring existing estates up to Decent Homes standards, local authorities are being encouraged to cash in on their underlying land value to finance more social housing. In 2015 the London Assembly estimated that over the last decade 50 former council estates across London have received planning permission for partial or complete demolition and redevelopment at higher densities. Our own data shows the figure to be much higher (see next section), and the overall gains in social housing to be negligible when compared with the addition of large amounts of market rate accommodation in most of these settings.

Urban scholars have challenged the very idea of estate renewal as 'gentrification by stealth', intended to privatize social housing and socially cleanse the inner city of low-income communities.[10] They have also raised questions about the underpinning ideal of 'mixed communities' as a poorly conceptualised and ineffective policy panacea for social ills.[11] There has been less focus on estate renewal as *causing* social ills. Displacement is something that needs to be considered as potentially causing individual stress and anxiety, and exacerbating existing health conditions or long-term illnesses. That said, recent research has complicated the absolute distinction between forced and voluntary mobility in the context of neighbourhood change, with Kearns & Mason finding that the degree of perceived agency was important in determining whether those physically displaced by estate renewal (in Glasgow) felt themselves to be functionally, socially and psychologically disrupted by their physical move to new homes.[12] This underlines that while some might feel helpless in the face of enforced displacement from their estate, it is possible that others feel this is an opportunity to make a new start elsewhere. Much here can depend on the extent of ties one has to a neighbourhood. Hana et al. have tried to estimate the indirect negative costs of upheaval for displaced residents from renewal sites (see Figure 1) - here, it is notable that the highest estimated stressor is the 'loss of local connection, local knowledge of neighbourhood'. Factors such as having to find new schools for children, new doctors' surgeries or new modes of transport to places of work can be significant for some. Arguably less quantifiable, but obviously important, is the time and stress of moving. All house moves are to some degree stressful, in the context of displacement from council estates, what is crucial is that the timetable is set by someone else and the process moves at a pace of their own choosing. Long periods of not knowing what might happen to one's home can be followed by sudden announcements that demolition is imminent. This not knowing, and being in a state of uncertainty about the future, is one that can create considerable stress that compounds any feelings of loss associated with the destruction of home and neighbourhood.

Impact duration over one year or event within first year	% households affected		"impact value" each type		Impact per displaced household
Type of indirect negative impact	Lower estimate	Upper estimate	Lower estimate	Upper estimate	Mid-range
Finding new GP, Dentist	25%	50%	£250	£500	£156
Change in social landlord	15%	35%	£500	£1,000	£213
Change in travel times, eg. to work	33%	50%	£750	£1,000	£374
Moving children's school, reorganising childcare	15%	25%	£750	£2,000	£306
Loss of local connection, local knowledge of neighbourhood	66%	100%	£1,000	£3,000	£1,830
Temporary sense of exclusion in new community	25%	75%	£1,500	£4,000	£1,688

Time and stress associated with move	80%	100%	£2,000	£5,000	£3,300
Change in home security/break-in after move	1%	5%	£2,500	£5,000	£138
Fear on part-empty estate	15%	25%	£3,000	£7,500	£1,163
Increased ill-health	10%	25%	£25,000	£50,000	£7,500
Earlier death	1%	3%	£100,000	£150,000	£2,750
Total negative impact value					**£19,416**
					c£20,000

Figure 1: Indirect costs for displaced residents (Hana et al, 2016:63)[13]

METHODOLOGY

The research reported here is from a three-year project looking at the impacts of council estate renewal in London since 1997.[14] We initially collated a database that shows 198 'regeneration' schemes on 161 estates over the last twenty years where there has been significant demolition with an eye to densification or intensification of land use (i.e. more than 100 households have been displaced to allow for demolition and rebuilding at higher density). The total number of households 'decanted' from these estates is clearly considerable, maybe affecting as many as 150,000 residents. As well as attempting to quantify and map the displacements[15], we have also undertaken 120 in-depth interviews on 6 estates (Aylesbury, Gascoigne, Ocean, Love Lane, Pepys, Carpenters) to assess the social, cultural, economic and psychological impacts of displacement. Here, we drew on Marcuse's influential conceptualisation of displacement as involving *direct* and enforced removal of low-income households via decanting/evicting them, as well as forms of *indirect* displacement where existing residents might not feel at home anymore in the neighbourhood because of changes in the identity of place.[16] Those who get to move back onto the redeveloped estate may also experience what Mark Davidson calls 'phenomenological displacement'[17]: this means analyzing not only the spatial fact or moment of displacement but also the 'structures of feeling' and 'loss of sense of place' associated with dis*place*ment.

Our interviews included specific prompts to measure impacts on psychological, emotional and social well-being following the use of similar prompts and questions in similar research[18]. Interviewing residents about their experiences of displacement can, of course, be traumatic, and they are focused, understandably, on their own and their immediate family's 'survivability' in the face of displacement. As such we did not ask about patient histories or medical circumstances. Nonetheless, such information was often volunteered and typically large sections of the interview were about questions of well-being. Here, we also trialled the Urban Mind app developed by the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King's College London, which encourages users to reflect on how their mental state is affected by city living. We wanted to measure displacee's mental states before, during, and after displacement; but the app was simply too basic and insensitive for what we needed. As such we relied on our own interviews which allowed residents to vocalise their experiences and feelings about displacement.

THE IMPACTS OF DISPLACEMENT

Accepting the premise that displacement can involve multiple forms of violence[19], in what follows we share some of the narratives of the emotional and psychic impacts of displacement from our in-depth interviews. Many commentators suggest that processes of displacement can trigger a range of affective responses which, in some cases, are associated with psychological distress, and even post-traumatic stress.[20] In what follows we argue that these can be associated with mental health issues, a conclusion that resonates strongly with Fussell & Lowe's analysis of the impact of housing displacements post-Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.[21] This is not to say that all individuals found the process of displacement equally stressful or depressing, as clearly some were more 'resilient' than others. Yet for others, displacement unfolded as a series of micro-events that generated anxiety, confusion, fear, dislocation, loss, dread, and so on. For those least able to cope, or those already living with mental illness, those emotions made the experience of being un-homed one that had seriously negative impacts on existing mental health.

The vast majority of our interviewees were reluctant movers displaying considerable displacement anxiety, and they articulated concerns about the potential upheaval of enforced movement:

> 'I am staying in my house, and I do not want to move. Who wants to move me? So, if you want to move me, you cannot say that "I am moving you to this place" which is not comfortable for me. I like it here! I don't want anybody to take this from me, I don't want problems with anybody' (interview A).

This sense of dispossession extended to the scale of the neighbourhood with many speaking of a connection to place and a phenomenological sense in which place was being destroyed:

> 'I have got fantastic neighbours, honest to God my neighbours are just fantastic…And it is like, I will be leaving all of that. And, a lot of them, they are like my family. If I am sick, we all know you can just pop in, you don't have to feel no way about knocking on the door and, and I have got the keys next door, I've got the keys for two doors away. They come, if they go away, I housesit. That is how we live. You know? And to lose all of that, and then you move, and then what are you going to get? ... And I don't want to move out, my children don't want to move out too. And you know it is very hard to find a place. Getting used to the place, do you understand? (interview B).

As noted in the work of Hana et al.[22], the threat of being displaced far from spaces of work, childcare, and education was also an often-raised theme that suggested that neighbourhood identity is constructed through social connections and relations:

> 'It is really depressing because, I don't know what is going to happen, and I don't know whether to register my son at nursery down here, or if I should, register him at nursery everywhere, outside of the area... I don't know what is going to happen with work, because, if I have to commute from all of the way out of London it's gonna be crazy and stressful, so how long am I going to be working there, how long I am working for…? Yeah, am I going to get help with my son in other areas or whatever?...And I do want to go back to work, but who is going to help me to look after my son, because my son isn't old enough to go nursery at the moment. And if he does, it is going to cost me a lot of money, which then it just brings me back to the same as if I am not working. So I might as well not be working. If I do stay in London

and go for private rent, there is no point in me working because the rent for a two-bedroom, in London, is really high, and, on bus driving, you get money for bus driving, but at the same time I still have to travel to work, pay other bills, pay for car insurance and whatever else, so it just works out as way too much. So, yeah' (interview C).

This highlights the importance of what Paul Watt[23] terms 'displacement anxiety' – that is, the subjective response to the threat of immanent direct displacement or the feeling that potential displacees have once they have either been told their home will be demolished, or when they are given notice to quit. Such displacement anxiety generates a profound sense of ontological insecurity as people literally do not 'know their place'.

While moving house is always a stressful experience, the stress and anxiety reported by some appeared elevated by the enforced nature of the displacement, and exacerbated by the tactics of councils decanting residents. Elsewhere, Loretta Lees has discussed the 'state-Rachmanism' enacted on the last residents refusing to move from the Heygate Estate in Southwark.[24] In this research we also found stress caused by the Rachmann-like tactics of other councils, here Haringey:

'Sometimes, I don't know how many times… you don't have heat…I don't know how many times we don't have a heater and when you called them they will say that they know, they are doing it, and nothing, that is it. Sometimes they won't tell us that there will be no hot water and they don't provide hot water, there'll be no heating system, so you have to heat your own flat with your own, like buy … like an electric one. Because this building is a communal heating system which we paid over £1000 per year for heating systems alone. And they do not give you any heating packs. Like, trouble you for a few days - here have this £20 or whatever… So they are just using all, every means just to force us to leave, to frustrate us' (interview D)

So while regeneration of estates is something considered necessary in the interests of the wider community, and longer-term public health goals, in the short term it was reported by many to be a source of worsening mental health. In this sense, the act of local councils like Haringey putting health and well-being fliers through the doors of tenants about to be removed from their estate (see Figure 2) appears hypocritical, and suggests that councils overseeing decanting have been insensitive to the health impacts that urban renewal is having.

Figure 2: Flier sent to Love Lane Estate tenants

The often slow nature of the displacements enacted by renewal is worthy of comment in this respect. Regeneration schemes are often mooted years before any firm proposals are drawn up. Plans for decanting populations follow, but it can be months if not years before compensation payments are made to leaseholders, or tenants are told what their rehousing options are. Schemes can become mired as developers go back and forth with local authorities arguing for less social housing (for reasons of 'economic viability'). The slow violence of the regeneration schemes grinds some people down. The tortuous and exhausting processes of establishing how displacement might ultimately impact on one's home-space can lead to feelings of shame, stress and anxiety.[25]

On one of our estates, tenants had been relocated, but the remaining residents (mostly leaseholders who had bought their flats through right to buy) remained, contending with damp and mould as water poured down through their roof, as workmen struggled to access flats vacated by previous tenants. They remained in situ, awaiting for news about what compensation might be offered for their flats. This sense of living in a state of abeyance encourages not just the council to disinvest, but also some residents to gradually 'give up' hope for a fair outcome:

> 'Yeah, so, you know, if you want to do something in the home, home improvements, for improvements, that is on hold. Because you don't want to be spending money, and then next month we have to move out, it is, so that's on hold. It is like, it is just hanging up in the air, not knowing what is going to happen, and it has been like that since 2006' (interview E).

For those waiting over ten years for a confirmation of what might be happening to their home, it was dispiriting that every now and then the council would change its plans, adding to their sense of hopelessness:

> 'All of the time it is on your mind, and it grinds you down. And it does make you ill. It makes you sick, it really does. You know. Sometimes I get quite depressed about it…and if I'm getting emotional...It is hard, it is hard. Yeah, but we just have to plod on. And hope for the best and that is all you can do. But it has come to the point now where I am thinking, I have thought about it seriously, because I think because I wasn't too well and I had an operation every everything, I was thinking look, you are now this age, and, you haven't got, even if I have got 10 or 15 years to live, I want to be happy and content in somewhere I know this is my home. No one is going to come and disrupt it. Should we just make this last move? Get somewhere and just go? And just start all over again, but I think why should I have to do that? It is like a battle. Between your, do you know what I mean? Between your heart and your head' (interview F).

The cumulative impacts of uncertainty meant some people's mental health was being impacted on a daily basis by years of living with uncertainty:

> 'It is awful, and it is something, because of the uncertainty, all of those years you have been living with uncertainty. On top, if you have the mental health issues, I end up having most of the night, having a nightmare. And, all of the night I have been seeing, looking for a home but not finding a home. And then waking up really, sometimes, my sister wakes me up, because of my shouting. And everything, and you still have to put a mask on your face, and go out and fight for your community, fight for your home' (interview G).

The potential psychological and physical health consequences of waiting to be decanted can then be considerable. In this sense, there are important parallels to be drawn between the experiences of those being displaced within cities and those of international refugees and migrants who seek to make lives while in a state of 'limbo'.[26]

But this is not to say that regeneration cannot produce better homes for some. On some estates, flats were outdated and central heating systems badly in need of repair. Physical neglect, and desertification (managed decline) took its toll on many estates. But those that were ultimately able to move back nearby or even back onto the redeveloped estate might have returned to a better (though often smaller) flat, but experienced different relationships with their neighbours, and not the social mixing policy makers mooted:

> '…making new friends again with neighbours…some neighbours we just still say "hi", we don't have a conversation, we just say "hi", that's it. We haven't fully conversated (sic) with them properly but slowly in due time yeah' (interview I).

This speaks to the theme of phenomenological loss, and the idea that one can return to a neighbourhood that has changed and feel profoundly displaced:

> 'I go around there, it's completely changed. I can't remember where the other, you know, my parents flat was, because everything is changed now I don't bother to go…I

think I can't get anywhere…I just see this was my old place because of the lamp post and where the street entrance was…that's why I like to stand here…I can recognise where the other houses were, but apart from that I can't (interview J).

In this way, while estate renewal offered the promise of better housing and an improved neighbourhood, for many of our respondents the process created short term anxieties about losing their home, and a longer term displacement that could be associated with depression and melancholia.

CONCLUSION

Urban regeneration is often deemed necessary to improve the housing conditions of some of most disadvantaged. It is justified with reference to the needs of inhabitants, who are expected to benefit from the process of renewal, and can be discoursed as socially improving. But this paper reveals that many residents harbour anxieties about displacement before the event, and often experience alienation and loss afterwards. In the context of London, mental health problems, and mental ill health, have been historically associated with council estates, irrespective of other factors such as class, gender and ethnicity.[27] The fact that many council estate dwellers have existing medical conditions means that the impacts of displacement are particularly intensely felt by some. It is interesting to note that while some commentators identify displacement as something disproportionately impacting on the poor, ethnic minorities and women, perhaps we need to add people living with mental illness to this list?

Put like this, we have to ask the question: is the disruption of those communities where large numbers of residents are particularly vulnerable to displacement worth it? Given over 50,000 London council estate families and households have seen their home demolished, and experienced anxiety and uncertainty, sometimes over a prolonged period, all for the sake of a net increase of around 7,000 additional affordable homes for Londoners, the answer appears to be negative. But this argument is always countered given improved housing can improve mental and physical health. Currently, we still know very little about the trade-off between short-term harms and longer term gains if any. But if our goal is to create better, healthier and more sustainable cities (including socially and culturally sustainable) then we do need to discuss what kinds of research and methods might do justice to these issues. As Charles Murray says 'much more experimentation with this agenda is needed'[28]: we need a robust evidence base on the negative (as compared to the positive) impacts of estate renewal, including better attention being paid to the emotional and psychic impacts. These impacts should be mandated to be included in viability assessments and funding should be made for longitudinal research from the minute estate renewal is mooted. More research and thought needs to be factored into policy programmes on renewal to mitigate the violence of 'un-homing' and take seriously its pernicious impacts on health, quality of life, and well-being. This work needs to be interdisciplinary, comparative, participative and community-based.[29] We hope this paper goes some way to underlining the importance of this call.

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