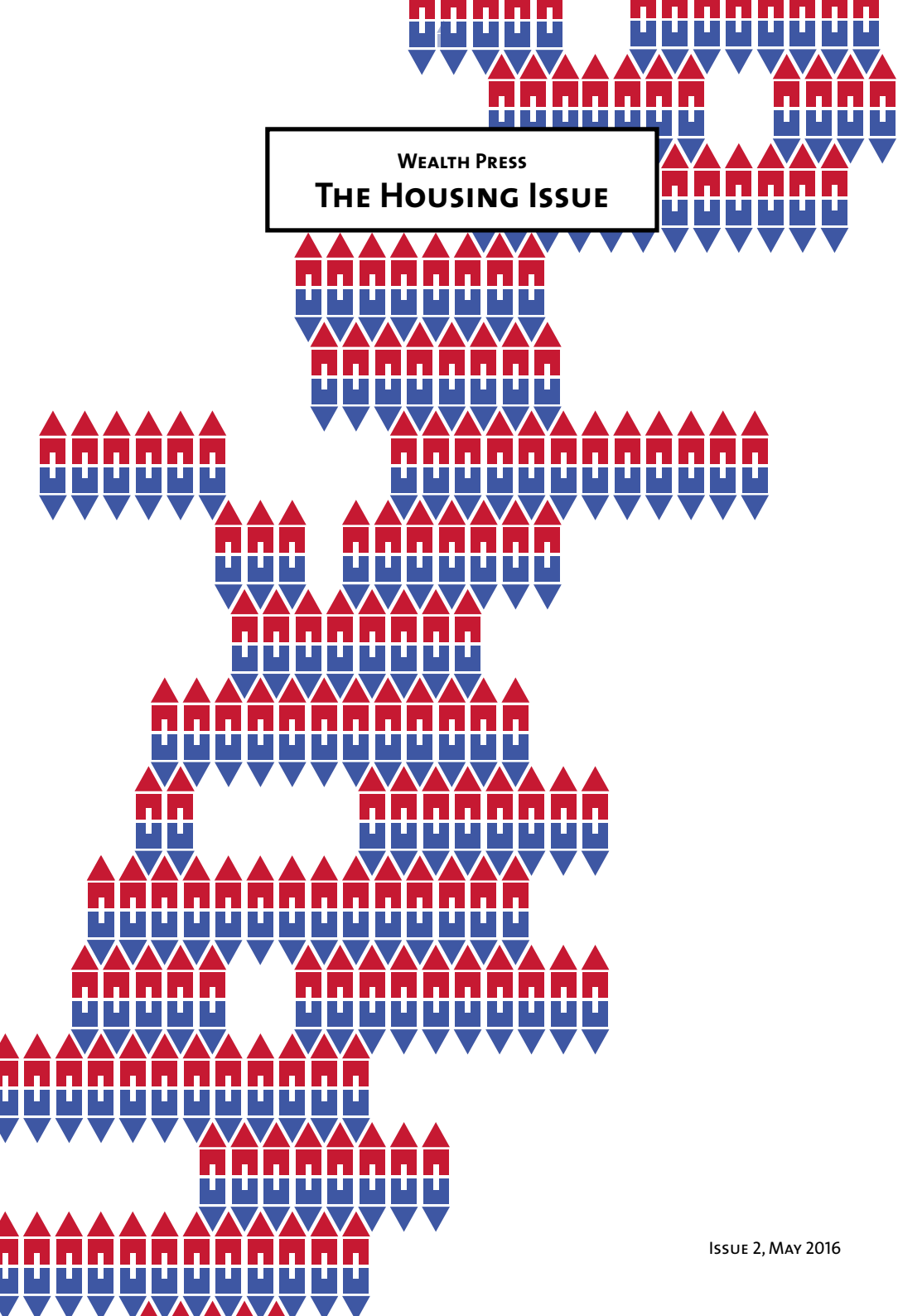
Wealth Press

The Housing Issue



Issue 2, May 2016

Who we are

The Wealth Press is a collaborative attempt to view the world through the lens of inequality and to see what we find. It has been created and edited by an open group of individuals with a concern for inequality and a need to voice those concerns.

What we do

We put those at the margins on the centre page. We discover and share the voices muted by society. We work horizontally and respectfully towards one another at all times.

What we stand for

We believe ideas should be shared, not owned. We believe in equalising voices. In empowering people to tell their own stories, we redefine the parameters of journalism. We believe in investigation, in curiosity, and in questioning the status quo.
Get involved!

With the Wealth Press...

Anyone can get involved with the Wealth Press; whether that is as a writer, a designer, a web editor, a photographer, a sub-editor or simply as someone with an idea or a story that they want to be told. We actively encourage views from all sectors of society and believe good journalism must fundamentally be about presenting those views.
Come along to our meetings every second Saturday, or simply join us on Facebook on our Wealth Press page.
For more information email Aidan at aidanmmharper@gmail.com

With Wealth Equality...

Come join us at our mother organization: Wealth Equality. We gives voices to those silenced by our current economic and political system. Not tied by national, cultural or linguistic boundaries, creating a model towards a better future for humanity, recognising the needs of every adult and child and enabling all to fulfil their true potential and feel valued within the world.
We aim to not only reimagine a world based on the equal distribution of wealth but to create practical steps towards making that ideal a reality. We do this through a wide variety of projects, campaigns and events based around the wants and needs of our local community.
Find us on www.wealthequality.org
Facebook: Wealth Equality
The Wealth Press
Twitter: @Wealth_Equality

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Editorial

Welcome to the housing issue of the Wealth Press. Working together, we wrote and designed this edition because we believe that everyone should have a home. We genuinely don't understand why so many people in Deptford, in the UK, and in the world are forced to do without decent housing.
At the same time we also believe that as a human you have claim to a safe and secure home in your community. These articles are an attempt to understand the problem, and to suggest some solutions.

It is very clear that the UK, along with most of the world, is experiencing a serious housing crisis. Rent is spiralling out of control, as is homelessness. Ownership of houses is concentrated in the hands of a wealthy elite that's growing smaller and smaller. Vast, unaccountable corporations deregulate national housing markets, betting on people's homes and livelihoods in a massive, global casino. We believe that inequality is at the root of the housing crisis, and we think greater wealth equality is the solution. Thinking about the housing crisis has given us a few ideas about how to solve it:

Introducing rent caps so that people can afford to live without constant fear of the next payment

Building large amounts of social housing, replacing stock sold off under Right to Buy, and funded by increasing taxes on the wealthiest in society

Those of us who are homeless, or living in a constant state of instability and near-homelessness, organising ourselves and creating our own stable housing solutions

Cracking down on multiple ownership of homes through legal and political measures

Creating a renters' union and going on rent strike

Politicising – instead of marketising – the issue of housing.

We have never claimed to have all the answers, and we're open to your suggestions, comments and critical feedback. But we are sure that we are asking the right question: how can we achieve wealth equality for everyone? The articles in this issue are intended to encourage us to take housing action in our local communities. Between us, we have enough houses, wealth, skills and resources to provide better housing for all.

Photo by Noémie Adam

Signs and Symbols

links for further information — www.wealthequality.org

references & sources — New Yorkers

links of photographs — Nicolas Vigier on Flickr

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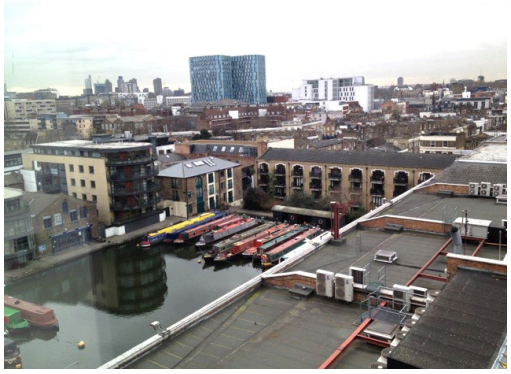
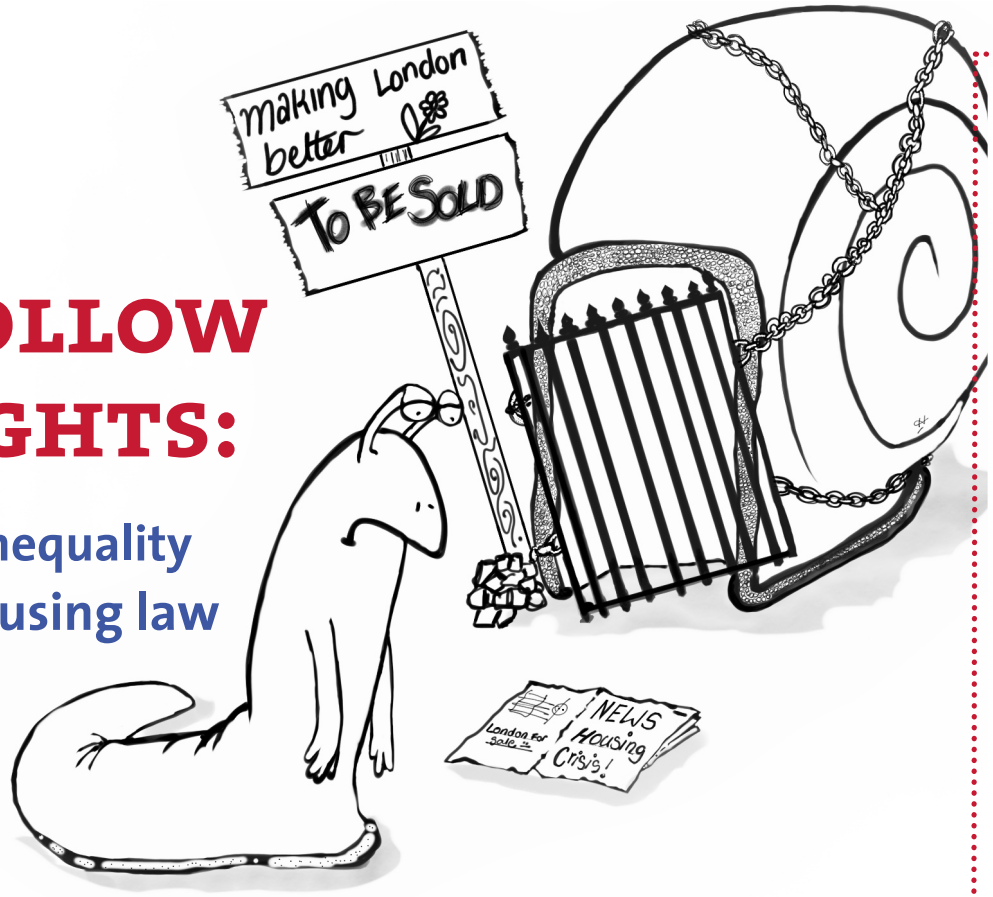


Photo by Noémie Adam

Nick Bano

Hollow rights:

The inequality of housing law



The law has always been generous to tenants. There are duties on the landlord to keep rented property in good structural condition, restrictions on the landlord's ability to disturb the tenant's use and enjoyment of the property, and strong and effective remedies for residential tenants. The landlord is effectively treated as having given up her/his rights to use the land in favour of the tenant for the duration of the tenancy.

But in the context of privately rented homes these rights are worth little because of the pernicious regime of 'no-fault' evictions (Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988). There is a constant implied threat of eviction, higher rent or punitive clauses in the lease, which drastically affects the power balance.

Without security of tenure tenant's rights have very little value.

Imagine, by comparison, a system of employment law that guaranteed high wages, excellent conditions, two months' holiday, sick pay, etc. If the employer could lawfully fire the worker for 'no reason' how many workers would enforce their full entitlements? Indeed, how many people do at the moment?

A few weeks ago I asked my lettings agent if I could take in a rescue cat over Christmas while its carers (who were keeping it while its owners, a family fleeing domestic abuse) were away. I was told that pets weren't allowed under any circumstances and itwas not a negotiable subject. I asked why and was told – correctly – that there didn't need to be a reason. In any other field of social or legal relations that kind of capricious, arbitrary attitude would be absurd. Intolerable. Appealable. But the Section 21 regime gives landlords a free hand to control important aspects of how we live our lives.

Housing law in the UK has moved from one of the most heavily regulated systems in the world to perhaps the most liberal, and that's had an enormous impact on the equality between landlords and tenants. Section 21 was introduced in 1988, ostensibly to improve conditions and availability in the private rented sector. To make it easier to exploit basic needs for a profit. A few decades later and the buy-to-let boom has changed our perception of the landlord, and of ourselves as tenants.

Rising Damp's Rigsby was nasty, racist and cheap but – despite his scheming – he was a pathetic character. His tenants treated him with disdain. More recently the landlord became a glamourous figure: the buy-to-let boom was carefully documented in various daytime TV series.

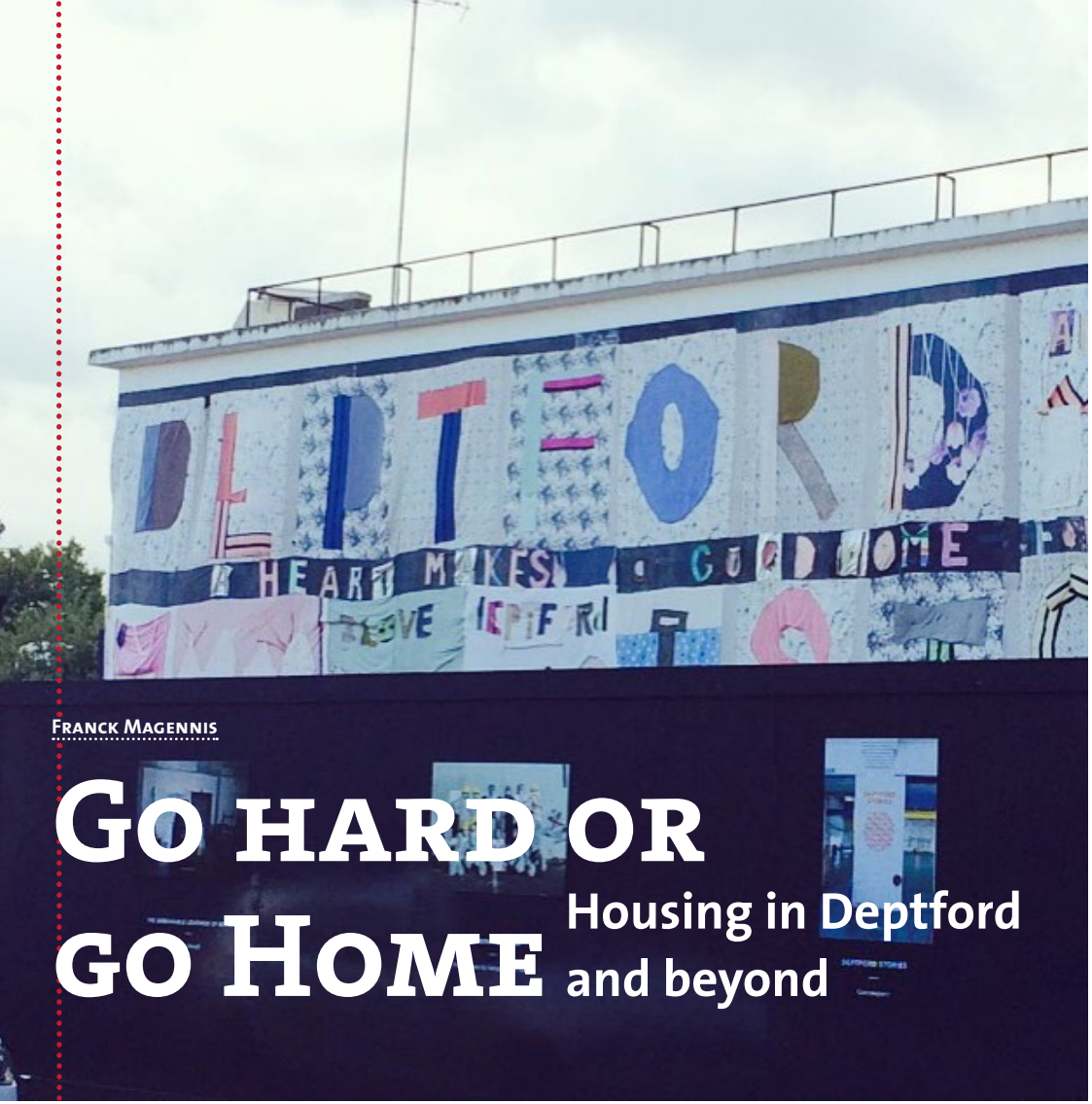
What is society's view of the landlord now? There still seems to be an element of respect hangover from the of buy-to-let. But what most tenants see is the lion's share of their income going to a person (or company) that puts in no labour. The landlord traps us in a miserable situation, while at the same time threatening us with the worse option of eviction. It's an abusive relationship. There seems to be an increasing amount of anger towards the landlord figure, driven by the disparities of power and wealth between owners and occupiers.

Importantly, a number of useful groups have emerged in response to those disparitesdisparities and the effects that they have on our lives. Focus E15, Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth (HASL), Haringey Housing Action Group, the Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty are good examples. If there isn't a local group the London Coalition Against Poverty (LCAP) can help people start their own.

These groups' members support each other in circumstances where the law is of little or no help. They take collective action, express their anxieties and fears, and campaign for better treatment from local authorities. Through collective action they win victories that are minor in the face of the housing crisis, but deeply important for the people concerned.

The gulf between the respective power of landlords and tenants has never been greater, and the law is responsible for that.

Nick Bano is a housing lawyer and a member of HASL.



Franck Magennis

Go hard or go Home

Housing in Deptford and beyond

Photo by Melina Dieckgräber

Housing is a type of wealth. The rich own it, the poor rent it, and the homeless are left to survive without it. In short, houses are not equally or fairly distributed. But a number of people in London and beyond aren't prepared to tolerate this situation. They are working and fighting to provide homes for everyone.

The people of Deptford are no strangers to housing trouble. Locals feel uneasy about the numerous blocks of luxury flats that now tower over this community.

Deptford Rise, the most prominent of the new builds, contains no social or affordable housing whatsoever. Publicity material for the apartments boasts that Deptford is 'Rapidly gentrifying and set to be a trendy area for well paid, young, urban professionals.' But as a Deptford resident of thirty years pointed out in a letter to the developers, 'Where are the people who work in a coffee bar/Sainsbury's/school/garage in Deptford supposed to live?'

This same process of gentrification is being repeated across London: existing communities are 'renovated' and 'improved' so that they conform to middle-class tastes. Gentrification leaves residents to watch – seemingly powerless – as they are slowly priced out of the communities they have lived in for decades.

The UK's housing crisis is far from unique. Every country in the world is still grappling with housing issues. Consider Iraq, now most famous for having been destroyed by the UK-US invasion in 2003. Entire sections of that country's housing infrastructure were destroyed during the invasion and its ongoing aftermath. Unofficial statistics put the number of homeless people at over half a million and yet the country has only two homeless shelters.

Compare housing in Iraq with Sweden, one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Sweden still benefits from its 'Million Programme' started in the 1960s. This saw the government build over a million new houses. The Swedish taxpayer subsidised 66% of the initial costs for residents in the lowest-income group.
But recently, the massive number of refugees from Iraq and other conflicts in the middle east has put pressure on Sweden's housing system. The country's housing estates now have a serious problem with racial segregation. The effects of destroying houses in places like Iraq and Syria are being felt in housing estates all over the world.

These different examples show that housing is a global problem. If governments across the world have failed to solve the problem, how can we as individuals hope to solve it ourselves? The solution will need to start at home, on our streets and in our communities. Some groups in London are already taking the lead.

The Old Tidemill Wildlife Garden is a unique greenspace in the heart of Deptford. Local residents rediscovered the garden after the old school closed down, and it is now managed and maintained by residents who keep it free and open to all. But this common resource is under threat by a proposed housing development. Of the 210 residential units now proposed for the site, social rented units have been slashed from 53 to 26, and shared ownership units slashed from 25 to just 8. Local residents have started a campaign to protect the Garden and to ensure that the new houses are affordable.

London CLT are developing London's first ever Community Land Trust at St Clement's in central London. Using an original funding model, the group are working to provide homes at affordable prices linked to local incomes instead of 'the market'. High demand for these homes has led to the group developing a de-

tailed application process to help them find the people most in need of housing. They are inviting people like us to invest, get involved and make the affordable housing project a reality. Could something like this work as an alternative to the unaffordable houses in Deptford Rise?

Residents in Southwark and Lambeth have benefited from the community activism of Housing Action Southwark & Lambeth ('HASL'). Take Mary Luz and her family, Lambeth residents who have been struggling to get social housing from Lambeth Council since May 2015. HASL are supporting the family, applying pressure to the council to solve the problem.

The Focus E15 campaign came to prominence in September 2013 when a group of young mothers were served eviction notices by East Thames Housing Association. The council then advised the mothers that funding cuts would mean they would have to move as far away as Manchester, Hastings and Birmingham. Instead of accepting this injustice, the mothers got organised and started campaigning under the banner 'social housing, not social cleansing!' They continue to occupy vacant housing estates, raise awareness, and fight to provide homes for those who need them.

What can you do?

Unaffordable London rent can leave us with longer working hours and less free time. It sometimes feels like there's no time left for solving housing issues. But there are ways for everyone to get involved in their local communities.

You can start by talking to your friends, family, and neighbours about housing issues. Share your experiences and start suggesting solutions. Ask your local government representatives about housing, and ask the property developers building flats in your area who they will be given to and whether they'll be affordable.

Finally, check if there's a local housing group in your area, and if not, try to set one up: Deptford/Lewisham still doesn't have one! Let's see if we can do something about it. Together we can and we will provide homes for everyone.

Franck Magennis is a Wealth Equality member and Deptford resident. He does community outreach for Deptford Cinema.

Tower Block, Photo by EVERYMAN FILMS on Flickr

Gary Stevenson

Housing

An Economist's View

As a member of Generation Y (just about) born, raised and still living in the mean suburbs of East London, I am well aware of what a huge issue housing is to young people trying to live in this city.

As an economist focused relentless on wealth inequality, I am even more aware of how painfully misunderstood this issue is from an economic perspective. I want to use this article as an opportunity to debunk some of the popular misconceptions of the issue. I know that housing is a passionate and contentious issue that raises heated emotions and affects people's lives and families deeply, but we can only solve this problem by understanding it. So let's give this a go.

1. The Housing Crisis is Not a London Issue

I'm always talking with people from all over the world about housing crises. New Yorkers think the crisis resides in NYC, the Sydney Morning Herald locates it in Sydney, the Chinese are confident that the housing crisis is firmly located in the Chinese cities of Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shanghai, San Francisco has it's own particularly painful housing crisis, and so do Rio, Vancouver, Paris and Mumbai. The list doesn't stop there, I could keep going, but I've been asked to write this in 800 words or less. So next time you hear an explanation to London's housing crisis that focuses solely on London-specific issues (the Green Belt, the Conservatives, Labour, Boris Johnson, Hipsters on Fixies), remember that this issue is much, much bigger than that: this is a global issue, affecting people all over the world.

2. It has not been caused by "Not Enough Houses".

This is the one that I knew would be contentious. But it's very, very important to understand. The number of houses and flats in London has greatly increased over the last 10, 20 or 30 years. Since 1997 the housing stock of the UK has increased faster than the UK population, and those extra homes have disproportionately been built in London. Let me be completely categoric here, as an economist, if house prices rise at the same time as housing stock increases, then the increase has been caused by demand, not supply. Housing prices are not going up in London because London homes are rapidly disappearing. In fact, new homes are being built at quite a rapid pace. The reason that house prices are going up in London and almost every other major global city, is because, more than ever before people are moving from the countryside and small cities to big cities, this is the real cause of the crisis and brings me on to my next point:

3. The crisis does not originate in the cities

Once we understand that the crisis does not come from disappearing housing within the big cities, but from massive, global migration into big cities from small towns and the countryside, we start to understand more clearly our problem. People are moving to London from other areas of the UK, as well as other countries and continents, at an unprecedented rate. For us to truly understand the housing crisis, we need to understand why the rate of people moving to London from small towns and countrysides in the UK and Europe has increased so much. Which brings us, finally, to the true crux of the crisis:

4. The housing crisis is a crisis of jobs

We know that the global big city housing crisis did not start in the big cities, we know that it has been caused by people (primarily young people) moving to London in massive numbers from smaller cities and countryside areas in the UK and other countries. Well, why has there been such a sudden increase in people leaving their hometowns and areas where there families may have lived for generations, to come to the bright lights of London and other big cities? It's no great mystery – you can ask these people and they will tell you. Smaller cities, such as those in the North of England, which provided decent, well paid employment to most of the English population for generations are no longer providing well paid jobs

5. The housing crisis is part of the broader demand crisis.

Forgive me for being an economist (again), but it's important to place this job crisis into a broader economic context. Housing in London (and other big cities) is expensive because of a lack of jobs in smaller cities all over the world. Job scarcity is a consequence of the broader demand crisis that we are experiencing all over the world. Ultimately, we cannot fix the housing crisis without fixing the jobs crisis, and we cannot do that until we get people in the economy spending again. And with this, we come, at last, to what I believe to be the only solution to the housing crisis:

6. In order to solve the housing crisis, we must reduce inequality.

Global economists are in a confused muddle as to what is causing the lack of global spending. I am not, to me it is clear. The rich save the money that they receive (and use it to buy houses), while the poor spend. This means that very high levels of wealth inequality suck demand and jobs out of the economy, forcing people to move to the big cities in search of work. This dynamic is at the heart of so many of our economic problems - housing, low wages and austerity, are all caused, ultimately, by the global crisis in demand. If we want to solve all of these crises, we must start talking about how redistribution can be achieved fairly.

For more information on wealth inequality and the demand crisis, and its effect upon housing and wages, a full explanation can be found on my website
www.wealtheconomics.org

Aidan Harper

Then and Now

How a lack of political will lies at the root of the housing crisis

Street, photo by Nicolas Vigier on Flickr

Power and politics determines change. We see that wherever we look. This holds true more than anything when we look at the history of housing and ownership in the UK.

We've been here before. After the First World War, 77 percent of households in England and Wales rented – and only one per cent of households socially rented. Housing conditions were poor, slums dominated city centres, and landlords were ruthless and exploitative.

It was a time of abject inequality. Half of the population didn't have the ability to vote, and over 700,000 mainly working class men were sent to their deaths by the establishment during the Great War. Even so, over a century ago Mrs. Barbour and her 'Army' put housing on the political agenda after organising a rent strike in Glasgow where 25,000 households refused to pay rent and hundreds of people turned out to stop evictions. They won. In 1915 the War Restrictions Act was introduced which restricted rents to August 1914 levels.

After the First World War, there was a promise to build 'Homes fit for Heroes'. Publicly, this was in recognition of the extraordinary sacrifice of those who had fought, but Lloyd George told his cabinet that 'Great Britain would hold out against the alarming spread of Bolshevism only if the people were given a sense of confidence, and only if they were made to believe things were being done for them.' An organized and increasingly active working class population sparked a real fear of revolution. As a result, the government passed the 1919 Housing Act which paved the way for council-housing and 1.1 million homes built by local councils in the interwar years.

The homes built were not enough to satisfy demand. Nor were they enough to satisfy an increasingly politicised working class. Housing and land were central to the politics of the Labour Party; so much so that in the 1945 election they ran with a manifesto promising nationalization of the land.

The victory of Labour in 1945 was revolutionary and changed Britain forever. Expecting an easy election victory for the Liberal-Conservative Coalition after the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany, Churchill called an election. However, fed up with wartime austerity, and inspired by the utopian vision of a cradle-to-grave welfare state as laid out in the 1942 Beveridge Report, the country voted for change. It was a radical vision, described in the outset as ' revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching'. It was a moment of political realization, where a vision of a better world was fused with a surging political consciousness to create real and lasting change.

Until Thatcher, homes were built at an unprecedented rate. Both the private sector and the public sector built homes with life tenancies or which were genuinely affordable to buy. In the 60s house building hit a post-war peak of just over 400,000 a year – compare that to 135,500 homes built in 2012-13. Wages were high due to strong unions, with 13million unionized in 1979 compared to around 6.5million today. In other words, access to housing was determined by a mixture of high wages and government-built houses that were present because of the power and political know-how of the trade unions and the organized working class.

Much has already been written on how the power of the unions was contested and destroyed by the mobilized power and violence of a right-wing state under Thatcher in the 1980s. But since then, house prices have become increasingly unaffordable, average wages have stagnated, inequality has remained persistent, inequality has increased massively and we have found ourselves lost.

This is beginning to change. Housing is becoming re-politicised, by which I mean that people are beginning to realize that their inability to afford their rent is not the fault of themselves as an individual, but instead the result of broader issues in society. Housing is beginning to be seen as a right, not an investment.

And once again, just as Mrs. Barbour and her army realized over a century ago,we can only change those broader issues through contesting power. Students in London have begun using their power of organization to strike against increasing rent by refusing to pay it. This follows victories in 2015 where UCL collectively paid out nearly £400,000 to students refusing to pay rent for substandard conditions. Sian Berry, the Green Party candidate for Mayor of London has also launched a manifesto promising to create a renters union across the city. The ramifications of such a union would be phenomenal.

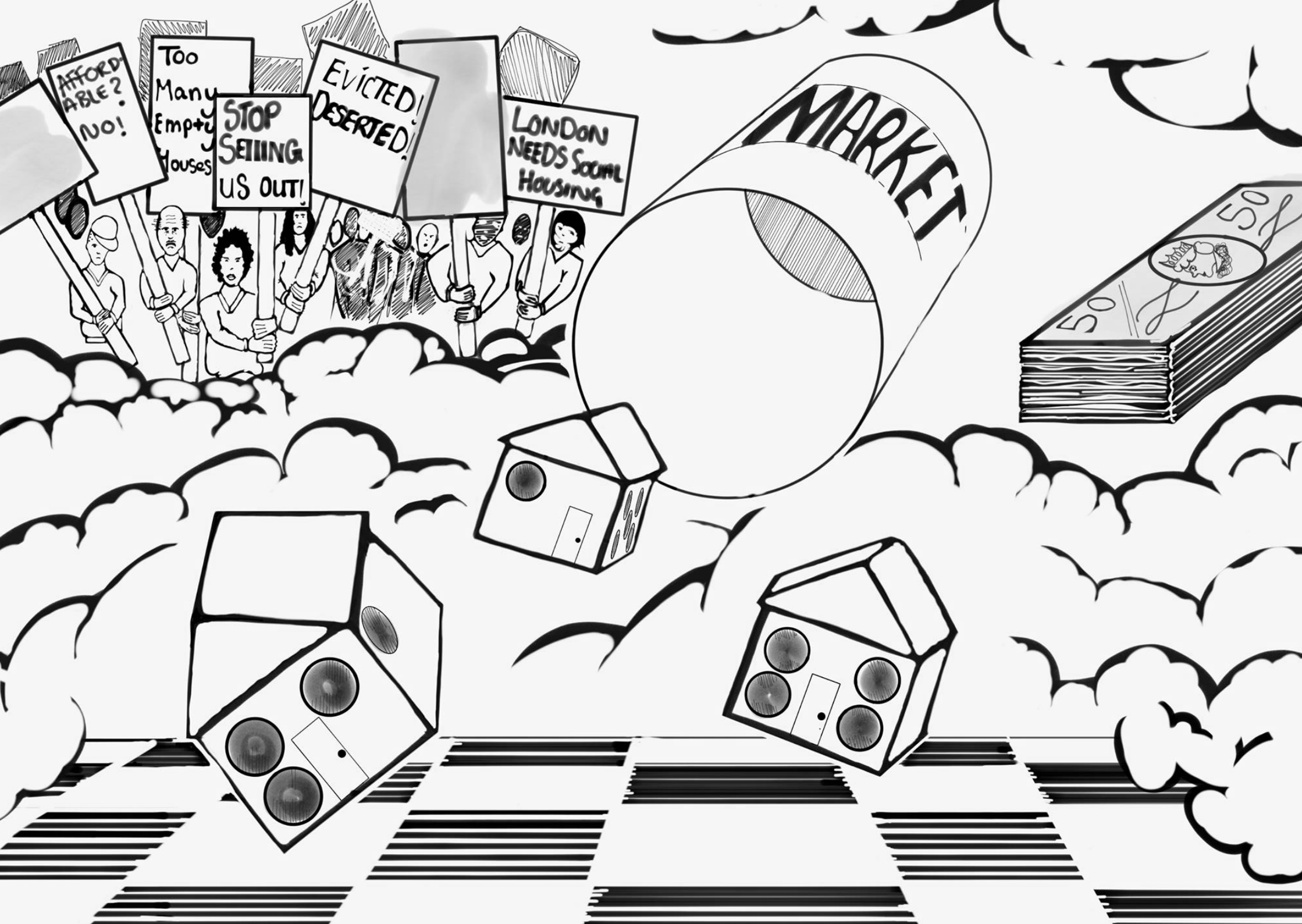
We have seen that power and politics are what determine our collective access to housing. To achieve power, we need to organise. To become political, we have to show how the values around housing are fundamentally political. We are already beginning to see a shift. Long may it continue.

Call to action

Email your MP, local councilors and all of the mayoral candidates asking them to support the creation of a renters union in their manifesto – just as Sian Berry has done.

If you are not in a union, join one. Ask what union is affiliated with your workplace and join it. If there is none, set up a branch. If you are part of the 'gig' economy and have very unstable work, then join GMB, who are beginning to organise those in the 'gig' economy.

Grues, photo by Nicolas Vigier on Flickr


AFFORDABLE? NO!
TOO MANY EMPTY HOUSES
STOP SELLING US OUT!
EVICTED! DESERTED!
LONDON NEEDS SOCIAL HOUSING
MARKET
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Conor McGuinness Grace

The importance of housing for the vulnerable and the future of supported housing

On a recent visit to a prison I had the opportunity to quiz the Deputy Director on the support offered to offenders. Coming from a housing background, I was most eager to know about the efforts made to find offenders suitable accommodation after release. He was able to reel off a long list of local authorities and housing associations that work with the prison to identify housing. Why is this important? Put simply, secure and stable housing greatly reduces the likelihood of re-offending and offers the necessary base from which individuals can find work and access other support.

Housing is also vital for a number of other vulnerable people, providing them with the appropriate environment to receive support to live as independently as possible. In 2011, there was national outrage when the abuse of people with learning disabilities was catapulted into the national news following the Winterbourne View scandal. What followed were criminal convictions and calls recommending a move away from institutional housing for people with learning disabilities, towards community-based supported housing and care.

Three years on however, in 2014, Stephen Bubb published a report highlighting the failure to move away from institutions towards community support. His analysis included the identification of a funding gap required to finance the necessary housing, training of staff and other areas.

'LIBOR fines' were imposed on large banks whose employees had been found guilty of financial fraud. Bubb's report recommended that the Government allocate £30m from LIBOR fines to a 'Life in the Community' Social Investment Fund designed to kick-start the move to community-based housing. This fund would then be used to generate additional funding up to a total of £200m. In the aftermath of the report, ministers gave 'qualified support' to the proposal (but no firm commitment).

Care and support minister Norman Lamb, rather emptily, welcomed 'the thrust' of the report. Though there has been some progress since, there is some distance to go and concerns over funding remain. The obvious funding barrier to achieving the move to community support is the elephant in the room.

It is impossible to discuss funding for supportive services without acknowledging the wider political and economic context. In the grand scheme of things, the recommended £30m is not much. It is a no-brainer for government to allocate these funds, whether from LIBOR fines or elsewhere.

But expecting this investment is difficult when cuts to local government spending are forcing the closure of learning disabilities services. And it is not just those with learning disabilities who are suffering the con-

Bed, photo by Alan Stanton on Flickr

sequences of austerity. Drastic funding cuts have impacted on services for homelessness, victims of domestic violence, people with mental health issues and elderly people.

In 2014 the National Audit Office reported that, despite dealing with large funding cuts relatively well, local authorities were experiencing financial stress and there was evidence of service reductions. Things are getting worse. The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) cap further threatens the capability of local authorities and organisations to provide supported housing services.

South Yorkshire Housing Association chief Tony Stacey has explained how the cap would make many services financially unviable. National Housing Federation (NHF) chief David Orr states that over 2,000 supported homes have already been delayed or scrapped and that we are 'in danger of failing a defining test of a caring nation'. The future is even bleaker; the benefit cap has the potential to force the closure of 82,000 specialist homes, leaving an estimated 50,000 vulnerable people without support. Homelessness has already risen hugely in the past six years, and it promises to get worse.

The government has responded to opposition by announcing a one year delay in enacting the cap for supported housing (the cap for general needs will go ahead as planned). While this has offered a little breathing space, it has not led housing associations to invest in developing services.

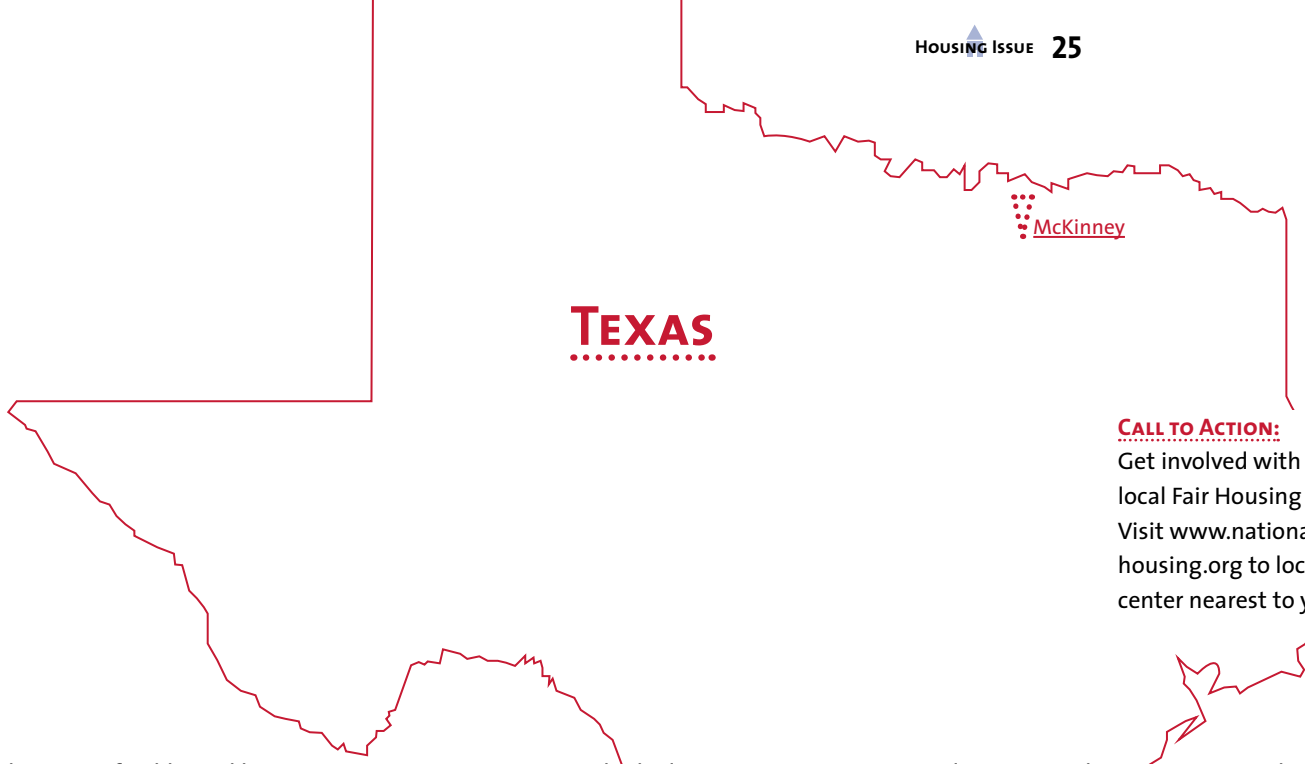
The issue we face that our societal duty to look after vulnerable people is increasingly incompatible with the government's taxation and spending policies. Ask the Government its view on supporting vulnerable people and the rhetoric is all there. David Cameron said prior to the 2010 election that the test of a good society is whether you look after the vulnerable. David Orr gives the Government the benefit of the doubt, saying he finds it 'hard to believe it is the intention of the Government to put all of supported housing at risk'.

But the risk is real; a risk Orr describes as 'terrifying'. The long-term solution is not simple, but short-term the Government should at very least exempt supported housing from the benefit cap. From there we need a full, open and honest discussion about the future of supported housing. The starting point of that discussion is that support for vulnerable people is not compatible with austerity.

Jonathan Nomamiukor

Accessing the Best Place to Live in America

Texas



Call to Action:
Get involved with your local Fair Housing Center. Visit www.nationalfairhousing.org to locate the center nearest to you.

When Time's Money Magazine's published their annual "Best Places to Live" list in 2014, they placed McKinney, Texas at the very top. The town's mix of "art galleries, boutiques, and farm-to-table restaurants" was just a small sample of the amenities cited by the CNN-backed publication. The profile described McKinney as a "hotbed for growth-industry jobs," lauded its exemplary school system, and praised their "housing options" that ranged "from restored Victorians to Texas-style mansions." Although the article noted that many of those housing options averaged in the "low $200,000," the article neglected to mention another thing McKinney, Texas is known for: racial segregation.

In 2009, a mere five years prior to the publication of the article, a housing nonprofit based in neighboring Dallas, Texas filed a law suit against the city. Per the complaint, the McKinney Housing Authority operated a racially segregated system of public and low-income housing that was designed to limit the number of low-income individuals from residing in the city, particularly on the affluent and mostly white West side. The vast majority of those impacted by this discriminatory housing policy were African-American. As a result of the law suit, McKinney's Housing Authority agreed to provide loans to develop hundreds of low-income housing options.

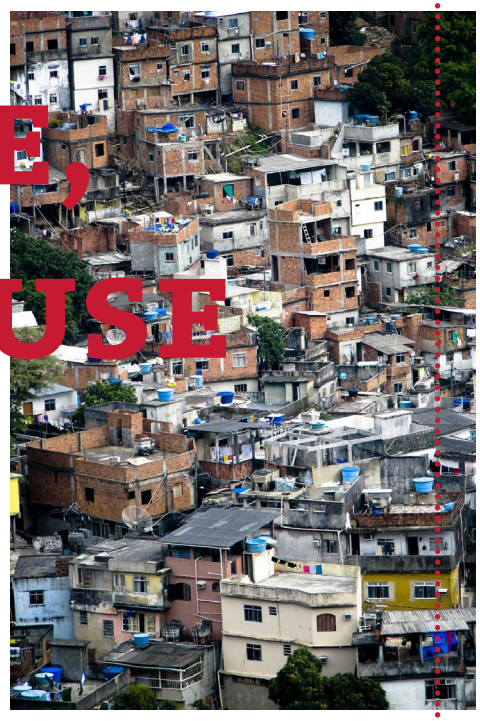
The importance of access to housing options in the United States cannot be understated. Local school districts derive their funding predominantly from the property taxes residents of that district pay. In other words, the wealthier the residents of a town are, the more money the schools in that town has. That funding can be linked to items such as books and computers for students, to the ability to hire teachers, administrators, and counselors. The less the homes in a district are worth, the less property taxes are available for schools to put students in the position to thrive.

By placing this structural barrier to housing opportunities, city leaders were attempting to further promulgate systemic inequities along racial lines. After all, the MoneyMagazine article also cited McKinney's proximity to a number of Fortune 500 companies and many other job opportunities as another boon in the city's favor. The accessibility to good, high paying jobs, as well as good, well-funded schools is precisely what McKinney's city officials sought to keep from poor people, the vast majority of whom were black. Roughly one year after the MoneyMagazine profile was published, and six years after the lawsuit was settled, McKinney, Texas was a national story yet again. In June, 2015, video of an ex-police officer named Eric Casebolt grabbing a 15-year-old African-American girl named Dajerria Becton by the back of the neck and slamming her, head first, onto the ground. He dragged her body against the grass, pressed his knee across her back, and yelled at other black teens who filmed and witnessed the altercation. The police were initially called after residents of a private community in McKinney complained that a number of unauthorized teenagers using their pool. Witnesses reported that prior to the police arrival, residents of the private community told black youth attending the party to "return to Section 8 (a.k.a publicly funded) housing."

Officer Casebolt, who pointed his gun at multiple unarmed black teenagers upon his arrival, likely believed he was just doing his job when he slammed the girl to the ground. After all, you can't just let anyone have access to the "Best Place to Live in the United States of America."

Gabriela De Oliveira

My Life, My House



Favela, photo by anthony_goto on Flickr

Housing is one of the clearest representations of extreme inequality in Brazil today. Whilst the country's richest families live in guarded apartment blocks with access to private swimming pools, its poorest communities live in vast slums in every region. These slums, many of which do not have proper sewage systems, are referred to as favelas in Brazilian Portuguese. You may be familiar with photographs of favelas crawling up the side of mountains over-looking some of Brazil's most famous beaches. You may also be familiar with blockbuster films such as City of God which depict the difficulties of growing up in a dangerous favela. However you may not be aware that many favela communities are currently fighting for their homes in the face of mass evictions.

After hosting the World Cup in 2014, Brazil will also be hosting the Olympics in a few months time. Rio de Janeiro, one of Brazil's most famous cities, will therefore be centre-stage for the world's largest multi-sport competition. Shockingly however, in preparation for these events many communities have been threatened, harassed, or forced to

Maracana Stadium, photo by Around the Rings 1992 on Flickr

leave their homes in order to clear land for construction sites such as the Olympic park, new transport links or even car parks. These types of forced evictions are often referred to as 'mega-event evictions'.

Many communities have been offered the option of relocating to newly-built social housing projects like the Minha Casa Minha Vida (My Life My House) program, which aims to give families the chance to move into more permanent and secure housing. However, some of those who have accepted this option, have been relocated up to 50km (31 miles) from the city centre and without proper transport links, meaning they are struggling to travel to work or to access schools for their children. Furthermore, those who have refused to move from their homes have been threatened with eviction, and some have had their homes demolished. The 1988 Constitution protects the right to housing for Brazilians, but the government has used a 'state of exception' law to defend these unconstitutional evictions and demolitions.

One affected community lives in the 'Vila Autódromo' favela, located right next to where the Olympic Park in Rio is being built (see photo above). This favela was originally established by a fishing community in the 1960s, but had since grown to a close-knit community of over 550 families. Despite original claims that the Vila Autódromo community would not be removed or affected by the Olympic Park, the community has faced systematic harassment from state forces to abandon their homes. This harassment has amounted to threats, abuse, eviction notices and demolitions, as recorded by the 2015 report by the World Cup and Olympics Popular Committee of Rio de Janeiro. A strong community campaign has emerged to fight for their right to keep their homes, and protests have been staged outside the favela as well as outside the Mayor of Rio's office. One ex-resident, Heloisa Helena has even written letters directly to the UN Human Rights Commission recounting the harassment she experienced leading up to the eventual demolition of her home in Vila Autódromo. She has received no reply.

For Heloisa it is too late, but for the 47 families who are determined to keep their homes, the battle continues. Despite the communities' relentless campaigning, evictions have

intensified. Many residents suspect that, rather than just for the Olympics, the land is being cleared for real estate speculation - meaning it has become valuable land for property developers. A recent agreement between the Vila Autódromo residents and the Mayor of Rio de Janeiro states that the remaining houses will not be demolished and will instead be developed into better quality housing. However, many residents are understandably suspicious of the government and fear this agreement will not be fulfilled. The community have therefore launched their latest campaign #UrbanizaJà (#UrbanizeNow) which aims to put pressure on the government to follow through with this agreement. Communities like Vila Autódromo have worked hard to build homes and communities from very little.

Although you may feel that you can't relate to a small favela community in Brazil, it is important to realise that these families are simply fighting for the right to keep their homes, as anyone would. Some favela residents feel defeated that the public doesn't care when a poor community suffers. So now more than ever, we must show solidarity with this resilient community. It is in moments like these that international attention can really support a cause and create change, so you can help.

Click on the following links to join their blog or Facebook page, and show your support by tweeting the hash-tags #VivaVilaAutódromo and #UrbanizaJà. For up to date information in English on community campaigning against evictions in Vila Autódromo and other favelas in Rio visit: www.RioOnWatch.org.

Neighbors, photo by Catalytic Communities on Flickr

The message reads: ‚When there are no more public areas for them to sell, they will sell the favelas. Who is going to complain?'

TJ Brooke-Bullard

Right to Buy:

What can Thatcher's failed legacy teach us today?

In 1980 Margaret Thatcher's government offered council tenants the Right to Buy their homes at large discounts. More than three decades on from the introduction of this controversial policy, the Right to Buy is being extended to tenants of housing associations under the Government's new housing and planning Bill. Yet despite increasingly generous discounts, few of the 1.3 million who are eligible for the scheme are sufficiently wealthy to take advantage of it. It is important therefore to consider the role that the 1980 housing bill has played in the crisis we are experiencing today, and to understand how its extension will deepen the problem.

As well as affording council tenants the Right to Buy, Thatcher prevented councils from building new homes with the money from sales. The justification was classic neoliberal economics: nationalised industries are inefficient, and by reducing them the principle of supply and demand dictates that the market will pick up the slack.

It seems simple enough, but private sector concern has always been less to do with satisfying demand than maximising profits. Since the introduction of Right to Buy, housebuilding has fallen behind demand, and prices have spiralled out of control. Last year 141,000 new homes were built: well below the 250,000 needed to prevent prices rising. At the same time, we have seen wages stagnate whilst the number of homeowners has barely grown. Between 1918 and 1981 home ownership rose by 35%, while from 1981 to the present the rise was just 6%. As a policy designed to boost homeownership, Right to Buy has failed on its own terms.

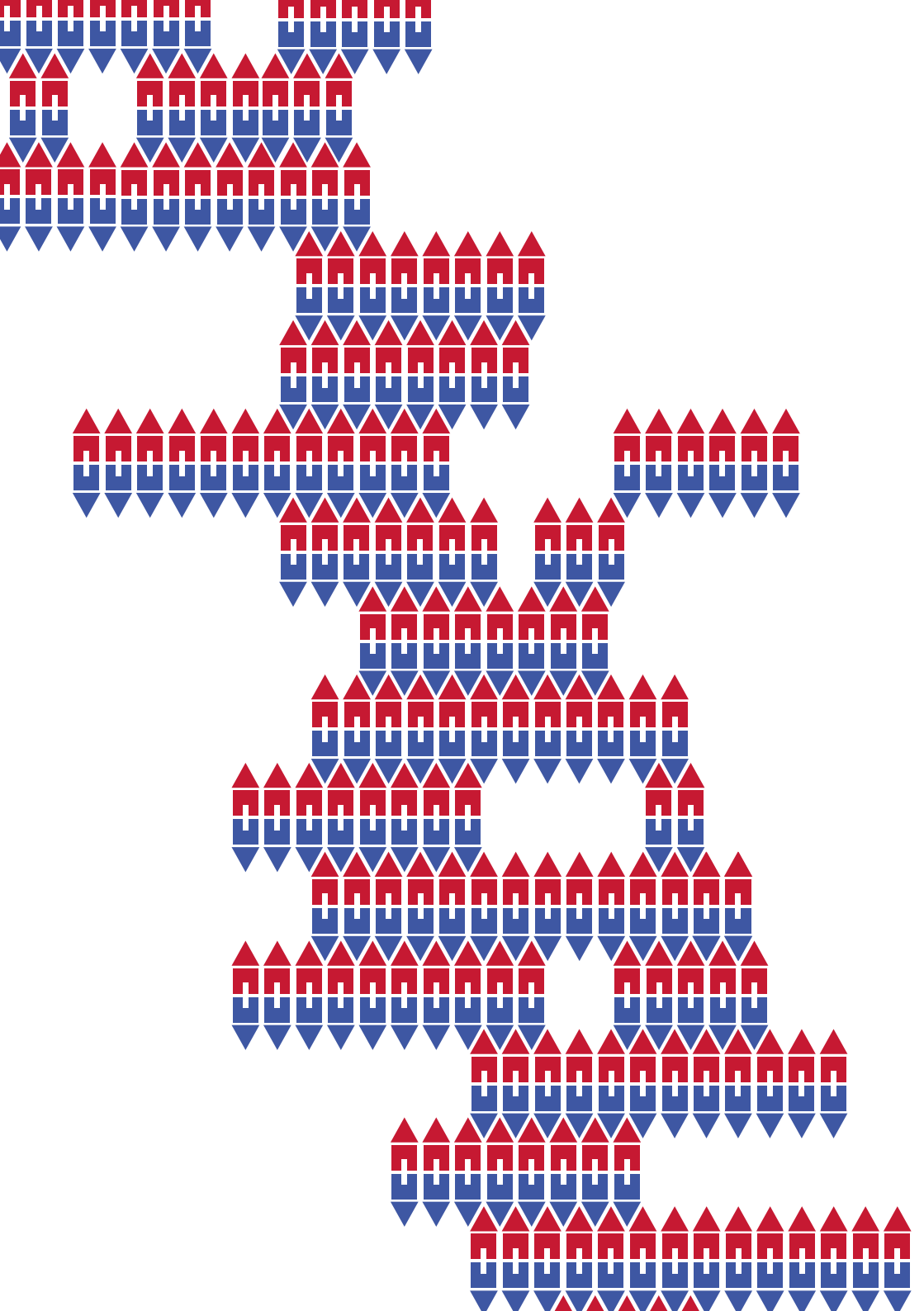
Many argue that while social housing has declined over the past thirty years, Right to Buy has allowed over 2 million people the chance to join the property owning classes. Although it may be true that some tenants have been given this opportunity, later generations have been priced out of the market and found themselves trapped in expensive private renting.

To make matters worse, Right to Buy discounts are tied to rising market values. This means that even with increased discounts, very few housing association tenants are likely to take it up. The 2015 Big Tenant survey – which interviewed 6,700 housing association tenants - found that just 13% of the housing association tenants surveyed would be able to afford it, with just 7% choosing to take up the offer. In London the figure is just 1%.

Over the past twenty years - rather than acknowledging the root cause of rising prices- governments' have sought to tackle the problem by offering increasingly generous discounts to encourage people to take up the scheme. When first introduced, the initial discount stood at 33% of market value, rising incrementally to 50% for longer tenants (to a maximum of £50,000). In 1997, New Labour responded to escalating housing prices by increasing the maximum discount for houses to 60%, and 70% for flats. By 2012, the coalition government had increased the maximum figure to £75,000 across England.

Under the new bill discounts start at 35% on a house and 50% on a flat, rising to a 70% maximum discount (capped at £77,900 outside London and £103,900 in the capital) This means that a gift of over £100,000 is available to some of the wealthiest housing association tenants. However, prices in the capital are so high that few will be able to take advantage of it.

I work for an organisation in the London Borough of Southwark which helps young housing association tenants to maintain their tenancies. The reasons these young tenants are referred to our services are various and complex. We work with asylum seekers, care leavers, and young people who have been forced to leave home. Many are the survivors of abuse or discrimination. Very few have any savings, and even fewer expect to receive any form of inheritance. In Southwark, the average price of a property is over £600,000. It will be a long time, if ever, before they are able to buy their own home.

At the same time as the availability of truly affordable housing has fallen, it has become increasingly difficult for people to maintain their tenancy. This is something which I have observed first hand. Rising benefit sanctions (686,000 in 2014), housing benefit delays, and increasingly insecure work based on zero-hour contracts (801,000 people were on zero hour contracts in 2015) are making it increasingly challenging for tenants. Meanwhile increased numbers of starter, introductory and excluded tenancies –which give people fewer rights and less protection from eviction – have made it easier for local authorities and housing associations to evict people who fall behind on rent.

The enormous Right to Buy discounts offered to a tiny proportion of social tenants exposes the failure of the policy over the last 36 years. It is clear now that a further gift to the wealthiest tenants - at the expense of the rest - is not the answer. A serious proposal would look to address the shortage in affordable housing by supporting local authorities to invest in council stock, while strengthening the rights of existing tenants. Not only will this benefit millions of low-income people, but will help alleviate pressure on the private sector and bring prices down for all. It is clear that Right to Buy has failed, and it is about time we considered alternatives.