

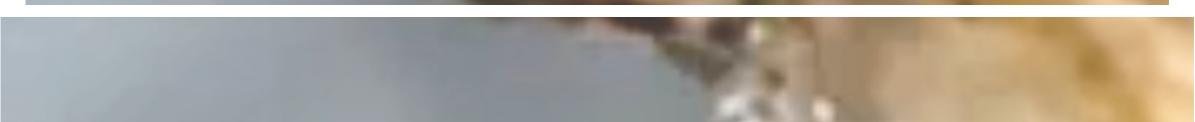


Transmitting dampness

*understanding media practices as
a means of unhoming through poor
conditions*

Elara Shurety

33640148
MARA Dissertation
6600 words
I agree that Visual Cultures may share
my work with future students.





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'Did you know a whole city /
could be a damp room?'

Devon Walker-Figueroa, *Damp Room*

'Every day we come across new injustices, new indignities, new outrages. Many, like this one, have been committed in the name of regeneration, a process steeped in everyday violence against us. [...] We are stigmatised here, there and everywhere. We are told we are shit. We often live in shit – mould, damp, overcrowding.'

Southwark Notes, *The Luxury of Not Being Burned to Death*

'Old media made modern architecture modern. New media makes it disappear.'

Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture*



Introduction

5

Uneven exposure to risk in social housing came to the fore following the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. This revealed a 'broader process of redistributing risk and vulnerability' within housing,¹ exposing also a relationship between unsafety and regeneration.²

This was again highlighted in 2021, when ITV News broadcast an hour-long report, *Surviving Squalor: Britain's Housing Shame*, uncovering the shocking conditions endured by many social housing tenants.³ One prominent case featured was Eastfields estate in Merton, which widespread disrepair made 'a touchstone for service issues in the social housing sector'.⁴ In a subsequent interview, Geeta Nanda, Chair of the G15,⁵ framed these conditions as necessary to 'encourage people to move' to enable its planned regeneration-by-demolition.⁶ This demonstrated that poor and unsafe housing conditions not only result from regeneration, but are used to facilitate it. Since *Surviving Squalor* aired, social housing conditions have remained a national talking point, alongside their relationship with regeneration and displacement. Notably, in July 2022 the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) published a select committee report identifying neglect of sites associated with regeneration as a key cause of poor conditions.⁷

The idea that estates earmarked for regeneration are deliberately neglected is often expressed by tenants and housing activists.⁸ This perception has a longer genealogy. Since the 1980s, Britain's housing context has been continually shaped by neoliberalism. As geographer Stuart Hodkinson argues, nowhere has neoliberalism 'been more fervently pursued than in

the realm of housing,' with dangerous consequences.⁹ However, rather than just unsafe consequences of long-term disinvestment and deregulation, neoliberal housing deliberately manufactures unsafe conditions. Disrepair is generated to sustain the devaluation of social housing: as an ideological justification and as a tool to expedite the removal of tenants. Extreme cuts to housing budgets, for instance, were central to strengthening and incentivising Right to Buys and large scale stock transfers to housing associations. As local authorities struggled to carry out maintenance and repairs, policies which sought to privatise or weaken local authority provision of social housing became more attractive to tenants and councils alike. By 1997, these cuts had left an estimated £19 billion disrepair backlog for social housing.¹⁰

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I argue that poor housing conditions function as a means to unhome and displace social tenants. My focus on dampness was driven by its prevalence. As one of the most rampant housing problems,¹¹ some local authorities even use it as a 'general proxy' indicator for housing disrepair.¹² Though focusing on dampness, a material condition, I move beyond material-based analyses that focus on building age or construction quality. Such approaches treat the dilapidated dwelling as a final product, rather than a shifting, fluid set of processes, produced by social relations.¹³ Instead, I situate my findings in relation to the subject of media. As my research progressed, it felt reductive to examine how damp conditions are produced by housing providers, without examining how the production of the idea of dampness, of dilapidation, operates in conjunction. The media transmission of the idea that social housing is materially defective as a category is an essential part of the dismantling of social housing. A media focus also resonated with the genesis for the renewed interest in poor housing conditions: *Surviving Squalor*. This focus builds upon a body of work that addresses 'territorial stigmatisation',¹⁴ as it pertains to social housing,¹⁵ and the role of the media within this.¹⁶ Of those who have evaluated housing conditions and stigma in conjunction, these categories are largely treated separately.¹⁷ I view them as complexly interrelated.

I utilise an expanded notion of media in the context of dampness, influenced by the

¹ David Madden, 'Deadly Cityscapes of Inequality,' *The Sociological Review*, June 19, 2017, <https://thesociologicalreview.org/collections/urban-sociologies/deadly-cityscapes-of-inequality/>.

² Stuart Hodkinson, *Safe as Houses: Private Greed, Political Negligence, and Housing Policy After Grenfell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

³ ITV, 'Surviving Squalor: Britain's Housing Shame,' *ITV News*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.itv.com/hub/surviving-squalor-britains-housing-shame/10a1795a0001>.

⁴ Nathaniel Barker, 'What went wrong on the Eastfields Estate?,' *Inside Housing*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/what-went-wrong-on-the-eastfields-estate-72631>.

⁵ The G15 is an organisation of the largest housing associations in and around Greater London. It's current 11 members (reduced from its original 15 largely due to mergers) are: Clarion Housing Group, L&Q, Notting Hill Genesis, Peabody Trust, Metropolitan Thames Valley, Hyde Group, Optivo, A2Dominion Group, Southern Housing Group, Network Homes, and One Housing Group.

⁶ Jack Simpson, 'Capital conundrums: G15 boss Geeta Nanda assesses the issues London landlords face,' *Inside Housing*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/capital-conundrums-g15-boss-geeta-nanda-assesses-the-issues-london-landlords-face-72078>.

⁷ Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, *The Regulation of Social Housing* (HC 2022-07 18) para 20.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, formally the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, is the UK Government department that deals with, among other things, housing.

⁸ The London Tenants Federation, Loretta Lees, Just Space, & Southwark Notes, *Staying Put: An Anti-Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London*, June 2014, <https://southwarknotes.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/staying-put-web-version.pdf>, 7.

⁹ Hodkinson, *Safe as Houses*, 6.

¹⁰ Stuart Hodkinson & Chris Essen, 'Grounding accumulation by dispossession in everyday life: The unjust geographies of urban regeneration under the Private Finance Initiative,' *International Journal of Law of the Built Environment* 7, no. 1 (2015).

¹¹ See, for instance: Shelter, '60% of London renters forced to live with unacceptable conditions, including vermin-infested, damp or dangerous homes,' *Shelter*, February 3, 2016, https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/60_of_london_renters_forced_to_live_with_unacceptable_conditions,_including_vermin-infested,_damp_or_dangerous_homes2.

¹² London Borough of Newham, *Unitary Development Plan*, June 2001, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/723985/response/1739499/attach/3/UDP%20Combined%20Copy%202001.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1, 169.

¹³ Matthew Thompson, 'Contesting 'dilapidated dwelling,' in *From Conflict to Inclusion in Housing*, eds. Graham Cairns, Georgios Artopoulos & Kirsten Day (London: UCL Press, 2017), 208.

¹⁴ Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Loïc Wacquant, Tom Slater & Virgilio Borges Pereira, 'Territorial Stigmatisation in Action,' *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 46 (2014); Tom Slater, 'The invention of the 'sink estate': Consequential categorisation and the UK housing crisis,' *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 4 (2018); Peer Smets & Margarethe Kusenbach, 'New Research on Housing and Territorial Stigma,' *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 1 (2020).

¹⁶ Ade Kearns, Oliver Kearns & Louise Lawson, 'Notorious Places: Image, Reputation, Stigma. The Role of Newspapers in Area Reputations for Social Housing Estates,' *Housing Studies* 28, no. 4 (2013).

¹⁷ Paul Watt, 'Territorial Stigmatisation and Poor Housing at a London 'Sink Estate,' *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 1 (2020).



idea that 'environments are also media.'¹⁸ In this, I treat the homespace itself as an environment which is a medium, and as a media environment, drawing also from Eyal Weizman's understanding of architecture as a documentary form.¹⁹ Weizman stresses this is not simply because 'photographs of it circulate in the public domain,' but because architecture as a form registers and stores the effects of (social and political) 'force fields,'²⁰ and transmits this information further, turning space into medium.²¹ At first, this might seem to complicate Stuart Hall's argument that an event 'must become a "story" before it can become a communicative event'.²² However, if we understand the building as medium, then the event of dilapidation is one that gains signification when passing through, and transmitted by, the mediator-homespace. From this departure, the form of the damp building, becomes an accretion of content, holding informative and communicative power. Alongside this, *homespace-as-media* takes on a second meaning: from life sciences, a substance designed to support the growth of microorganisms. This expanded configuration of media deepens understandings of how unhoming occurs through the transmission of neglect and violence, but also starts to etch pathways towards a radical transmission of dampness.

I understand displacement, through unhoming, as 'not (only) a question of physical relocation, but (also) [...] a(n immaterial) rupture between self and home'.²³ Similarly influential is Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell's work on home *unmaking*,²⁴ which offers an expansive and ambivalent reworking of homicide.²⁵ Nevertheless, I recognise the far-from-neutral semantic choice within *home* (over, say, *house*). *Home* is imbued with more symbolic and ideologic meaning, with idealised discourses of the home particularly challenged by queer and feminist thinkers.²⁶ *House*, however, is not without ideological baggage; illustratively, Thatcher's use of 'house' when introducing Right to Buy, despite millions of council tenants living in flats, framed the policy aspirationally.²⁷ Moreover, while house is usually understood as spatially confined within property, home has additional associative meaning with place – a hometown, a place one feels at home. This distinction is crucial: the dispossession of the urban poor is not limited to a removal from property, but marked by economic and social displacement from the surrounding area. The *home* within these terms encapsulates this expanded site of expulsion.

I begin with my methodological approaches, before providing a critical overview of household dampness in section one. Section two deals with the transmission of dampness through the 'traditional' realm of media, and in section three consider the evidentiary matter of damp housing. Section four then offers an understanding of the homespace as medium, and unpacks how such a framing might offer radical possibilities in research and activism.

18 John Durham Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3.

19 Eyal Weizman, 'Introduction: Forensis,' in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2014), 15.

20 Ibid, 15.

21 Ibid, 19.

22 Stuart Hall, 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,' in *Essential Essays / Stuart Hall* ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 258.

23 Sara Westin, 'Un-homing with words: economic discourse and displacement as alienation,' *Cultural Geographies* 28, no. 2 (2020), 240.

24 Richard Baxter & Katherine Brickell, 'For Home UnMaking,' *Home Cultures* 11, no. 2 (2014).

25 Douglas Porteous & Sandra Smith, *Domicide: The Global Destruction of Home* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001).

26 See, for instance: Andrew Gorman-Murray, 'Contesting Domestic Ideals: queering the Australian home,' *Australian Geographer* 38, no. 2 (2007).

27 Andy Beckett, 'The right to buy: the housing crisis that Thatcher built,' *the Guardian*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/aug/26/right-to-buy-margaret-thatcher-david-cameron-housing-crisis>.

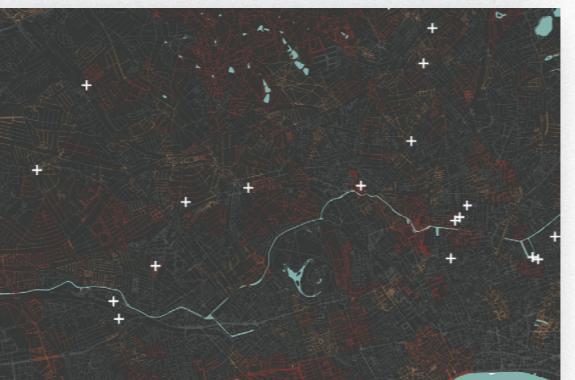


67	22/04/2022	Havering	Council	Woman constantly di
68	20/04/2022	Tower Hamlets	Landmark Pinna	FLAT OUT HELL We
69	19/04/2022	Hackney	Council	MY HOUSE HELL M
70	15/04/2022	Merton	Moat	Mum trapped in flat s
71	15/04/2022	Hackney	Council	Mum made to feel lik
72	14/04/2022	Merton	Moat	Mitcham mum's son i
73	11/04/2022	Hackney	Council	'Like a beggar': Hack
74	08/04/2022	Merton	Moat	HOUSE HELL My so
75	08/04/2022	Hammersmith	Council	Grandmother died in
76	07/04/2022	Havering	Council	DEATH TRAP My ho
77	06/04/2022	Newham	L&Q	LOST MY PRIDE' My
78	06/04/2022	Newham	L&Q	Family use bucket as
79	03/04/2022	Merton	Clarion	EXCLUSIVE: Social I

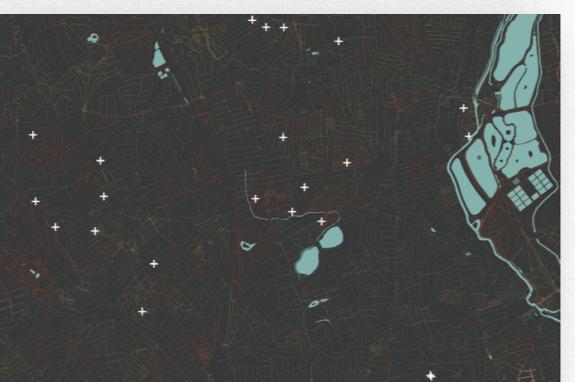


Ealing	Council	West London's 1060s estate whoro residents are stuck My London	https://
Southwark	Council	Southwark residents fear estate will collapse if new hi News Shopper	https://
Croydon	Catalyst	HORRIFIC! My toddler, 2, struggles to breathe as our The Sun	https://
Hackney	Industrial Dweller	Shackwell residents demand better housing conditic Hackney Gazette	https://
Hackney	Industrial Dweller	'It makes you nauseous': Damp and mould at Shackle Hackney Citizen	https://
Hackney	Industrial Dweller	Tenants on east London estate revolt over damp and The Guardian	https://
Hammersmith	Council	Council launches damp and mould strategy after lopp Inside Housing	https://
Enfield	Council	Leaking roof on housing block 'unfixed for six years' Enfield Dispatch	https://
Lewisham	L&Q	Worst Case of Cockroaches' Exposed as Mom's Hell Newsweek	https://
Croydon	Council	Croydon Council: Domestic abuse survivor forced to Sutton & Croydon Guar	https://
Ealing	Council	Slow Progress on High Lane Estate Demolition Ealing Today	http://
Lewisham	L&Q	'Just unacceptable': Mother living in cockroach infests The Independent	https://
Croydon	Council	A year after housing scandal, council to raise rents by Inside Croydon	https://
Lewisham	L&Q	Children living in a cockroach-infested Lewisham home ITV	https://
Havering	Council	Harold Hill mum looks for support in petition to address Romford Recorder	https://
Lambeth	Council	Vulnerable' Brixton family waiting months for repairs My London	https://
Camden	Council	Woman lived in damp-infested council flat for years at My London	https://
Lambeth	Council	Family's leaky flat is so damp they're woken up by wa The Mirror	https://
Lambeth	Council	Family trapped in leaky London flat so bad they're for My London	https://
N/A	N/A	EXCLUSIVE: Hellish rented homes with black mouldy The Mirror	https://
N/A	N/A	Housing Ombudsman: how social landlords should fix Inside Housing	https://

4 years	Southwark Council	Nose constantly blocking, itchy skin breathing problems
Since I was 7/8 and I am now 33. They have fixed it but it always comes back	Yes the Council, they came and fixed it after chasing them up but it does not solve the underlying issues	It makes you feel embarrassed as v care of our home and tired having to the council to fix
Over 10 years	Council has been contacted number of occasions	Living in this damp condition has me and my young children 2 of them mould spores and also have to try hard as I am in a small space with : they just say to wipe the walls down and that there's nothing they can do as it's an issue with the building, apparently the house was built too long ago to be adequately protected against mould
10 yrs	council, they just say to wipe the walls down and that there's nothing they can do as it's an issue with the building, apparently the house was built too long ago to be adequately protected against mould	Its so buttters its embarrassing yo @kwejhousing on twitter, he's got k case studies ab mould in social hous
15 years	Southwark Council - initially ignored, the whole bathroom was covered in mould and the window rattles out of the frame. Mould in the bedroom window. Had to contact local councillors and threaten legal action as they initially said it was from condensation. They performed "studies" and found nothing wrong but I managed to prove them wrong.	Health wise has made my lungs we cough. Embarrassing as refused to my home due to smell and how it has bad asthma and is worse when compared to visiting other family me
20+ years	yes, open windows and turn heating on! wash with bleach!	very difficult and time consuming (w want anti mould paint) every couple c most issues chronic health cc Also Extreme heating costs and m required every 3 months.
Over 30 years	Yes, the council wiped it down and repainted the walls.	It has caused my two eldest childre asthma, caused one of my children form of OCD.



The council simply tell us to ventilate the property by keeping our windows open... during winter. They've never actually done or given us any help to solve the damp. We're expected to buy things to eradicate it ourselves and are told to just bleach and clean the walls whenever it appears.	It's depressing. I feel like I'm scrubbing my walls and ceilings all the time, I can't keep up with it. It's also so embarrassing having people over because the damp is so visible against the stark white surfaces. It infuriates me to think about having to live in a freezing home or a damp one, all because the council haven't made/maintained this property better.
Reported to the council, they sent a surveyor and meant to be getting fixed quite soon. It's taken numerous emails since October for them to respond and send repairs.	Very disheartening. My block is meant to be demolished soon so maybe that's why the council cannot be arsed to fix the damp/mould.
Yes - my house is part of a housing association and we regularly contact them regarding that. They continually advise us to keep our windows open and don't dry clothes indoors, because this causes mold.	I have asthma and the damp and mold severely affects my condition. I wake up every morning with a sore throat, tight chest and coughing due to the damp and mold. I have been advised to move to a different property by our housing association and as though we are just a burden instead of a family who needs help.
Contacted Catalyst Housing - soon to be Peabody. They ignored it for about 9 months until a neighbour gave me the direct number to a very senior manager. She arranged an inspection. The inspector said that the guttering was no longer fit for use, with climate change it needed to be changed to larger guttering to cope with torrential rain.	We live on a building site. My first home and garden were demolished. This home will be too. There is a massive demolition 30 feet from my home. A neighbour is dying of lung cancer, the jackhammer and heavy plant noise is the environment she is spending her final days in.
Because my home will be demolished within the next 10 years we've been told that it isn't worth it to the trust and that the guttering will just be cleared - it is not blocked.	My son's clothes and shoes were covered in mould. The senior manager I contacted is the only competent human being in Catalyst, the CEO doesn't bother to reply to anyone, the Board is made up of people who collect Board memberships. We were abandoned years



LEFT: Figures 1-4. Screenshots taken from spread sheet used to track news coverage (1-2), and store survey responses (3-4).

RIGHT: Figures 5-8. QGis map used to spatialise news coverage and survey responses.

Methodology

This research takes a mixed-methods approach, drawing on first-hand accounts from those with lived experience of damp housing conditions, alongside representations of damp housing.

Between July 2021 and July 2022, I logged 341 news articles about damp housing in London, sourced primarily online.²⁸ Alongside this, I surveyed and interviewed those living in damp conditions in London.²⁹ I both accepted responses from, and logged news articles about, tenures other than social housing – not least because leaseholders and private renters can live in properties where the freeholder is a social landlord. This allowed me to compare conditions and experience by tenure type, and provided additional insight into living with dampness. Initially, I posted the survey on social media, and allowed it to spread organically. As reliance on snowballing to find research participants is known to result in bias, unsurprisingly circulation via my own networks yielded a high proportion of middle class private renters, and Haringey residents – both of which represent my own position.³⁰ In response, I used Facebook groups and residents associations to better reach social tenants.

In total, I received 102 responses, and interviewed 10 people.³¹ These interviews took place either at their residence, or via Zoom, and followed a semi-structured approach. As I was aware of the sense of embarrassment those living in damp housing can feel about their situation, I frequently drew on my own experiences of damp housing to show empathy, and break down initial discomfort about sharing details – as others researching damp have successfully done to 'reduce distance'.³² All participants have been given pseudonyms for the purpose of this work, and where contextually relevant personal information is included, it is not identifiable.

28 My inclusion criteria were that articles logged must mention at least one case of damp/mouldy housing in London. Articles which mentioned multiple cases around the country could be included if they mentioned a case in London. Damp/mould did not have to be the primary focus of the article.

29 A link to the survey can be found here: <https://airtable.com/shrmFjNjJNKFIuYZ1>.

30 Victor Jupp, 'Volunteer Sampling,' in The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods, ed. Victor Jupp (London, SAGE Publications, 2006).

31 While I contacted all 46 who were interested in being interviewed, many did not reply. For some that did reply, we were simply unable to find a time that suited us. I also saw a reduction in those willing to be interviewed after explaining I would need to record the interview, and trying to get consent for this. As this research carries on past the dissertation submission, I have some further interviews scheduled in the coming months. This was particularly necessary as multiple people indicated difficulties with finding time in the summer holidays, and a strong preference for conducting the interview once their children were back at school.

32 Elliot Serjeant, Robin Kearns & Tara Coleman, 'Home Tours: An approach for understanding dampness and wellbeing in the domestic environment,' *Wellbeing, Space and Society* 2 (2021), 6.



1. Dampness under the microscope

11

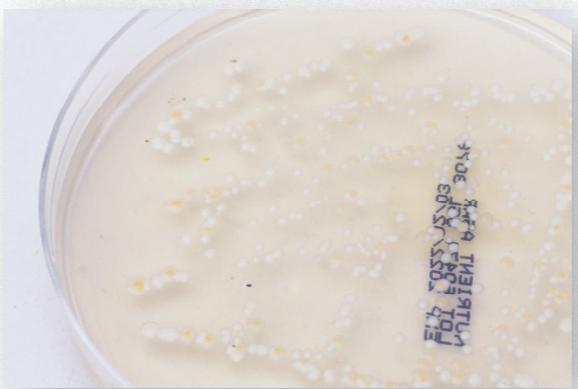
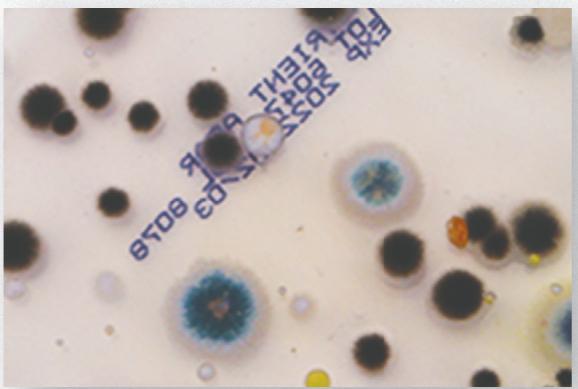
What does it mean for a dwelling to be *damp*?

It's an all too familiar assessment: you press your hand against a wall at a flat viewing to feel for the cool, clammy sensation. You upturn your bedroom, searching for the source of that stale, musty smell. You are surprised at the creeping grey dots on the wall, the perfect outline of your poster once you take it down.

At its crux, damp is an excess of moisture that cannot escape. Water in, greater than, water out. Most buildings will contain some dampness, at some point, in some place – maybe after a rainy week, every so often in the winter, or in that corner of the bathroom. Generally, this isn't what we think of when talking about *household damp*. The term has come to connote dampness in excess: a quick online image search – *is my house damp* – confronts you with crumbling plaster, white walls turned entirely grey, someone in a hazmat suit scraping at a surface. Occluded are the gradients in-between, the manifestations in dampness that fill the gradient from *not-damp* to *extreme-damp*. This obscures damp's temporality, as something that builds up over time, gradual rather than sudden – an accretive, or attritional phenomenon – a form of 'slow violence'.³³ The UK Centre for Moisture in Buildings underscore these complexities, asking 'what are the threshold levels of moisture which would serve to classify a building as suffering from a dampness problem?'.³⁴

Dampness imparts wide-ranging sensorial traces upon the bodies of its cohabitants. It infiltrates our sight, our touch, our smell, our temperature perception, even our hearing. Furthermore, one person's experience of damp might not be the same as another's, even if objectively at similar levels. This can be impacted by socioeconomic factors. A damp problem in the living room will be experienced differently by the family of five in a two-bedroom flat with no other communal space, than a family of three who also have a dining room, a guest bedroom, and a study. A disabled person unable to leave their house frequently might experience a lower threshold of damp as problematic than someone who spends 10 hours a day out working. Larger events can factor on an experiential level – such as a global pandemic that sees many spending more time at home than ever before.

Amongst survey respondents the median time someone lived in damp conditions in the private rental sector (PRS) was one year; in council housing 15 years. A key contributing factor here is the ability to relocate – many in the PRS face financial limitations to moving,



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Damp

Black mold

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science.com

Damp Walls | 23 Ways t...
restorationuk.com

³³ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³⁴ Neil May, Marcella Ucci, and Charles McGilligan, 'Health and Moisture in Buildings,' UK Centre for Moisture in Buildings, October 27, 2019, <https://ukcmb.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/health-and-moisture-in-buildings-report-1.pdf>, 13.

LEFT: Figures 9-12. Photographs of household mould, grown in petri dishes.

RIGHT: Figures 13-16. Screenshots from Google image results for search 'is my house damp.'

12



social tenants are precluded from nearly all options of doing so.³⁵ Notably, while many participants across tenure-type understood dampness as a common experience, social tenants often felt that their living conditions would not be tolerated in the PRS. One interviewee, Priya, stated: '*you shouldn't be allowed to provide housing that is subpar. If you were a private landlord, it would be unacceptable to provide a house [like this]*'. Another spoke of needing to fix the damp problem in their council housing to sublet rooms privately, revealing an internalised perception that private renters are accustomed to higher quality housing than social tenants tolerate.

There were exceptions – Jessica, who grew up in council housing but rents privately, had never witnessed anything like her current situation in social housing. Additionally, social tenants seemed more aware of different avenues for support and escalation, regardless of whether they had used them successfully or at all. Nevertheless, my participants' views broadly point towards underlying assumptions that social tenants suffer worse conditions, underscoring the complexity of quantifying damp separately from personal experiences of it. These findings are also interesting when compared to trends observed in other studies.

According to the English Housing Survey (EHS), in recent years rates of dampness in the PRS have been higher than in social housing nationally, though notably in London the reverse is true.³⁶ EHS data also relies heavily on self-perception; over half of its sample typically only completes a questionnaire, rather than having an in-person visit, raising the same complications.³⁷

Despite these complexities, household damp is a racialised and classed issue. Someone's likelihood of experiencing dampness is greatly impacted by tenure-type, and is rare in owner-occupied properties.³⁸ Other economic factors, such as fuel poverty, are strong determinants.³⁹ Mixed White and Black Caribbean households were over four times more likely to endure damp housing than white British households.⁴⁰ This is important when considering the health risks dampness furnishes as a cohabitant; from asthma to autoimmune conditions to increased vulnerability to infectious illness. As legal scholar Nadine El-Enany

³⁵ Most social tenants can apply for tenancy transfers or tenancy exchanges. A tenancy transfer is when you are moved to an empty social housing property by your provider, or nominated for housing with a different provider. Tenants living in disrepair are not automatically eligible to apply, but may be due to other factors (such as overcrowding, or health or disability needs). Even for those eligible, average wait times for such transfers are often in the decades. Tenancy exchanges involve finding someone to 'swap' their homes with another social tenant. Those with poor conditions are often unlikely to find partners wanting to swap with them.

³⁶ English Housing Survey, *Headline Report, 2020-2021* (London: Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2021), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1060141/2020-21_EHS_Headline_Report_revised.pdf; 39; Environment Committee, *Keeping out the chill: fixing London's cold, damp and mouldy homes* (London: London Assembly, 2019), https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/keeping_out_the_chill_-_final.pdf, 2.

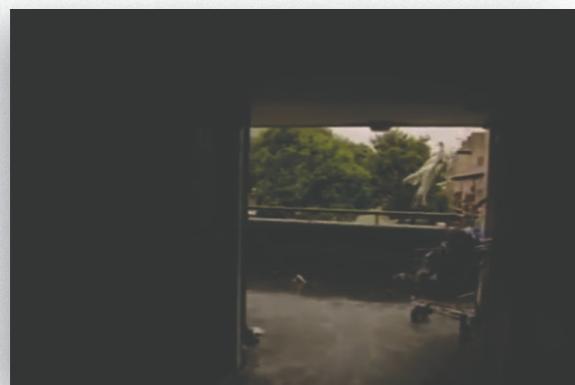
³⁷ Note that this was not the case for the EHS 2020-2021, due to issues surrounding the Covid 19 pandemic. For a more representative insight into the EHS's methodology and sampling, see: English Housing Survey, *Technical Report, 2019-2020* (London: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2021), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1000123/2019-20_EHS_Technical_Report_-_Final_Ch_1-7.pdf.

³⁸ English Housing Survey, *Headline Report, 2020-2021*.

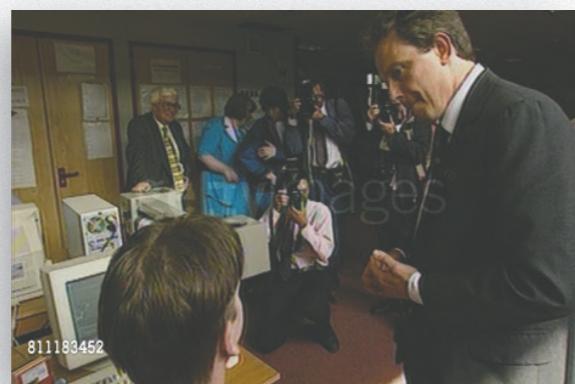
³⁹ Joanna Sutton-Klein et al., 'Associations between indoor temperature, self-rated health and socioeconomic position in a cross-sectional study of adults in England,' *BMJ Open* 11, no. 2 (2021).

⁴⁰ English Housing Survey, *Housing with damp problems* (London: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020), <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/housing-conditions/housing-with-damp-problems/latest>.

writes, 'environmental harms are a slow and less visible, but no less significant form of institutional violence than custodial deaths.'⁴¹ If we take the production of poor housing conditions as a mode of displacement, then it must be viewed also as a form of 'racial banishment'.⁴² However, in viewing damp as racialised and classed, I do not advocate for these to be understood as distinct, always keeping in mind Hall's evocative formulation that 'race is the modality in which class is lived,'⁴³ and his later reminder that 'class is the way in which race is lived'.⁴⁴



LEFT: Figures 17-20. Stills from Channel 4's ident.



RIGHT: Figures 21-24. Stills from footage of Tony Blair's visit to the Aylesbury.

2. Transmitting dampness, circulating dampness

In Channel 4's infamous ident of the Aylesbury estate, first used in 2004, abstracted chunks of tower blocks shift in and out of resemblance of the number four as the camera moves through a raised walkway. Residents criticised the ident,⁴⁵ in part due to its fabrication; a manufactured image of the estate as run down, replete with graffiti 'absent in real life,'⁴⁶ staged with 'rubbish across the whole of the area'.⁴⁷ By the mid-noughties, the Aylesbury had already long been symbolic of the very worst of council housing – becoming emblematic of the failing estate following Tony Blair's first televised prime ministerial speech, delivered there in 1997. 'There are estates,' he said, 'where the biggest employer is the drugs industry, where all that is left of the high hopes of the post-war planners is *derelict concrete*'.⁴⁸ Though scholarship often foregrounds the Aylesbury's relation to moralising discourse on crime and antisociality, the image of physical dilapidation that runs alongside this should not be overlooked.

This section contextualises the proliferating images of damp social housing in mass media within wider trends of representation. I position recent coverage of damp housing as part of a longer legacy of efforts to produce a certain image of social housing – an image that contributes to the ideological denigration of its existence as a form of dwelling. This contends with the notion that such coverage is primarily a tool that aids tenants in bringing light to their poor conditions, and through this expedites justice through an increase in public awareness and pressure, shaming housing providers, local authorities, and the Government into action. As Thomas Keenan writes in a different context, 'mobilising shame presupposes that dark deeds are done in the dark, and that the light of publicity [...] thus has the power to strike preemptively on behalf of justice'.⁴⁹

2.1 The role of the press

The British press covers housing voraciously, with all major newspapers having at least four reporters who cover housing.⁵⁰ According to my research, coverage of damp housing conditions in London is abundant, with an article published nearly daily over the past

⁴⁵ Loretta Lees, 'The Urban Injustices of New Labour's "New Urban Renewal": The Case of the Aylesbury Estate in London,' *Antipode* 46, no. 4 (2014); Watt, 'Territorial Stigmatisation and Poor Housing at a London 'Sink Estate'.

⁴⁶ Christopher Beanland, 'Channel 4's Aylesbury estate ident gets a revamp – starring the residents,' *The Guardian*, March 14, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/mar/14/channel-4-aylesbury-estate-ident-revamped>.

⁴⁷ Jean Bartlett, Aylesbury Residents and Tenants Association, quoted in: Lees, 'The Urban Injustices of New Labour's "New Urban Renewal"', 938.

⁴⁸ Quoted in: Anthony Bevins, 'Blair's pledge to the dark estates,' *Independent*, June 2, 1997, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/blair-s-pledge-to-the-dark-estates-1253883.html>. Emphasis own.

⁴⁹ Thomas Keenan, 'Mobilising Shame,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004), 446.

⁵⁰ Mary Manjikan, *Securitisation of Property Squatting in Europe* (New York, Routledge, 2013), 83.



year.⁵¹ Though this comes in the wake of heightened public interest on the subject, other studies have historically noted a high proportion of coverage of poor conditions, primarily dampness, among all coverage on select estates.⁵²

In this coverage, aesthetic and linguistic patterns stigmatise and sensationalise, fetishising the extreme, the most shocking. Language use is significant: ‘in the social world, words make things, because they make the meaning and consensus on the existence and meaning of things’⁵³ My research revealed a strong tendency towards pejorative word choices. The word ‘hell’ appeared in over 8% of articles’ titles, a further 4% of headlines featured the word ‘nightmare’.⁵⁴ The word ‘forced,’ was used in 10% of titles, most frequently the phrase ‘forced to live.’ This tacit framing holds particular weight, evocative of framings of social housing as a tenure of last resort.⁵⁵ Within image usage, high-contrast, close-up photographs were common, magnifying and decontextualising manifestations of damp and mould. Often, residents will be staged around a problematic spot, staring back at the camera, repeating familiar tropes of poverty porn. Such choices produce shock and aversion, constructing a space of abjection which likewise condemns those who live within it.⁵⁶ These inert images sit counter to demands for housing justice; as Susan Sontag notes, ‘to take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged.’⁵⁷

Surviving Squalor is filled with similar close-up, abstracted imagery. More important, however, is the footage not of housing conditions. Frequent expositional shots are replete with recognisable visual tropes: close ups of graffiti, dark walkways, broken windows. The title card for the broadcast takes as its subject not poor conditions, but the high-rise estate. It’s a notable break with the show’s high production visual imagery. The shot is of Regina Road in Croydon but it’s not instantly recognisable as so. In shades of blue and cream, the desaturated image conceals the cladding’s distinctive red trimming around every window. An overlain texture gives the image a grainy quality, and mimics the defects of cracks and dirt on an old photo. Through this image choice and treatment, ITV uses visual shorthand that positions the high-rise as ‘the symbol of decline in contemporary Britain.’⁵⁸ Here, architectural form and design are root causes of moral, social, and material failures,⁵⁹ following social housing discourse and policy defined by Alice Coleman’s influential work, *Utopia on Trial*.⁶⁰ This is not incidental.

⁵¹ Having logged 341 articles over one year, this equates to one article every 1.07 days, or one every 25 hours, 30 minutes. It is worth noting the true number of articles across this time period is likely higher; I am frequently finding months-old articles I missed at publication, and there are undoubtedly still some unaccounted for in my study.

⁵² Kearns *et al.*, ‘Notorious Places’.

⁵³ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘On the family as a realised category,’ *Theory, Culture & Society* 13 (1996), 21.

⁵⁴ Emotive descriptors of conditions, including the words ‘horrifying’ ‘disgusting’ ‘grim’ ‘dirty’ ‘slum’ ‘filth’ and ‘squalor’ were also common.

⁵⁵ See: Alex Turner, ‘A tinted view: negative media portrayals of social housing,’ *Inside Housing*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/a-tinted-view-negative-media-portrayals-of-social-housing-55950>.

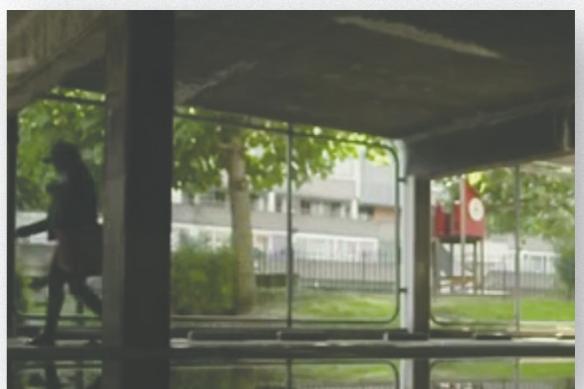
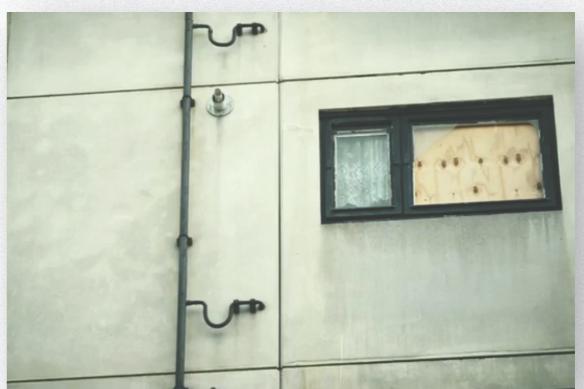
⁵⁶ See: Imogen Tyler, *Revolting subjects: Social abjection and resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, (London: Zed Books, 2013).

⁵⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1978), 12.

⁵⁸ Andrew Burke, ‘Concrete universality: Tower blocks, architectural modernism, and realism in contemporary British cinema,’ *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 3 (2007), 177.

⁵⁹ Saffron Woodcraft, ‘“Avoiding the mistakes of the past”: Tower block failure discourse and economies of risk management in London’s Olympic Park,’ *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 86 (2020).

⁶⁰ Alice Coleman, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1985).



LEFT: Figures 25-28. Photographs used in news articles about damp housing in London.

RIGHT: Figures 29-32. Stills from ITV’s *Surviving Squalor*.



Alongside affirming an ideological condemnation of social housing, these aesthetic choices shift blame from housing providers to the architectonic. As such, it constitutes epistemic violence; as geographer Mara Ferreri argues, dispossession begins with the ‘discursive association with social failure and urban decay’.⁶¹

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An online mediascape facilitates a bidirectional relationship between content and consumer, providing space for readers to input directly into housing discourse. These fora are significant: as Hall reminds us, consumption and reception are also ‘determinate moments’ in the production of meaning.⁶² Comments on such articles are rarely sympathetic. Below one concerning a Westminster estate, a representative comment reads ‘I guess they could privately rent and pay market rate like everyone else or they could get together and do something about it themselves? Rather the council do the eh? [sic].’⁶³ One interviewee told me of the important role they felt such discourse plays in the manufacturing of unbalanced responsibility for damp housing, and the problem’s proliferation. They described public response to coverage as ‘one of the main factors’ why it ‘takes so long for issues to get just sorted’ for council tenants. Through providing space and material for such discourse, news outlets support the ideological assault on social housing and its tenants. While this could be seen as inadvertent, this participatory practice is often encouraged due to its associated benefits, including generating traffic and improving brand loyalty through manufacturing outrage.⁶⁴

News media is a prime agent in the ‘reputation formation and maintenance’ of social housing, with poor conditions a central part of this.⁶⁵ The transmission of them contributes to the ‘ongoing ideological assault’ on housing provision ‘needed to make attractive the destructive policies deepening profound housing inequality’ – underscoring how damp media transmissions are thus part of a process of unhoming and displacement.⁶⁶ Therefore, common justification of such representation as needed public exposure is unconvincing. I often asked interviewees whether the recent increase in news and media focus on the topic of dampness had made any changes to their situation, or that of those they saw around them. Were providers quicker to act – concerned about potential media backlash? Were phones answered more often? The answer was resoundingly negative. Some even felt the increased media attention allowed housing providers to look publicly active, by pouring resources into high profile cases on the short term, while remaining inactive on less publicised ones. One interviewee summarised this well: ‘the moment they get a bit of bad news, they send out the fire brigade, right?’

2.2 Social media

Mould, an opportunist agent that thrives in dampness, is light averse; perhaps it is more at

⁶¹ Mara Ferreri, ‘Painted Bullet Holes and Broken: Understanding and Challenging Municipal Dispossession in London’s Public Housing ‘Decanting,’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 44, no. 6 (2020), 1010.

⁶² Hall, ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,’ in *Essential Essays / Stuart Hall*, 258.

⁶³ Commented by *poormanoflondon* on: Jacob Phillips, ‘Families’ hell on London estate where flats are covered in damp and gutters overflow,’ *MyLondon*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.mylondon.news/news/zones-1-news/families-hell-london-estate-flats-21739058>

⁶⁴ Clare Cook & Megan Knight, *Social Media for Journalists: Principles and Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), 115.

⁶⁵ Kearns et al., ‘Notorious Places,’ 593.

⁶⁶ Slater, ‘The invention of the ‘sink estate,’ 878.

home in the pixelated, low-resolution of social media, than the camera flash of a news crew. Individual spores become indistinguishable, details hard to make out as a shaking phone jerks from one spot to another. In many such photos and videos, extensive mould might be rendered as little more than a contiguous grey smudge across a white wall.

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Without professional staging, both the footage and audio tracks provide us with information of the quotidian in which dampness is endured – from children coughing, to belongings in shot. We sense the ritual movements part of day-to-day cohabitation with dampness. With one hand holding the phone, its pair moves in-frame, pulling away objects normally positioned to conceal problematic spots, instinctively reaching to wipe away moisture. As Susan Schuppli underscores, such ‘defects, disturbances, and disorder’ are ‘one of the very means by which the conditions and stakes of the political are disclosed.’⁶⁷ Social media’s first-hand/hand-held opens the possibility for dual-level damp representations, legible not just in the subject matter, but the image quality itself. Phone cameras get damp-damaged too.⁶⁸ Without knowledge about the documenting device, it’s hard to definitively say whether foggy smudges or light refracting on a lens are the result of this, or simply an old or poor-quality camera. However, this gestures towards how through media we can gather more than a snapshot of a damp issue: but also an image of its long durationality as imparted on/through the sensing object of a personal phone.

Kwajo Tweneboa is particularly associated with the circulation of poor housing conditions on social media. After being interviewed in *Surviving Squalor*, Tweneboa became a leading figure in platforming the conditions of social tenants. In many respects, his work on combating poor housing conditions is admirable. I owe him personal thanks too; approximately a quarter of the people who filled in my survey found it after he shared it, and his name was a frequent touch point in interviews.

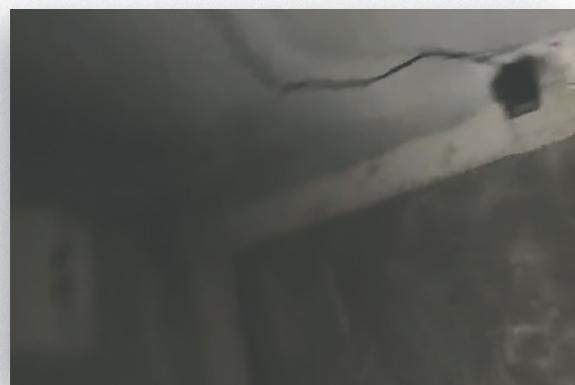
Tweneboa focuses on exposing extreme examples of poor housing conditions. Through this, dampness that occurs below this spectacularised threshold is normalised. Everyone who mentioned Tweneboa stated they had not contacted him, because their situation was comparably better than the cases he publicised. One interviewee remarked, ‘he deals with absolute madness. And in the long run or in the grand scheme of things, our place isn’t that awful.’ This was in reference to a damp problem at risk of collapsing their ceiling. It is telling that someone with such concerns would feel their situation would not be of interest to a social housing activist. The Council’s protracted response to this interviewee is revealing in relation to the role social media plays. Following their June complaint, Newham Council booked an October appointment. When asked what they should do if it crumbled in the interim, the Council advised they call again if this occurs, implying the problem was not severe enough to warrant quick action. Considering this, Tweneboa’s work functions in an almost confirmatory manner for many living in damp conditions – aligning even if unintentionally with responses like the above. By publicising the most extreme cases, those below this threshold of severity come to understand that their conditions are not as bad, not as urgent. Those who had considered contacting Tweneboa reasoned similarly. Alex, whose mum was prohibitively uncomfortable with their situation being broadcast publicly, spoke of his desire to reach out: ‘I just thought, you know, maybe ours isn’t as bad, but it’s still worth a try.’ Through focusing on

⁶⁷ Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (London: MIT Press, 2020), 185.

⁶⁸ Prism Specialties, ‘Is Humidity Bad for Your Electronics?’ *Prism Specialties*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.prismspecialties.com/blog/2020/06/10/is-humidity-bad-for-your-electronics/>; SCW, ‘My camera is blurry or foggy due to moisture on or in the camera. What do I do?’ *Get SCW*, Accessed 23 August, 2022, <https://www.getscw.com/support/faq/camera-lens-moisture/>.



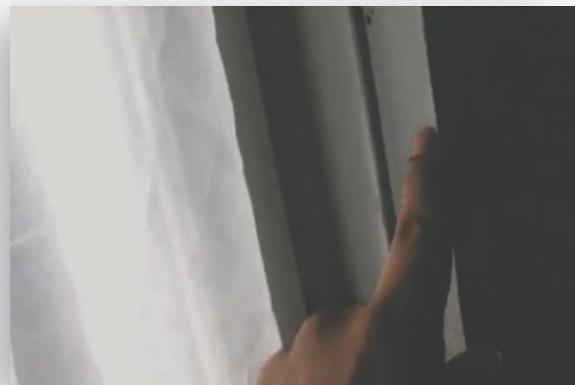
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drawing light to extreme examples, it seems that in the case of damp conditions, ‘the dark side of revelation is overexposure.’⁶⁹

It’s undeniable the ‘name and shame’ technique Tweneboa utilises has yielded results. However, while social media has proven to be an effective forum in which individual cases can be brought closer to resolution – as a member of Refurbish Don’t Demolish Central Hill Estate told me – it seems less effective at treating dampness as systemic. Social media in the case of dampness is reflective of the individualisation of an often communal problem, the fracturing of collectives, and precludes any transformative justice by treating it on a case-by-case basis.

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LEFT: Figures 33-36. Stills from video of damp housing, recorded by Wandsworth Council resident. Sent to and posted by KwajoHousing on Twitter

RIGHT: Figures 36-40. Stills from TikTok video, recorded and posted by KwajoHousing.

69 Keenan, ‘Mobilising Shame,’ 438.

3. Evidence

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Evidence as a subject traverses traditional mass media and an expansive notion of media. The issue of evidence was important to many people I spoke to, who often described to me a concerted effort to collect evidence to ‘prove’ their case. One stated, ‘what I basically wanted to do was [...] build a mountain of evidence so it was overwhelmingly in our favour.’ For residents, creating damp content is thus a media practice and a mode of evidence production. Those whose homes I visited were quick to stress that the damp problem was normally worse than this, more evident than this.⁷⁰ This bears testament to the realities of dampness as a threshold condition, and the complexities at distinguishing the point at which something becomes legible, the point at which a wall can become read as a piece of evidence.

Evidence is desired, and needed, for numerous purposes: for claims against providers, for social media, to send to journalists, or simply to ‘prove’ the extent of their problems. To inform their recent report, the DLUHC Committee report called for evidence from social housing residents, which included six oral evidence sessions which were then uploaded online. The ability to watch hours of footage provides insight into the affect and tone of these accounts, as well as the governmental evidence-gathering process and its limits. Who gives evidence within the ‘privileged arena’ of this setting is of central importance,⁷¹ as evidence-gathering is ‘a central mechanism’ of scrutiny and accountability for select committees.⁷² The majority of witnesses at the roundtable sessions were housing professionals, and despite racially minoritised households being more likely to live in social housing, and endure damp housing, only one witness speaking to the tenants’ perspective was not white. As evidence in these contexts is in part about ‘giving people a voice,’ this is revealing of who is afforded such a voice.⁷³

News media formed a central part of this evidentiary circuit. Surviving Squallor reporter, Daniel Hewitt, is referenced 11 times in the report, second only to Regulator of Social Housing executive Jonathan Walters.⁷⁴ In his evidence, Hewitt speaks to the lived experience of those he has encountered as a journalist; notably, he repeatedly states that it was not ‘[his] place’ to answer questions posed to him.⁷⁵ While Hewitt’s refusal to answer these questions is couched in his professional position, these moments display the Committee pushing Hewitt to further speak on behalf of others. This displays the extent to which media representations shape discourses on housing conditions across settings, and the lack of immediacy tenants have in shaping their own accounts. Through the evidence-gathering



⁷⁰ This was perhaps unsurprising, given that I conducted my fieldwork during the heatwaves and drought of Summer 2022.

⁷¹ Marc Geddes, ‘The webs of belief around ‘evidence’ in legislatures: The case of select committees in the UK House of Commons,’ *Public Administration* 99, no. 1 (2021), 290.

⁷² Ibid, 286.

⁷³ Ibid, 288.

⁷⁴ Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, *The Regulation of Social Housing*.

⁷⁵ Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, *Oral evidence: The regulation of social housing* (HC 2022-03 874), questions 222,

223, and 225.

LEFT: Figures 41-44. Screenshots taken from The Regulation of Social Housing oral evidence sessions.

RIGHT: Figures 45-48. Photographic evidence sent to me by participants.

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session, like the ITV broadcast itself, their lives become mediated through his framing and voice.

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Damp's evidentiary matter is nearly always treated as visual or auditory. This reflects the limitations of the mediating technologies we have at our disposal, for, as noted, dampness is multisensorial. In one study using a psychological approach to the experiences of adults experiencing energy vulnerability, exposure to damp and mould are highlighted as a focal point for participants, particularly the significant role smell plays. The authors note that, 'one of the predominant ways in which the participants discussed 'the smell' related to the risk of it being apparent to others when out in public.'⁷⁶ Damp evidence is then beared literally, carried outside, beyond the literal threshold of home. Private renter John gave insight into how this struck at a tension with the feeling that, in the PRS, '*you can just move on and just leave the place behind*'. Damp antagonistically collapses the divide between yourself, and your dwelling, a disruption into the '*emotional sense*' that '*you and your belongings [are] free of the property*'. Bodily changes, the health effects of damp, function likewise – serving to evidence not only the presence of a damp problem, but the longevity of living with one.

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4. Homespace as medium

While Weizman positions architecture as a documentary form, he notes that it transmits through assistive mediating technologies.⁷⁷ In this section, I view the damp building as a form of content and communication in its own right, examining what is transmitted without technological assistance. Returning to Peters' expanded configuration of environmental media, I posit the homespace as an important medium in this context.⁷⁸ This is not to say that I view the homespace as always a medium. As Peters argues, 'being a medium is not a permanent state, it is the condition of being in the middle' and so 'is situation-specific'.⁷⁹ Rather, the homespace is something that becomes a mediating technology through the presence of dampness.

If the home becomes a petri dish, the walls its agar, we might imagine the violent cultivation of damp housing conditions as akin to the cultivation practices of life sciences. Mould or damp within the homespace broadcasts out to those within its signal range – a signal range that, as previously underscored, is amplified in scale as it becomes embodied in organs, or imparted onto clothes and possessions. It might communicate technical information, such as the relative humidity within a room or the levels of ventilation. It might communicate the presence of a leak, or a structural defect. But it can also be said to communicate the social, political, and ideological too – it can communicate neglect, disregard, disgust.

I first explicate how a conception of homespace-as-medium assists in understanding the complex configuration of unhoming processes bound up in poor housing conditions. I then turn to how this same conception might open up radical possibilities.

4.1 Unhoming in the homespace

Dampness is a home un-making process, in which 'material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally or deliberately, temporarily or permanently, divested, damaged or even destroyed'.⁸⁰ Dampness fractures both the materiality of the home, including its assemblage of contents, and a more intangible sense of home. While the focus of urban displacement is often directed to a singular 'event' – the eviction, or decanting, or demolition – it is a much longer, and often symbolic, process.⁸¹

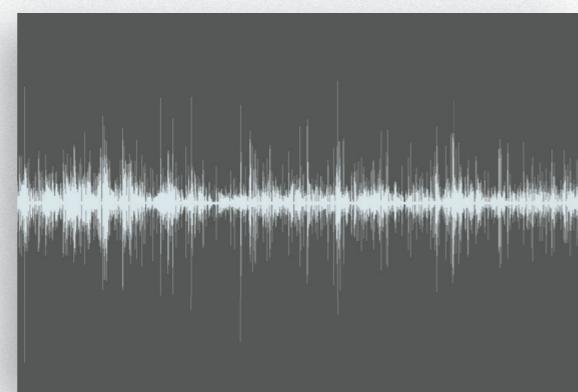
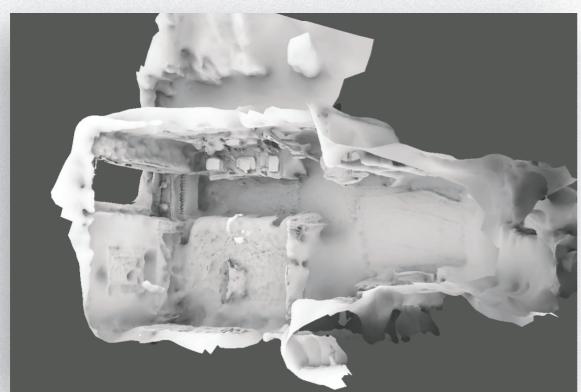
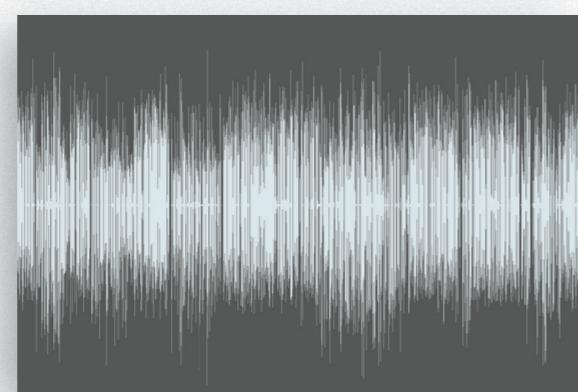
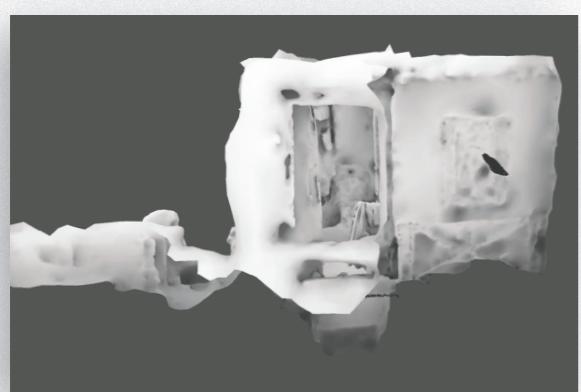
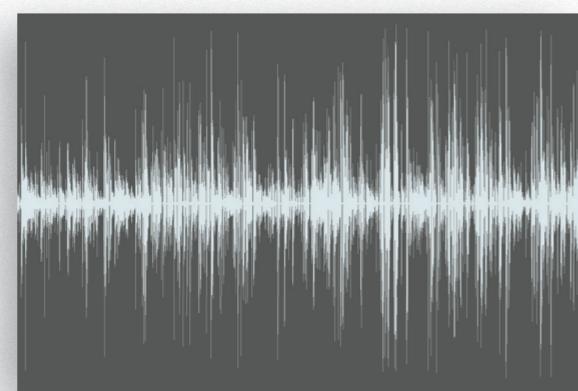
⁷⁷ Weizman, 'Introduction,' in *Forensis*, 15.

⁷⁸ Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds*.

⁷⁹ John Durham Peters & Otavio Daros, 'What is not a medium? Media Studies as philosophical anthropology/O que nao é um meio? Estudos de media como antropologia filosofica/?Que no es un medio? Estudios de medios como antropologia filosofica,' *Revista Famecos* 28, no. 1 (2021), 6. Translation author's own.

⁸⁰ Baxter & Brickell, 'For Home UnMaking,' 134.

⁸¹ Adam Elliot Cooper, Phil Hubbard & Loretta Lees, 'Moving beyond Marcuse: Gentrification, displacement and the violence of unhoming,' *Progress in human geography* 44, no. 3 (2020).



LEFT: Figures 49-52. Photogrammetry model of interviewee's room with damp problem.

RIGHT: Figures 53-56. Waveform images made from interview recordings.

For many I interviewed, their damp conditions resulted in them avoiding spending time in their dwelling. Milena, a leaseholder on the Ferry Lane Estate, Haringey, spoke to this issue specifically, with regards to her chronic mental health conditions: *'it seems much worse when you're constantly in the same place all the time. [...] I try and go out as much as possible. I'm always going to gigs or trying to just stay out.'* Others underscored how cold or physically unpleasant it was to be in, and how they found themselves '*going to the pub, because at least it was warm there.*' Emphasis was also placed on the associated increased costs, such as running a dehumidifier, leaving windows open, and increased central heating use.⁸² Spending time outside of the home therefore represented residents' responses to the dual challenge of managing a damp problem and financial considerations. By ejecting themselves from the homespace, residents perform a sort of preemptive displacement. This pre-expulsion is a mode of unhoming within its own right, a form of socio-symbolic homicide,⁸³ as well as a more 'tactical' way of facilitating the removal of residents and minimising resistance.⁸⁴

Another common experience was embarrassment or shame when inviting guests over. One council tenant noted in their survey response that the damp was '*horrible to look at and embarrassing for guests to see.*' During our later interview session, they stated they had '*actually never invited a guest.*' Priya recalled an occasion where her dad kicked her out of the house, and a friend drove over to help move her belongings. Though she was moving out, she refused to let her friend in, because of her perception of it as being '*really gross.*' Though their council house had been damp throughout their 12-year tenancy, she located her first conscious memory of this later, in sixth form when she stopped inviting friends over. While marking the unmaking of the social and communal spatial potential of the home, this reinforces an understanding of the home as a site of individual or familial privacy, as a site of security and separation from the outside.⁸⁵ This forecloses on transgressing or puncturing this boundary, through communality and hapticality, or what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten might call, embracing '*homelessness.*'⁸⁶ Through this tandem home-making/unmaking, we gain insight into a further political dimension of dampness as unhoming, where this project of dispossession is one that not just dictates who has a home, or the conditions of that homing, but the very question of what a home is (and can be) on an ontological level.

Private renters self-reported similar feelings at much lower rates. Those who did used milder language and did not describe it limiting their activities. One private renter responded, '*doesn't make for a nice environment to host friends and stuff.*' In contrast, a similarly representative response from a social tenant reads, '*this caused my family to feel ashamed as we would often smell of damp. My teenage son never brought any friends home, we would not have people over [...] due to the conditions we lived in.*' While private tenants were more likely to express concerns about guests' comfort, social tenants were predominantly concerned about what their damp conditions broadcast to others witnessing them. Many worried others would interpret it as a sign they did not know how to look after their home or their family. The experience of unhoming in the damp home/mediaspaces is therefore compounded for social

⁸² See also: Elliott Serjeant, Tara Coleman & Robin Kearns, 'How tenants in New Zealand respond to winter weather indoors: A qualitative investigation,' *Health & Place* 75 (2022).

⁸³ Mel Nowicki, 'Rethinking Domicide: Towards an Expanded Critical Geography of Home,' *Compass Geography* 8, no. 11 (2014).

⁸⁴ Michael Romyn, 'The Heygate: Community Life in an Inner-City Estate, 1974–2011,' *History Workshop Journal* 81, no. 1 (2016), 216.

⁸⁵ Manjikan, *Securitisation of Property Squatting in Europe*, 46.

⁸⁶ Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 96.



LEFT: Figures 57-64.
Photographs from protests demanding better housing conditions



tenants by extra feelings of shame in relation to their conditions more broadly,⁸⁷ conforming to the notion that people internalise and reproduce stigmas attached to them.⁸⁸

What also emerged as important was the lack of material care many felt dampness communicated from their housing provider. One interviewee spoke of others '*suffering from mental health issues, because they can't get through to their Councillor, because of the damp and condensation in their homes.*' This frames the affective impacts beyond solely dampness, locating them with the feeling of being neglected by housing providers and local authorities. For many, this was compounded by a belief that social housing serves the most vulnerable in society. Therefore, in the case of social tenants specifically, dampness can be said to damage the idea of their right to dwelling, and through this the notion that social housing can still be a site to make long-term homes.⁸⁹ The home is not merely a collection of rooms, but 'also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings.'⁹⁰ The ideas that constitute the home are also tied up with the political, especially in the case of social housing. In this context, the homespace is not unmade by the presence of damp alone, but by its presence as a continually communicated message, and embedded representation, of the social, political, and financial divestment from social housing and its inhabitants.

The cultivation of the homespace as a medium thus serves, through the growth of dampness, to unhome residents. Hilda, a private renter with a young child, underscored how the presence of dampness made her flat's unsafety legible, and affectively distanced her from it, saying '*it just feels like this really visualised thing. [...] These kinds of things that make you feel like your house is like not yours, not like a safe place or something.*' Through dampness, the accretive neglect through which the home is un-made is transmitted to residents, in real time – developments tracking across walls, through rooms. Through the process of making this legible, and transmitting this to residents, the sense of the home being unmade is continually reinstated and confirmed to those that witness it.

4.2 Radical transmission

My preceding argument could be characterised as pessimistic. How else, one might ask, can tenants expose the poor conditions they are often subjected to? I now offer a different tack, following calls for a 'more hopeful grammar of urban injustices'.⁹¹ What are the radical potentialities that can be opened up by this reading? If the homespace can be considered a medium, what else can be transmitted via these means?

Efadul Huq and Stacey Harwood's work in Chicago is notable here. Following the observation that disrepair forms part of the 'shadier practices that contribute to displacement even before rents increase and gentrification is fully visible,' they assert that resistance

⁸⁷ Mel Nowicki, 'A Britain that everyone is proud to call home? The bedroom tax, political rhetoric and home unmaking in U.K. housing policy,' *Social & Cultural Geography* 19, no. 5 (2018), 663.

⁸⁸ Imogen Tyler, *Revolt subjects: Social abjection and resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, (London: Zed Books, 2013).

⁸⁹ Ella Harris, Katherine Brickell & Mel Nowicki, 'Door Locks, Wall Stickers, Fireplaces: Assemblage Theory and Home (Un)Making in Lewisham's Temporary Accommodation,' *Antipode* 52, no. 5 (2020).

⁹⁰ Alison Blunt & Robyn Dowling, *Home* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 2.

⁹¹ Loretta Lees, 'The Urban Injustices of New Labour's "New Urban Renewal"', 937.



strategies emerge too late.⁹² By starting with these shadier practices as a point of intervention, more success could be gained than resistance that begins at the eviction notice. Returning to the long temporalities of dampness, it's possible to see how dampness might be tracked to help to build fights for housing justice before it is 'too late.' They further argue this framing evoked more response from their collaborators; narratives of home unmaking through dilapidation 'drew far more passionate and indignant reactions' than broader narratives about gentrification and displacement.⁹³ On reflection, I had encountered a similar pattern. While circulating my survey, I was occasionally met with the opinion that regeneration was not the principal issue affecting tenants, and that researchers were too preoccupied with it as a phenomenon. Those expressing this perspective included people who lived on estates that were undergoing regeneration. In comparison, I received more responses and receptive interactions, when I omitted the mention of regeneration from my email or social media post.⁹⁴ Through shifting prevailing discourse towards topics like housing conditions, researchers have the potential to expand avenues for collaboration with residents in ways that could strengthen and develop collective knowledge-production and epistemic intervention.

Dampness also transmits a sense of housing providers' priorities – clearly and explicitly. For many I spoke to, dampness played a clear role in politicising their stance on other actions of their housing providers. This was particularly true for those whose landlords were local authorities investing considerably in new developments. For private renters too, damp problems were a common experience that intervened in their more neutral prior perceptions of landlords, leading them to explicitly come to view them as profiteers. Alex raised this when I asked him what he felt needed to change to start addressing widespread poor conditions, contextualising this within his perspective as a resident of the Brixton area since his family migrated to the U.K. 10 years ago. He felt Lambeth Council was '*clearly catering to a specific demographic*' through expenditure on new-build developments, saying he '*just wish[ed] they took the approach of treating their tenants first*' Priya felt it was telling that, following the spring to action some providers demonstrated after negative press, '*suddenly councils, housing associations, suddenly they have the resources to care*' – with this moment revealing poor conditions as not a case of limited resources, but selective resource allocation. Others informed me how now-active residents associations had formed in direct response to widespread damp problems. Anecdotally, an organiser for London Renters Union told me of how much easier it had been to effectively mobilise an estate with widespread damp problems than other estates facing different issues, such as rising rents or regeneration.

While simply broadcasting dampness cannot achieve transformative ends for residents (and is often antithetical to this), my research offers insights into how poor housing conditions might, and have been, transmitted to collectivise struggle for radical goals.

Conclusion

The extent and level of poor conditions in social housing is something that should shock us – as Hewitt opens *Surviving Squalor*, these are 'conditions that shame 21st century Britain'.⁹⁵ But what is left in the wake of this shock, this shame? For many I spoke to, life necessarily goes on, though limited and diminished. And so, for the urban poor, 'violence and trauma wind on as material, embedded, everyday realities'.⁹⁶

I advocate for a position that attempts to move beyond shock. I have sought to underscore the relationship between poor housing conditions and media forms as a means to unhome, and ultimately displace, residents. This contributes to a wider body of work that seeks to understand urban dispossession and displacement as related to housing not as something that occurs in one violent event, but as a process which is always occurring, across an expanded continuum of accretive violence. As Ferreri argues, 'before and beyond the material loss of home,' dispossession 'involves a deeper unmaking of the relations that constitute residents' emplacement'.⁹⁷ I move towards the form of household dampness as an accretion of content, as something with informative and communicative desire, both as mediated through other fora, and as a medium in its own right. Through placing in conjunction a cultural studies argument on this topic with more recent ideas that position the architectonic as mediatic, I have sought to destabilise existing conventions and open up potential discursive and epistemic shifts within the field.

My focus has been contained to both dampness, and the role of media in relation to that. This approach necessarily narrows. Damp is not the only experience of poor housing, but part of a 'deeper neoliberal fault-line in the governance of housing safety'.⁹⁸ Media are not the only technologies or infrastructures forming the assemblages which produce damp housing; notably, this work pays little attention to local and national governmental processes, or the role of think-tanks.⁹⁹ Even this selective breadth has felt too expansive for an essay of this length, and under a year of study. More sustained, longer-term research, would be a pertinent extension of the work I have advancing.

Before ending, I will return to something one of my interviewees, Dave, said. Dave lives on the Clarion-run High Path estate in Merton. At the time of our meeting, Dave had two weeks prior moved from his old flat on the estate to one of the recently completed new-builds

⁹⁵ Daniel Hewitt, 'Surviving Squalor: Britain's Housing Shame,' *ITV News*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.itv.com/hub/surviving-squalor-britains-housing-shame/10a1795a0001>.

⁹⁶ Rachel Pain, 'Chronic urban trauma: The slow violence of housing dispossession,' *Urban Studies* 56, no. 2 (2019), 390.

⁹⁷ Ferreri, 'Painted Bullet Holes and Broken,' 1007.

⁹⁸ Hodkinson, *Safe as Houses*, 5.

⁹⁹ See: Slater, 'The invention of the 'sink estate.'

⁹² Efadul Huq & Stacy Anne Harwood, 'Making Homes Unhomely: The Politics of Displacement in a Gentrifying Neighbourhood in Chicago,' *City & Community* 18, no. 2 (2019), 711.

⁹³ Ibid, 718.

⁹⁴ Reference still remained to these themes in the survey text.



– he was '*living in phase one*' of a seven-phase regeneration project. Both the estate's transfer from Merton Council in 2010, and the present regeneration, were discursively framed in response to the damp many residents had endured for years. Despite having voted in favour of both of these, and now living in his new, damp free residence, he was far from optimistic for the future, warning that '*in 50 years time, we will have the same problems that we had in the old towers that we were living in before.*' In light of this assessment, the need for new modes of inquiry and intervention remain clear and urgent.

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