

Cladding and community

Coming together in times of crisis

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The longstanding housing crisis in the UK, and London in particular, has been exacerbated in recent years by an increased understanding of the flammability of buildings and the arrival of what activists term ‘The Cladding Scandal’. In this paper, I show how in response to the health and financial risks of The Cladding Scandal, disparate groups come together to challenge the dominant politics of expertise through the enrolment of traditionally ‘expert’ forms of knowledge within community groups. I analyse community building practices, especially the lines of communication, to show a means by which the social reproduction of the city is sustained, to argue that such practices constitute an important but under-recognised form of expertise. Drawing together geographies of emotion and social reproduction theory, I demonstrate the productive possibilities of thinking through the social reproduction of the city and its politics of expertise by questioning the role, types and circulation of particular emotions.

Introduction

Globally, societies are enduring housing crises as investors are drawn to property as a safe haven and homes become less valued for their use value, and more for their exchange value (Madden and Marcuse 2016;

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Beswick et al. 2016). In the face of housing crises—in their multiple forms—many cities have become home to thriving resistance(s) and a wealth of social movements. In London, where this paper is situated, an enduring state of crisis driven by the lack of affordable, decent quality homes has created an abundance of sites of resistance (Watt and Minton 2016). Communities and activists across the city come together to resist the challenges thrown up by the crisis state through a range of mechanisms, ranging from legal challenges to existing plans to occupying buildings set for demolition (Edwards 2016; Lees and Ferreri 2016). The focus of much of the research to-date has been on those resisting state action, specifically around the destruction of social housing estates in favour of elite developments (see Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2020) or a more general pushback against austerity agendas (Penny 2020). In this paper, I focus on a new emerging group of resisters: those experiencing the ‘Cladding Scandal’.

Across the UK, even for those fortunate enough to have access to assumed safe and secure housing (addressed here by focusing on homeowners), the housing crisis is coming to bear. In recent years, a new material manifestation has emerged: ‘The Cladding Scandal’ (Apps 2020) which generates both material and financial insecurities. To briefly introduce the situation, in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire in London in 2017 it became evident that buildings across the UK (and indeed more broadly across some parts of Europe) are built with combustible material which poses significant fire risk. In the years that followed, it became apparent that issues ran deeper: further types of cladding popular in high-rise construction practices were found to be combustible, materials used on balconies were noted as untreated and therefore also flammable, and the necessary internal (and often structural) fire management techniques such as wall breaks were missing. People’s homes are flammable, their lives are at risk. In their response to the situation, the real estate profession rallied together to consolidate their position of power within the politics of expertise that develops and sustains the UK housing system, by creating a risk-based analysis process that all buildings above 6 metres must conduct. If any element of fire insecurity is captured in their analysis, buildings are classified as unable to be lent against. This has stalled property sales, leaving flat owners stranded, unable to re-mortgage or sell their homes and awaiting bills for remedial work, which they are unable to finance through mortgages (the cheapest debt available).¹ The emotional consequences of this shape the everyday lives of those living through scandal, often captured by activists as the triple fear: fear of fire, fear of financial ruin and the inability to escape (see Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee 2020).

The focus of research on the Cladding Scandal to date has been on what caused the issues, especially the regulatory failures (see for example Hodkinson 2019), and who and why different actors are paying for remedial works (see Local Government Association 2021). In particular, activists and policymakers have sought to understand the degree of accountability which can be levied on various stakeholders; whether it is possible to hold to account developers and building owners registered offshore (Ward and Brill 2020). In this paper, I depart from a focus on the structures that have created and sustained a system that links fire remedial works to value extraction processes, and look instead at how the Cladding Scandal has created a sense of community within buildings, and what this community means for urban life and resistance going forward.

I draw from my own experiences as a flat owner in London, my work over the last two years as a member of a leaseholder group within my block of flats (in which I have been active for eight years) and from experience with End Our Cladding Scandal, who work to challenge the system and highlight the impact on leaseholders. This work, especially within my own block, is exhausting and frustrating, reflecting a general sense of fear within our community. It includes phone calls and text messages disturbing workdays and holidays; and it has induced a deep sense of anxiety amongst many, myself included. Reflecting on my experiences as well as others, this paper offers two main contributions. Firstly, empirically, attending to the social reproduction dimensions of urban space provision in the case of one block of flat, which demonstrates/interrelates with the changing politics of expertise in London's development as new groups are enrolled in the crisis of housing production and affordability. Specifically, it demonstrates how social reproduction constitutes an important part of 'expertise' that is required to enable other forms of expertise to have an impact. Secondly, theoretically, drawing together research on the geographies of emotion and social reproduction theory reveals the ways in which emotions experienced by those embroiled in the Cladding Scandal, the fear, anger, frustration and at times hope, are fruitful sites through which to understand how urban spaces are managed and communities develop.

Community building and the emotional labor of reproducing urban environments

Grenfell was an awful, preventable event that reflects the inequality built into the UK housing system (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany 2019; Burgum 2019). In this paper, I use the increased public awareness about fire risk that is generated as a starting point. As one interviewee reflects 'it could have been me' (Flatowner 1, 2021). In the years since Grenfell, other buildings across the UK covered in flammable cladding have caught fire. Thankfully, no further people have died. However, the impact of construction practices and development models has become more evident. The Cladding Scandal should be understood as a crisis of systematic regulatory failure (Hodkinson 2019) that demonstrates the impervious nature of the real estate and housing development industry to the challenges of fixing problems created and enabled by their practices. Attending to the enduring legacy of regulatory and developer failure, research has highlighted how the structures of provision that underpin the highly financialised housing market enabled multiple classes of expertise to extract value from the remedial process and sustained a structure of property provision where flat owners have minimal oversight for projects they end up being financially liable for (Ward and Brill 2020).

In this paper, I depart from a purely structural focus and turn to the role of emotions and community, examining the Cladding Scandal through the lens of social reproduction and the various materialities, temporalities and spatialities that the everyday production of communities requires (Katz 2008). As feminist scholars highlight, 'without it [social reproduction] there could be no culture, no economy, no political organisation. No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long' (Fraser 2017, 21). I explore the communities as not just a means by which voices can be heard, but as spaces

through which the practices and politics of social reproduction take place. In doing so, I centre an analysis of emotions involved in social reproduction as a means of extending existing theorisations of urban social reproduction (see Lees and Robinson 2021) and the role of 'community' building and maintaining practices more generally.

Community building as a way of resisting the structures of oppression is a long-standing means by which urban citizens globally have responded to challenges such as financialisation, gentrification, displacement and social-cleansing in cities. In employing the idea of community I am mindful of the debates on how community is defined, especially the racialised and classed dimensions of who is included or excluded in a given community (see Bloch 2021 for a recent review). In particular, in the context of organising within blocks of flats in London, I am attendant to the prominence of particular voices, those with recognised forms of expertise, and the relative exclusion of renters from discussions of fire safety.

In London, research on community-led housing strategies has demonstrated the power that communities hold in resisting dominant policy narratives and approaches to issues such as estate regeneration (Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2020). Research on opposition to state-led projects of gentrification demonstrates the multiple ways and channels through which resistance takes place (Lees and Ferreri 2016; Sendra 2018), where resistance ranges from direct action and sustained occupation in the face of removal orders through to collective organising to find alternative financing mechanisms. Organising activities within resistance practices can and do draw on legal mechanisms and state-endorsed avenues for challenging the on-going demolition and 'regeneration' of areas (Hubbard and Lees 2018); they also create alternative spaces and modes of operating that challenge the underlying assumptions of extractive urban practices (Taylor 2020). Much of this action is achieved through established social movement networks and structures such as the organisation Just Space, which provide a platform through which communities (in their various forms) are able to contribute to, inform, and challenge the planning process in London through state-endorsed avenues of engagement (Lipietz, Lee, and Hayward 2014). In less organised spaces which lack the legitimacy associated with broader social movements, such as leaseholder WhatsApp and email threads, the fight for urban spaces (be those commercial, industrial or residential) is one of (variously successful) insurgencies through which the political dimension of urban spaces become evident (Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2017).

The Cladding Scandal has emerged because of the regulatory *laissez-affaire* approach adopted in the construction industry and the unrelenting dominance of real estate in the UK's economy. Yet these actors will also benefit from the remedial works because new construction work, the management of that process, and the financing of loans for owners to pay for it will enable the further extraction of value from buildings already consumed (Ward and Brill 2020). This extractive process relies on 'free-rides', including the 'activities of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds' (Fraser 2017, 23). As others have pointed out, the making of particular urban spaces, particularly the 'mundane' or the maintenance dimensions, have often neglected the all too often hidden practices of social reproduction

(Andrucki 2021). As with the capitalist economy more generally, the system of accumulation requires hidden actions that social reproductive theory makes clear (Bakker 2007; Bhattacharya and Vogel 2017). To foreground a feminist approach is to make visible the gendered, classes, racialised and otherwise other-ed activities that sustain the economy (Bakker 2007; Katz 2008), or in this case, the city. Indeed, the destruction of the sites of resistance or 'infrastructures of social reproduction' are deliberately embedded in the strategies of those extracting value through urban development schemes (Luke and Kaika 2019). As such, it is necessary to analyse the care work that mediates the public and private dimensions of urban management. The organising processes that make up communities and movements are not just practices of politics, but rather are labour (see also Andrucki 2021). To see it as labour shows the deliberateness of it, the time-consuming nature and the way in which it helps perpetuate systems of housing production and existence.

To focus on the realities of social reproduction and how it occurs in the case of the Cladding Scandal, what drives it, what the mechanisms are through which it unfolds and how people experience it day-to-day, I turn to the role of emotions. Paying attention to emotions highlights the deeply political nature of feelings (Anderson and Smith 2001; Anderson 2006, 738).² The politics embedded in emotional responses help reveal the structures of oppression at work, as Strong (2021) has shown through their work on geographies of shame, as the *emotion* of shame demonstrates the effect of the governmentality of austerity regimes. Emotions are transmitted and transformed through social relations, they have an affective economy to them (Ahmed 2004a) that means they help justify decisions and positions assumed by individuals and groups (Parish and Montsion 2018). To analyse the emotions of the Cladding Scandal is to address them not as property or owned by an individual experiencing the Scandal, but to see them in circulation (Ahmed 2004a), where their circulation increases their affect over time and surfaces on the bodies of communities (Ahmed 2004a; 2004b).

These emotions are the 'thing between us' that bring together individuals (Coward 2012). The Cladding Scandal produces, or has the potential to produce for many enrolled in it, a situation of extreme tragedy in which intensely political emotions are evoked and circulate (Anderson and Smith 2001). In this paper, I analyse the channels of communication through which people build community to support one another through the scandal, and challenge the costs and seeming unfairness of the process. These analyses provide a fertile ground, they are 'emotionally heightened spaces', which 'usefully illustrate the ways that social relations are mediated by feelings and sensibility' (Anderson and Smith 2001). Indeed, for Anderson and Smith (2001) geographies of emotion are vital for understanding social relations; they point to the example of buying a house as one of intense emotions. Continuing with the established idea that buying a home is one of the most emotionally challenging phases of a person's life, here I explore how living in a fire trap whilst sustaining financial solvency reinforces the emotional weight of property ownership³ and also changes the type of emotions experienced: from the security and comfort associated with ownership to insecurity and fear. In this regard, focusing on the Cladding Scandal helps shed light on the emotional dimensions of property precarity more generally in the face of assumed comfort afforded by the long-standing emphasis on

property rights in land law and the default ownership model associated with economies such as the UK (see Blomley 2020 for a full discussion).

Methods: learning from the Cladding Scandal

The Cladding Scandal, or as some activists are arguing, the more precisely named Building Safety Crisis (see UKCAG 2021), emerged in 2017 but has gained wider acceptance in the public consciousness since then. A mix of regulatory failure, poor construction and improper management of buildings led to a situation where thousands of buildings across the UK were identified as subject to extreme fire risk. In particular, business-as-usual construction practices used flammable cladding and developers failed to complete full fire safety work throughout blocks. This was reinforced through poor management practices, for example with a failure to instigate programmes of 'treatment' for wood facades. This fire risk extends beyond the initial concern raised by the 2017 Grenfell fire—ACM cladding—to include structural failures in the buildings, flammable stacked balconies and the use of untreated timber. In most cases, particularly those in a higher risk category, which is the focus of this paper (above 6 floors or 18 metres), the properties are flats owned by leaseholders, where the underlying land and buildings are owned by a freeholder. In some cases, these properties are owned in shared ownership, but in this paper, I focus on market-priced property owned outright or with a mortgage. This is just one section of the Cladding Scandal. For these flat owners, leases define the terms of the contract between themselves and the freeholder, but typically freeholders appoint a management company to manage the building on a day-to-day basis, and collect their ground rent annually with little engagement with the leaseholders.

This research draws on my experience as a flat owner, a leaseholder, in London. I write from a position of relative privilege (owning London property), and from one of great emotion. I draw on my notes made during meetings with other leaseholders, in activist circles and in meetings with various management companies. Throughout this process, I have also conducted semi-structured interviews with real estate professionals and flat owners, and held informal chats with other flat owners, which both aim to develop both more information for our resistance and inform academic arguments.

In 2019 when we, as residents occupying the same block of flats, first started hearing about the Cladding Scandal we were all nervous. In the two years that followed we have become very angry about the process, sometimes turning against one another, but mostly this anger has been directed towards the developers and the government who failed to regulate and now fail to help remediate the failings of building construction practices. The block of flats is in a rapidly changing area of London (in terms of demographics), and contains a number of commercial units and 23 flats. The flats were built or converted from offices between 2006 and 2013, with an extra floor wrapped entirely in flammable cladding added in 2012. The flats on the rear elevation have timber balconies, which are 'stacked', meaning they are on top of one another and are therefore susceptible to spreading fire, should a fire break out. Each flat owner across the building owns a lease, they are 'leaseholders', with the underlying land and the building owned by the subsidiary of an asset management company

who exclusively own freeholds for properties across the South-East of the UK, anonymised here as Royalty. The asset management side is divorced from the management of the buildings and leaseholders interact with a company, anonymised here as Bond, whose role in the management is purely financial and does not concern issues such as fire remedial work. The day-to-day management of the block is done by a third company, anonymised here as Rugby, officially listed at the same address as Bond. Leaseholders pay a service charge to Rugby, whilst ground rent and building insurance are collected by Bond, who act on behalf of the freeholders, for which they are able to take a percentage of all costs charged. I moved into the block of flats in 2013 and became an active member of the 'living in the building' email thread.

In the lead up to the Cladding Scandal, the bulk of discussions on the leaseholder WhatsApp chat and emails focused on the security of the building, the management practices, complaints about the cost of management charges and unsuccessful attempts to meet up in person to have a drink. The communication was sporadic, reflecting when emergencies happened and when new bills were issued by Bond and Rugby. In 2019, a group within the building, led by a commercial leaseholder, sought to get the Right to Manage the building. This process was ultimately unsuccessful, but it did mean that more leaseholders were added to a single email group and a sense of community started to develop. This group was in much more frequent communication than the previous group, and the conversation covered a wider range of issues. As the Cladding Scandal started to unfold, this email thread became the means through which leaseholders learnt from one another, supported one another in the face of challenging management costs, and communicated experiences beyond the block that might provide opportunities for dealing with our localised crisis. The leaseholder group is relatively diverse, reflecting the changing socio-economic backdrop of the local area since the building was first converted in 2006.

Over the course of 2020 it became clear that the building had fire safety issues and after being issued with an invoice to cover a fire safety report, we were notified that a number of issues throughout the building needed to be addressed. Communication from both Rugby and Bond was relatively limited, with little engagement with our concerns around the extent of the works needed and anticipated costs. However, some flat owners actively pursued Rugby, monitoring their attempts to get government funding from the Building Safety Fund (a government initiative to cover some remediation costs), reporting back via the email thread as and when communication developed. In 2021 the block was issued with pre-tender indicative costs for remedial works. The structuring of these works created a deep division within the group: those with balconies were given indicative figures of under £5000 to cover their proportion of the remedial works to fix roof issues; the government fund would cover the cladding replacement (for everyone); whilst those with balconies were issued with bills of nearly £30,000,⁴ exclusive of professional fees and VAT, to be added at a later date once project management fees had been determined. In addition to working closely with my own block of flats, once it became clear the size of the Cladding Scandal, I signed up to End our Cladding Scandal (EOCS). EOCS are a national group that organise to challenge the costs of remedial works and interim measures that leaseholders are burdened with.

In these capacities, I spend on average 20 hours a week doing what the community refers to as 'Cladmin'. As one interviewee reflected, this work is essential: 'communication [by agencies] hasn't been very good, it really has required a huge amount of effort from some leaseholders to basically try and dig information out of them and where we're at with things'. The work is often challenging, and includes checking figures presented in tender reports, communicating access problems with other leaseholders in the building, and writing to MPs to ask them to support amendments to new laws on Building Safety costs. In this paper, analysing the emotive labour of these actions as a way to better understand the social reproduction of urban spaces, I take seriously the argument made by Anderson and Smith (2001, 9) that

Performing the role of cool interpreter in the face of the displacement experience, or in instances where personal and collective hurt thoroughly infuse politics and memory [...] makes for anemic knowledges predicated on the artificial separations of private and public, body and citizen, domestic and global.

In this, I also take inspiration from those who have drawn on their own organising work elsewhere in urban geography (see for example, Taylor 2020). The issue of the Cladding Scandal is deeply emotional, and personal for all those involved, myself included. To write about it is to take seriously the emotions circulating and their function within community practices. It is also to acknowledge and balance the position of leaseholder, volunteer, researcher and friend in a way that attends to the severity of the situation. My position as a traditionally defined 'expert' and my active engagement in policy debates meant at times that other parts of the resistance were less visible to me. Additionally, being away from the flat for large parts of the year (for academic requirements in other places) meant I was less exposed to the accidental, informal discussions that happened in communal spaces. Together these meant that I relied on relayed information gathered from the more informal exchanges that I missed. In particular, my position as an 'expert' shaped my experience in our larger online meetings where I was given a clear voice and my role in communicating on behalf of the leaseholders with management teams meant time was set aside for me. In contrast, other leaseholders were less visible and their opinions were likely shared outside of spaces I was invited to. Whilst I was lucky that many approached me outside of our larger group meetings, to speak about particular dimensions and form smaller WhatsApp groups to chat through problems, there were undoubtedly lines of communication I was not involved in that functioned as key spaces through which emotions circulated and the momentum of resistance was sustained. That said, as someone who was often at the interface of interaction with the management company and who was very active on email and WhatsApp threads I was exposed to a lot of conversations within the community that evidenced their experience, emotional responses and the way they come together during this crisis.

My home and the Building Safety Crisis

Correcting building faults has been a slow process, with some flat owners reporting it taking years between finding out their building is covered in a

flammable material and remedial works beginning. Some of these delays have been driven by a lack of understanding about who is culpable and responsible for fixing them, and therefore who should be liable for bills of up to £100,000 per flat (Simpson 2020). As one interviewee reflected,

the developers and the people who built the building with material that is unsafe are at the origin of the responsibility. That's number one, they shouldn't have put flammable materials on our block, the number one thing. I think, if the government changes its safety norms and this type of material—I don't know if its legal or illegal but any way it wasn't up to standards—if they change the rules, they should be responsible for helping leaseholders through that process

Whilst the government has repeatedly noted that they believe leaseholders should not bear costs that are unreasonable, even going so far as to describe it as immoral for leaseholders to have to fix issues they did not cause (MHCLG 2021; Wilson 2021), they have also repeatedly prevented legal changes that would ensure leaseholders would not be liable for the costs, including refusing to enshrine protection in building safety law (Hansard 2021). Instead, they have announced successive government funds to remove and replace all flammable cladding on buildings over six metres (MHCLG 2021). At the time of writing, the government had announced a total of £5 billion for the Building Safety Fund. This is considered a 'drop in the water' for the total amount needed, and it has a relatively narrow remit: exclusively for replacing cladding defects (Duncliffe-Vines 2021). As such, many of the faults that render buildings across the UK fire traps are ineligible for funding (The Fire Protection Association 2020), leaving leaseholders liable for costs that often exceed the value of their homes.

This matters in a material sense and it has financial implications because until the remedial work has been done flats cannot be sold or remortgaged since borrowers will not lend against the buildings. This has been reinforced by the introduction of the External Walls Survey (ESW1) form by RICS, the valuation standards setter in the UK. In response to fears around the fire risk of buildings, RICS consulted with real estate professionals throughout 2019 and created this form as a way of quickly identifying whether a building was safe to be lent against. The form has five options, which broadly divided into two groups: Option A which allows the building to be lent against and Option B, whereby until works are complete, people are stuck in their buildings. For many, Option B means they are not just trapped in a risky fire situation, but they are also subject to high costs and inappropriate living situations since their home no longer meets their requirements (examples I have come across during this research includes: they bought it with an ex-partner; they have more children than bedrooms; they have a new job elsewhere, sometimes in another country). The situation has been exacerbated by the scale of the issue and the need for a fire engineer to oversee works, which has put pressure on the relatively small number of qualified experts across the company. In this paper I focus on the experience of leaseholders, who are currently being held liable for fixing (some of) the faults created by developers and sustained by freeholders, with little oversight of the process.

Community building across diversity

Community building is a time-consuming, essential practice that in this case enables leaseholders to challenge the management company's practices and approaches to remedial work and build a support system for moments of anger and frustration. In this section, I argue that the sometimes difficult but ultimately collective process of community building in the face of the Cladding Scandal demonstrates the changing nature of community resistance in the UK's housing crisis. In turn, this reveals a changing politics of expertise in the production of urban space in London, through a focus on the social reproduction and unpaid dimensions of creating communities and home. By community building, I refer to the deliberate engagement in often-online meetings and communications, that included: upwards of 20 emails a day discussing different approaches; text messages between individuals; phone calls for support on Saturday mornings; Sunday night Teams/Zoom chats and collaborative document development. As one leaseholder summarised in the early communication channels:

it's been a bit of an email chain of communication and there's been a lot of that—trying to share information over email and have a cohesive voice and going back to the agencies with sets of questions on costs that were put forward and luckily some leaseholders have put in a lot of work and scrutinise these costs.

These actions were not consistent, they ebbed and flowed in response to government announcements; calls by activist groups such as EOCS and UK Cladding Action Group (2021) to email MPs and get active amongst blocks; bills and tendering documents issued by the management company; and the beginning of the work. The process of developing these channels of sociality was a form of phatic labour that unfolded in the background of the urban space, but which enabled and helped sustain communicative channels as the Scandal unfolded (and continues to unfold) (see Elyachar 2010). The community that developed was orientated around key organising goals: reducing the cost of remediation work and challenging management practices. The community was cladmin-orientated from the outset. At the same time, as conversation happened, more personal details were revealed and created spaces for a more friend-like form of community. For example, a mention of a holiday led to conversations about murder mystery novels set in that location. In these instances the pain and stress at the forefront of the community organising was set aside and replaced with instances of shared interest and joy that helped solidify the growing sense of 'we're in this together', as evidenced in one leaseholder's reflections that others in her building were 'trying to get a fairer deal for all of us'. These kinds of organising practices that occurred can be understood as moments of social reproduction that stepped in when the state failed (see for example Katz 2008).

The processes enmeshed in community building were not without difficulties though, and it is in these differences that the strength of the community of place was most challenged. As one leaseholder, explaining how her emotions changed over the course of the early remedial discussion, narrated her situation: 'Not all the flats are the same and not all have the same costs and that has created division. We have organised a few calls and Zoom to try and talk things through.'

This created more deliberation and work for those trying to create a cohesive voice. In this case, of the 23 flats, seven are owned by a company who were part of the original conversation, and that let them in a professionalised 'buy to let manner'. Of the remaining units, some are owner-occupied and others are let out. Of those let, two are let out of necessity: the flat owners have relocated because of a change in personal circumstance that required them to move but they were unable to sell because of the cladding. Within the flat owners, there's further differences: some are on lower incomes and purchased their flat when it was first built (between 2003 and 2012 depending on the flat), when the area was known by word of mouth as the Heroin centre of the UK; others purchased their flat less than a year before the Cladding Scandal was revealed and paid over £500,000. Moreover, the flats themselves are not all the same: they contain generations of conversion and therefore different styles of property, ranging from a four-bed to a one-bed. As such, there is a huge diversity in the demographic of the owners, which created the possibility for tensions in organising efforts, especially when the bill for remedial work was not issued equally. Overcoming the sense of us-and-them, which became evident and rose up in conversations about 'rich people's problems' (Private communications from Resident, 2021), required story-telling practices and the constant reminder that even if the building contains 'two classes of people' (Private correspondence from Resident, 2021), we were 'all pulling in the same direction' (Private correspondence, group, 2021). Indeed, as one leaseholder summarised it:

when things developed in a bit of a more sour way when there were division [...] that was quite frustrating and it just felt, it felt like it was a negativity that was popping up with emails and stuff.

Yet at the same time, as has been the case in other examples of community resistance across London (see Keene 2019), the diversity of owners provided a platform through which different forms of expertise could unite to provide a more effective community challenge to management. The middle class has long been involved in resisting gentrification and, as Madden (2020) notes, the depoliticised narrative in the middle class has brought them into the political economy of housing struggle more broadly. In our case, diversity was especially evident in terms of the occupational expertise: we relied heavily on the legal knowledge of a non-land specialist solicitor who used the symbolic power of being a legal expert, a know-how of the law and the tools through which the law is implemented, and legal jargon to elevate our arguments in discussions with Ruby and Bond. As one interviewee explained, 'just in terms of knowledge and time, we're really lucky to have that because probably a lot of people really sign up to some of the stuff that is crazy'. The trust developed through the mundane practices of community building instilled across the owners a sense of trust in the expert, which might otherwise not have been there. His work was supported by my own expertise in urban planning and my research on developers and investors in London that allowed me to track developments in the Cladding Scandal in policy and real estate professional circles. For some, this was both something they appreciated, and that induced a sense of worry around their own contribution to the community effort: 'I felt grateful, but I also

felt guilty because I don't really know if I'm well placed to look in to this further than you guys were with your different sets of skills and knowledge!

However, what was particularly important was how these white-collar forms of expertise were complemented by other occupations in the building, especially those working in construction or who had access to construction companies in an informal manner. As a demonstration: as leaseholders we had the option to nominate contractors for the tendering process. One flat owner nominated a company he knew well, he was then able to use his connection to ensure they had access to all the parts of the building needed for a full tendering report, and acquire their tendering report even when the management company would not reveal it. With access to their notes, flat owners had the chance to challenge costs announced by Rugby, with a more robust evidence base.

The communities of change enmeshed in London's perpetual regeneration programmes created a mixed community in this instance. Through luck regarding who maintained ownership over time and who purchased at a later date after successive rounds of gentrification had pushed high-end professionals to the periphery of the city where this block is located, the collective that formed contained within it the capacity to challenge management. This is not to romanticise the realities and processes of mixed communities, indeed the uneven nature of who spoke and participated in the various channels of communication was indicative of the power imbalances within the group. Community dynamics reflected wider socialised positions, for example in some instances, some of the women in the building contacted me directly to ask for advice based on what I had said in the wider group discussions, where they had not felt comfortable speaking in front of professionalised experts. The diversity was, however, a powerful tool for resistance. In part this was because the crisis situation enrolled the middle classes into a situation previously typically isolated to social housing tenants in the UK: regulatory failure (see Hodkinson 2019).

The involvement of middle classes in social movements is not new (see Mayer 2013). The politics of urban expertise are dominated by real estate professionals in London (Robin 2018), and beyond. In the case of the Cladding Scandal, the breadth of the issue in terms of its spatial distribution and that the financial burden has fallen specifically on those who were able to buy a property in the first instance, which means a new demographic is embroiled in the everyday challenges of urban politics. As Keene (2019) has shown in his work on Cressingham Gardens, the policy choice of previous governments created communities rife with tensions that when overcome enabled communities to be more powerful. The mix of forms of expertise now included under the umbrella of 'community' means real estate professionals are confronted by those with the socialised and educated experiences that form the basis of middle-class dominated fora for the politics of housing provision. However, as shown below, it is the additional emotional geographies found in the social reproduction behind resistance that supports the more recognised forms of expertise and enables the middle-class knowledge to be more powerful.

The role of emotions in the social reproduction of urban spaces

The community building exercise is on-going, deliberate and often tense: 'it's like a whole set of different emotions' (Leaseholder 4, 2021). This work was

emotional from the outset (Borén, Grzyś, and Young 2021), evidencing the way emotions run alongside the other (more material or capitalistic in their visibility) processes that make up our cities (Anderson and Holden 2008). Emotional responses are induced by the daily experience of living through the Cladding Scandal—the fear of fire, financial loss and the inability to move circulate between those trapped in the buildings and within community spaces. In this section, I explore the various emotions experienced by those living through the scandal and reveal how these emotions have circulated, what that means for social reproduction and how this is particularly pertinent during the covid-19 crisis.

The sites and spaces through which communication about (potential) remedial works happens reinforce the effect of these emotions, such that the fear and anger have a greater affect (Ahmed 2004a). People are angry at the situation, exacerbated by confusion over who is to blame for the situation, the seeming inconsistencies of national government responses, and the long drawn out processes the management companies go through to remedy the situation.

The fear, probably coming a lot from a lack of knowledge, it's quite difficult when you don't have a sense of how much it's going to land on you. You watch Channel 4 news and you hear stories of people saying they had to pay 5k within 2 weeks and then you see the story of someone who is 70k in debt, so you just worried about what's going to land in me and I had no sense how much that was going to cost.

Beyond the particular building, the wider Cladmin community is tired and frustrated by the endless consultation, empty promises from national government to fix the situation, with additional costs to leaseholders and the fear that their homes may burn down. For many the response has been to find others who understand their experience, to develop shared knowledges on how to go forward and to feed into generating information for press releases, to lobby MPs and to inform the information base of activist groups such as EOCS or the UK Cladding Action Group (UKCAG) (2021). The emotional labour behind the mundane actions—communication about what might happen and when charges might be issued, the near constant questioning of what is happening on a building, city and national level—are the everyday actions through which the economies of emotion circulate in the Cladding Scandal community. Similarly to what Ahmed (2004b) demonstrated in the context of the nation state, the feelings we held about others aligned us to the collective. It is not necessary for the collective to hold the emotion, but rather than the collective aligns and is shaped by the sense of what is felt about others. In taking this as a starting point and applying it to the sometimes fraught, but often aligned, actions and emotions of those implicated in the Cladding Scandal, it is possible to see how the circulating emotions and their relationship with the community that emerges in their image, represents a fruitful site through which to understand the social reproduction of the urban environment.

The social reproduction of the wider Cladding Scandal's social movements as well as building-level engagement proved impactful spaces through which the circulating and ever more affective impact of rage, anger, desperation (and potentially hope) nurtured a culture that fostered a sense of injustice in the

broader system. As one interviewee reflected ‘when we speak I get to know more about it, but I also get more annoyed because I understand it better’. Communities, in their shared desperation, thrived in coming together despite the challenges of diversity addressed in the previous section. What is important to note is that whilst anger, fear and frustration were the dominant emotions circulating within the community, there were also vital moments of joy and happiness, realised at least in part because of the collective labour undertaken by the groups. On a building level, after receiving pre-tender quotes, the community organised multiple channels of resistance. This resistance was fractured and reflected diverse priorities within the group, speaking to the broader patterns of how urban resistance manifests in London (see Lees and Ferreri 2016 for a full discussion). In this case, it largely focused on providing evidence, collected through calls with potential suppliers and contractors, to challenge the numbers presented to leaseholders. This evidence-collecting process was long and relied on leaseholders having spare time. The numbers acquired were then communicated with other leaseholders in the group chat and formed the basis of questions presented to management companies. This was a time-consuming and exhausting process that led to some expressions of frustration by those leading it, an emotion that was reinforced by its circulation within the group. However, the document was received well by Rugby who used it to drive down costs and the final tender was up to 80% less than initial estimates. The changes reflected where the group had challenged estimates and when new numbers were emailed from Rugby there was a decisive moment of happiness in the leaseholder community. The community provided, therefore, a site through which homeowners both comforted and consolidated one another when needed, and celebrated when successful. For those involved, it is this community and coming together where the affect of relief was experienced most intensely, because it was through these lines of communication that stress and fear rose most acutely before. As one leaseholder reflected, as new, reduced costs were announced:

there was also a bit of relief when it was going to be lower than predicted—probably a quarter of what was planned—thanks to the challenges that [Flatowner] and you and others had done, that was a bit of a positive, in the sense that luckily when you come together and you look at it you can have a positive impact.

Paying attention to these lesser discussed emotions is vital in continuing an agenda that demonstrates the value of emotional geography for urban studies (see Lees and Robinson 2021). These spaces and channels are therefore fruitful sites through which to analyse both the emotions of intensity associated with tragedy and stress (see Anderson and Smith 2001) and for the resultant emotional change collective action can bring about. This was especially pertinent because the Cladding Scandal has unfolded at the same time as the covid-19 pandemic and therefore the limitations of everyday interactions shaped the way we experience the scandal, how we can communicate with one another and ultimately the wider urban and housing context at this time (Madden 2020; RHJ Editorial Collective 2020; Gibbons et al. 2020).

The social reproduction of the city requires huge amounts of (unpaid) labour, labour that can be compelled but is often self—or collective—motivated.

The emotions which are enrolled and circulate in the processes of social reproduction also actively enable it: the anger and frustration felt by leaseholders in this case pushed them to work together and to create community. Chronic urban trauma such as the cladding scandal is 'hardwired' into places through the wider regulatory environment—and its associated failures (Pain 2019). To overcome the slow violence being experienced by leaseholders—and the at times rapid financial violence—requires emphasising the relationship between the individual and the collection (Pain 2019). The circulating emotions involved in sustaining resistance, the social reproductive practices that act on the formal, professional and more recognised expertise used in resistance—therefore become key sites through which the slow violence of value extraction through urban management can be both understood and challenged.

Conclusion

This paper makes two contributions towards critical urban studies. First, I demonstrate the ways in which the politics of urban expertise challenging the housing crisis in London are unfolding and the rise of new dimensions. I show how resistance to the financial pressures inflicted on leaseholders by the Cladding Scandal has benefitted from the enrolment of new forms of knowledge within the community. Specifically, I show how the inclusion of multiple forms of expertise, from legal advice to construction industry know-how, and most importantly the skills that enable social reproduction, are leveraged by communities challenging the dominance of real estate professionals. More broadly I demonstrate the often limited and contested nature of mixed communities, yet how, if they are able to come together, the diversity of occupational and experiential background can solidify the sense of community and enable them to challenge the more powerful actors in urban development. Departing from a focus on developers and the *production* of the built environment evident in the politics of urban expertise research to date (see Robin 2018), this example speaks to the on-going contestations in urban *management* and demonstrates the possibility of research on urban political expertise in this arena.

Secondly, I show how the emotions experienced within these emerging communities generate further affect through their circulation. I add to understandings of emotions' role in the social reproduction of urban spaces and how it connects to ideas of resistance and disruption (see Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020). Attending to the lines of communication, I reveal the emotional geographies at the heart of relations within urban spaces. The social reproduction of urban life, as sustained through spatially initiated but not fixed communities, builds from and reinforces the affective economies of frustration, anger and, in some moments, joy.

This is not to take away from the severity of the situation faced by those living through the Cladding Scandal on a day-to-day basis. London's housing crisis, as with many other global cities, is fuelled by the dominance of real estate professionals (Colenutt 2020), relatively weak tenant rights and a lack of access to safe and reliable social housing, stagnant wages relative to house

prices and a continual de-valuing of use value in favour of exchange value (Madden and Marcuse 2016). The Cladding Scandal is emblematic of these conditions and the long *durée* of the housing crisis; it is demonstrative of how regulatory failure and the prioritisation of large-scale house building as a means of 'building out' of recessions and crises has created material, physical and financial risks for those who were fortunate enough to be able to buy a home. Attending to emergent communities demonstrates the breadth of the crisis, and the enrolment of new forms of expertise within resistant movements. Cities such as London have long and vital histories of housing activism (see Watt and Minton 2016), the Cladding Scandal, as with each previous material manifestation of the housing emergency, has led to new groups engaging. Within the wider group working on the Cladding Scandal activism, some individuals have experience working in other activist campaigns, particularly direct action against elite organisations. Others have no experience in this way and instead bring knowledge such as investment practices or building law to discussions. Very few interviewed from my block have connected with the wider activism around the Cladding Scandal and housing in general. Whilst the Cladding Scandal has a range of impacted building and tenant types, the vast majority of the activism has been siloed from wider activism on housing in London. Despite this, as the battle to challenge liabilities continues and the fight to reform building safety regulations carries on, it is vital that research continues to engage with how this experience shapes wider debates in housing provision across the UK, as new people become aware of the severity of the housing crisis and are exposed to its systematic failures.

Notes

- 1 This is the situation at the time of writing, although the national government is currently launching a new set of laws and regulations that aims to limit some of the financial impacts on leaseholders
- 2 For a review of the role of emotions in Geography see Pile (2010).
- 3 Throughout this paper I am primarily concerned with leaseholders, those who 'own' their home for a defined period of time, in this case for most leaseholders between 100 and 125 years. I also briefly mention a commercial leaseholder. Whilst their lease is different it remains a long term lease and they have a residential leasehold in an adjoining building, and are therefore deeply involved in the social movements within the small estate.
- 4 It is worth noting that this block is lucky, whilst in need of remedial works they are not subject to any interim measures. In many blocks across the UK, inappropriately de-centralized fire alarms and the extremes of their remedial works required means they have to pay for interim costs such as a

waking watch, which for a standard block in London costs £776/day, roughly £300/flat per month.

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