**The Beginnings and the Ends: A ‘Superdiverse’ London Housing Estate**

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**A Living Tapestry?**

In the summer of 1951 a national exhibition was held at venues throughout the United Kingdom. The Festival of Britain,[[1]](#footnote-1) as it was known, was designed to cultivate a sense of national recovery in the aftermath of the Second World War by showcasing key British contributions to science, technology, industrial design, architecture and the arts. One of the exhibits was a newly-built housing estate in Poplar, East London. The estate was home to more than 1,500 people (housed in 440 units) and named after the former MP for Bow and Bromley (and former Leader of the Labour Party), George Lansbury, who was popular locally because of his campaigns for social justice.[[2]](#footnote-2) The design of the Lansbury Estate was described by the American sociologist Lewis Mumford as ‘based not solely on abstract aesthetic principles, or on the economics of commercial construction, or on the techniques of mass production, but on the social constitution of the community itself, with its diversity of human interests and human needs’ (quoted in Blanton 2016: 21). Others concurred, seeing the estate as successfully avoiding the design flaws of public housing constructed elsewhere in the interwar period, collectively dubbed ‘tenement town’ (Hanley 2007).[[3]](#footnote-3) The Lansbury was lauded as the finest example yet of what Minister for Health, Aneurin Bevan, had called ‘the living tapestry of a mixed community’ (quoted in Goodchild 2008: 85), with solidly-built dwellings of different sizes existing alongside vibrant street markets and transport nodes. There were no special requirements for living on the estate, but it came to be dominated by the area’s local working-class population; 90 per cent of the estate’s principal wage earners had manual jobs, while 28 per cent had found employment on the East End’s docks or in ancillary trades (Municipal Dreams 2013).

**The Pursuit of the New Society**

In this context the term ‘mixed’ was addressed more to the function of a particular estate than the demographic characteristics of its residents; its design took careful account of residents’ access to schools, retail outlets, transport hubs and places of worship. However, meeting a classic debate in ‘urban anthropology’ (Prato and Pardo 2013), in contemporary London many estates are more mixed in terms of social class, ethnicity, nationality and age than they are in terms of function. That said, the diversification of such estates along demographic lines has had little to do with the political logic espoused by Bevan, which sought to re-order the national landscape according to the egalitarian principles that typified the Labour government of the day.

Times change but housing remains a political issue. Some thirty years later, in pursuit of what Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher termed a ‘property-owning democracy’, the 1980 Housing Act had far-reaching consequences for the social complexion of Britain’s housing estates. Critics have laid the blame for Britain’s chronic shortage of affordable housing at the door of Right to Buy, seeing in the policy all that is wrong with the neoliberal ideology promoted by Thatcherism (Beckett 2015). Indeed, it is interesting that in qualifying the remark so often taken to encapsulate her creed of individual responsibility, Thatcher (speaking in 1987) reached for the same phrase that Bevan had used back in the 1950s:

There is no such thing as society. There is living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate. (Quoted in Seawright 2010: 36)

While it would be unfair to identify the ‘Right to Buy’ scheme exclusively with the Conservative government under whose auspices it was passed – the cross-party resonances of the scheme are underplayed by many commentators (Hanley 2007) – its elevation to a national level was a bold move. In line with Margaret Thatcher’s Hayekian endorsement of individual responsibility and entrepreneurship (which entailed a corresponding scaling down of state services), the Act allowed council tenants to buy their property at market value minus a discount based on length of tenancy. This would quickly change the face of many inner-city estates and in many ways its implications are still being realised.

Enterprising residents of estates situated in prime locations stood to make tens of thousands and, if they were particularly lucky and held their nerve, hundreds of thousands of pounds, by purchasing their property and selling during ‘booms’ in the housing market.[[4]](#footnote-4) Concomitantly, in many parts of London ex-local authority housing stock became the only affordable option for the aspirant middle-classes, a fact reflected in the number of young middle-class professionals who have made their home on inner-city estates over the last 20 years.

More recent legislation on council housing has paved the way for a further round of privatisation. The 2016 Housing and Planning Act, the Conservative government’s attempt to boost levels of homeownership and house-building, proposed that so-called ‘high value’, vacant council properties be sold off as part of an extension of Right to Buy. In parts of London this could result in nearly 50 per cent of public housing stock being held in private hands (Murphy 2016).

The 1980 Housing Act has been instrumental in broadening the social base of numerous housing estates. In 1979, more than 40 per cent of Britons lived in council-owned property. Today this figure stands at under eight per cent (Harris 2016).[[5]](#footnote-5) With 9,600 dwellings having been sold-off by town Northtown Council via the Right to Buy scheme since 1980, the borough is consistent with other inner-London local authorities. However, most of these sales have been concentrated in a handful of estates seen as desirable because of their size (broadly speaking estates comprising fewer than 200 units), configuration and location. LG is one of the latter.

**The People of Providence: Investing and Returning**

LG is located in one of the most diverse areas in the UK in terms of ethnicity. The push and pull dynamics of international migration and, relatedly, the vagaries of geopolitics, have played a role in making LG so ethnically diverse. On the completion of building work in the mid-1960s LG became home to first-generation Irish, Portuguese and Greek Cypriot migrants and their descendants, as well as members of the local white working class. Throughout the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s a number of migrants from the ‘new commonwealth’ – more specifically, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the West Indies and West Africa – also made their home on the estate, exercising their right as British subjects. Working locally and originally remitting a sizeable proportion of their savings, they would in many instances be joined by relatives over the next twenty or so years who also sought accommodation nearby (and if possible on the same estate). The 1990s saw new, asylum-seeking arrivals from Somalia, Rwanda, Sudan, Kosovo, Bosnia and Albania (among other places), while the years following Poland’s accession to the European Union saw a handful of Poles make their home on LG.

Because it is relatively small, low-rise and brick-built, LG’s 150 units have proved popular with tenants seeking to purchase their flats.[[6]](#footnote-6) As a result, over 35 per cent of its dwellings are privately owned, and this figure is set to rise to over 50 per cent with the passing of the aforementioned 2016 Housing and Planning Act (Denton 2015). The majority of newly-minted homeowners have since moved on, buying from the council in the late 80s and early ’90s and subsequently selling for substantial profit. This was then used to purchase houses some 25 to 30 miles outside London in counties such as Hertfordshire, Essex and Kent.[[7]](#footnote-7) Today the private dwellings on LG are owned mainly by middle-class professionals unable to afford anything ‘better’ and buy-to-let landlords, some professional in having a portfolio of properties. A handful of ex-tenants inadvertently became landlords after purchasing their property via the Right to Buy scheme. The number of university students living on the estate has increased dramatically since the early 2000s. In the lead up to the 2001 general election former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair pledged that more than 50 per cent of young people would attend university before the end of the decade. Though this target wasn’t reached, its pursuit led to an unprecedented increase in the number of university students in the UK. These students, of course, needed to be housed, with many towns and cities seeing a boom in the rental market and the encroachment of large private providers of accommodation. The influx of students also stimulated local economies all over the country. The borough of Northtown was home to more than fifteen universities and colleges and had benefited from the emergence and growth of many student-related markets.

Young professionals on LG bemoaned the increasing clout of landlords in the local property market, accusing them of crowding out home-makers and driving up the cost of rent. ‘It’s crazy’, said 27-year-old teacher, Jess. ‘We’ve tried to get a bigger place, but as soon as one of these landlords is in the running, forget it. The (estate) agents don’t take you seriously when you’re up against that lot … many of them are cash buyers and have deals going with agents in the area’. Landlords themselves, arguing that ‘the market wins’, are attracted by the return of high rents paid by reliable tenants: young people studying at local universities. With only one year in university-owned accommodation guaranteed by most of the capital’s HE institutions, and with eye-watering rates charged by private providers of student residences in central London, private landlords have tens of thousands of room-seeking students at their disposal.

This element of the marketization of cities is often overlooked by scholars and commentators. The fact that so many university students in cities like London now rent rooms in former council property is obviously one of the downstream effects of Right to Buy. But the ‘push’ factor here is the selling off of university-owned accommodation to private providers.[[8]](#footnote-8) One such company, *Unite*, now offers student accommodation in more than 20 sites across London. Their services have proved popular with international students seeking the security, comfort and customer service boasted of in the company’s advertising (www.unite-students.com). These luxury citadels have not been popular with all residents, with stories emerging over the last few years of halls being ‘unliveable’ and students paying eye-watering rents of up to £400-per-week (Bischoff 2014). Unsurprisingly, such rates have proved unaffordable to many students, hence their willingness to live among people they had in most instances never lived among before. Such a new – inadvertent – pattern of living arrangements saw social classes and diasporas of the dispossessed sharing space and, to a degree, living together. It was a tapestry no one had designed.

**Rubbing Along: Proximity and Understandings of Difference**

LG certainly met any criteria for hyperdiversity and superdiversity. What was in the 1960s a ‘white’ working-class estate had changed in complexion by the mid-1990s. Home to people drawn from a bewildering array of ethnic groups, with many having been born abroad, internal migration also contributed to the estate’s diversity. Sandra was a 51-year-old teaching assistant who moved to London in the mid-1980s. She spoke about her experiences since arriving in Northtown:

Sandra: I was twenty when I arrived. I did the classic northern thing and got a job as a nanny via *The Lady* magazine. I had to have somewhere to sleep on my first night in London and a job and money guaranteed. It was a big posh house a few miles from where we live now and I looked after a film star’s two kids. You had to be discreet with people and the working hours could be long. But it was better than what I’d known and the neighbourhood was lovely. You don’t want to do that forever though and I met Tom – he’s a northerner too from the North East and had just left the Navy when I met him in London. We got married and had three kids and we got a council flat as tenants when flats were not hard to get and we later bought it with the Right to Buy. We’ve now paid for it … Twenty years ago my accent stood me out among the mainly white, local-born mums at the school gates. Now English as a mother tongue is rare against the number of mums who have barely a word of English, or English as a second language. Northerners now are not considered ‘migrants’; that word is for them who come from thousands of miles away! It’s interesting to think how many of us might all those years ago (have) been considered that generation’s ‘economic migrants’.

Long-term council tenant Ronnie, an 83-year-old former market-stall trader, talked us through the effects of external migration.

Ronnie: The area changed. It was slow at first. In the 1960s and 1970s there was an Asian family, then a Nigerian one. No one really cared. The 1990s saw changes. The war in Yugoslavia saw thousands of Bosnians and Kosovans and Albanians appear. They must have been considered as refugees ’cos some got council flats. Then other wars in Somalia and Africa brought more seeking safety I suppose. They too got flats. So, you woke up some mornings to a family from East Africa and another from Guinea–Bissau. What remains here is quite interesting; if you are white you are either elderly and stayed on, or young and studying and will be moving on soon. Or you are from what used to be Yugoslavia and have a job and kids in local schools. There’s little that unites in terms of when we all might get together. The best you hope for is a quiet life and no disruption and a nod of the head of a morning.

There was also variation within the ethnic groups who together comprised the population of LG. The ethnic category, ‘white’, for example, was fractured into numerous sub-groups including Greek, Greek-Cypriot, Kosovan, Irish and Portuguese. Similar fault lines could be drawn among ‘Asian’ and ‘black’ residents when it came to nationality, channel of migration, legal status, religion, culture and gender politics. It was encounters across these ethnic and sub-ethnic divides which underlined the realities of living amid such diversity.

Well placed to comment by virtue of teaching the children of many of their neighbours, were Ann and Terry. Teachers at local secondary schools located within ten minutes’ walk of LG, they spoke of instances in which they had learned about ethno-cultural differences. They lived in a ground-floor studio flat below Bengali couple Abdi and Sheena and their two sons. Abdi was a cab driver who would return home each evening around 10.00pm, whereupon the family would eat together. Ann and Terry spoke of their frustration at the noise these late-night meals generated.

Ann: It can be really loud. And what's really weird is that the kids will go to bed for a couple of hours around 8.00pm, then get up again for dinner. So initially it kind of lulled us into a false sense of security, you know, 'maybe it'll be different tonight'. But up they would get and the noise starts ... In fact, it's got worse over the years as the kids have got bigger. They really charge around up there.

Terry: Yeah, then the dad will start shouting to get them to settle down which we appreciate, as we've mentioned the noise to them, but can be really startling if you're trying to sleep. Then there's Ramadan, when we know they could be eating twice, once around their normal time and again even later just before the fast begins for the next day.

The couple had spoken with Abdi but, after the noise had subsided for a half an hour or so, normal levels were resumed.

Terry: It's tricky. We have asked them to be quieter if they can. And he does try - we can hear him shouting at them to sit down and eat. But it doesn't last. Ann has to sleep with earplugs in and I normally fall asleep listening to the radio through headphones. Unfortunately it's not just late mealtimes. Sometimes you hear Abdi speaking on the phone or Skype in the middle of the night. Guessing to family back in Bangladesh; time zones you see. But what can we do besides try to block out the noise? We're not going to get environmental health onto them for having a family meal every day or staying in touch with folks back home. Besides, they never, ever, say anything to us when we have friends back here after a night out. Sometimes till really late.

Ann: Yeah, we try and take the rough with the smooth. Like with *Eid*, we know as teachers we'll effectively get a day off work anyway because our schools will be deserted!

Abdi had his own version of events:

Abdi: It’s hard, because we can’t hear what they hear downstair(s). I do everything I can. But I have just reached (returned) after work all day. So I’m tired and just want to eat and forget things … My wife says she hears them making noise sometimes but would never down go to say (anything) when I’m not here. So it’s on both sides.

Ann and Terry recalled another curious episode involving students from the Far East living in a flat next door for the duration of a ten-month contract.

Ann: Terry was out late with some work friends and I had an old colleague over. When she left we could smell gas, it was really strong. So we called the gas board and within an hour or so they had come out. I thought the man would find the leak fairly quickly and just hoped we wouldn't be without hot water for too long. But he couldn't find anything.

Terry: Yeah, it was late when I got back so Ann went to sleep and I carried on with the gas man. He was baffled because his detector – which apparently is really sensitive – couldn't pick anything up. Said he thought it was coming from the students' flat and after going in to see them said it could be something they had been eating. Anyway, the next morning the smell was still there, so we were on the verge of calling the gas board again when one of the students came out with the remnants of this fruit, which was definitely the culprit as it absolutely stunk! Durian I think it was called.

Ann: That was it! It was a relief to know it wasn't gas, but the whole thing was a bit strange. Though I guess tolerating smelly fruit is part of multicultural living!

**Commonplace Saturation: ‘No One’s From Here’**

The scenarios recounted above are illustrative of what Susanne Wessendorf (2014) (drawing on Vertovec's concept of superdiversity) has called ‘commonplace diversity’. In documenting her fieldwork in Hackney, East London, she argues that a “normalcy of diversity ... results from a saturation of difference whenever people step out of their front door” (ibid: 2–3). Though commonplace, such diversity is nevertheless modulated differently across public, private and parochial spheres. These spheres, which can be described as “social territories defined by specific relational forms” (2014: 12), are subject to differences in the nature and level of engagement with the ‘multiplex differences’ which make Hackney superdiverse. The public realm, places like bus-stops and corner-shops, evidences a ‘civility towards diversity’ conditioned by the assumption that because everyone most likely comes from elsewhere, the issue of diversity isn’t worthy of mention. The parochial (or semi-public) realm, however, which includes places such as schools and sports clubs, demands more concrete acknowledgement of, and interaction across, categorical differences. The friendships constitutive of the private realm are for the most part characterised by shared social class and ethno-national status. The instances witnessed and described on LG may allow us to embroider Wessendorf’s typology. Here we deal with the three spheres in turn.

Relations in LG’s public realm were to a large extent typified by the encounters which took place at a local convenience store situated on the estate’s periphery. Its proprietor was Imran, a Turk who had moved to London in the 1990s. A ‘civility towards diversity’ was observable in the store. Though the business sold day-to-day necessities such as milk, pain-killers and toilet roll, it made the majority of its money by selling alcohol, primarily to residents of LG. Imran realised that his livelihood depended on people’s drinking habits and that these drinkers came from a variety of backgrounds.

Imran: All sorts come in. The teachers (Terry and Ann) will come in at six in the evening and buy beer and wine – four cans and maybe a bottle of red wine. Maybe four times in the week. At the weekend not so much. But the real drinkers come in here from nine in the morning and buy one can, then come back every hour for six or eight hours to buy another. They want cold beer. Some are on benefits and sit at home all day, some are in hostels and sit in (the) park. They don’t want drink to be in a bag getting warm.

The council had given some of these ‘real drinkers’ accommodation on LG on the basis that they constituted a ‘medical priority’ (in many cases they were also dependent on class-A drugs). Terry spoke about his trips to the store:

Terry: Not sure I go there as much as the fella (Imran) says! But you do see all sorts. There’s a guy I used to drink with in the pub. He was a pot-washer – Egyptian originally, I think. It’s sad because I see him in there (a small park located nearby) now. Says he can’t afford to drink in the pub anymore as it’s too expensive. Just drinks cans in the park now. Actually made me see that lot (the park drinkers) in a different way.

His recollection of the Egyptian street-drinker prompted him to reflect on the diversity of LG and Northtown in general.

Terry: It’s true that everyone here is not from here – you know, originally – but when I moved here all those years ago it slowly dawned on me that neither was I, you know?! In meeting all these people I thought more about my own background. (I) wouldn’t have done that before. So then on the odd occasion when somebody asks in ‘the ends’, as the kids at school call it, or one of the kids themselves, I can reply that my family’s Scottish with some French in there as well … But then that’s part of me now. It’s not just saying it. Before this I was from some small white seaside town.

This was interesting, in that moving to Northtown had led Terry to question his own status as ‘native’. And whereas at first the results of his enquiries into his background simply provided something interesting to say in ‘convivial’ exchanges (Gilroy 2004), they had now been woven into his identity. On arriving in the area he had evidently posed as foreign in order to strike a chord of commonality, then through seeking an alibi for this had realised that he actually was ‘from elsewhere’. Indeed, this realisation seemed to be part of a superdiverse, ‘settler’ sensibility, at once extending and widening the horizons of one’s genealogical imagination (Tyler 2005) and thereby complicating the notion of ‘nativity’. Put more simply, white urbanites are no longer exempt when it comes to the question of where they are ‘really from’, and this has some potentially profound implications for their understandings of ethno-racial difference. Their attitudes to ‘immigrants’ and ‘refugees’ may also be affected.

**Axes of Differentiation**

It was perhaps the local secondary school and a handful of local pubs which were most illustrative of social ties in the parochial realm. These places witnessed lots of accommodation of and negotiating across the categories of difference which were only rarely pointed up in the public realm. In discussing the diversity of the clientele at his favourite local pub, university professor Barry, who once owned one of LG’s maisonettes but now lives on a private street adjacent to the estate, alluded to a number of intriguing issues.

Barry: Yeah, lots of different types of people down there – though at the times I go in (late at night), it’s mainly men. From all over: Ireland, Portugal, Brazil … I speak to lots of people from the estate: Steve, the caretaker; Mike, the postie (postman) … Never arrange to meet them. Just see them in there most nights. They’re drinking mates, I suppose.

Here the characteristics of the parochial realm in and around LG tallied with those described by Wessendorf. Though important commonalities were formed between residents of the estate through their exchanges in the parochial sphere, differences associated with social class seemed to preserve a degree of social distance. The familiarity and camaraderie forged during such routine encounters did not often lead to orchestrated meetings or get-togethers. In other words, the relationships created and developed in the public and parochial realms did not graduate to the private realm, where for the most part relational dynamics were defined by shared class background.

Indeed, residents tended to use knowledge about their neighbours’ ethno-racial backgrounds gleaned in the parochial realm to create and sustain private space. So while ‘contact’ (Allport 1958) between members of different groups did further their understanding of one another’s cultural repertoire, this did not rule out assertions of ethno-racial difference being made which could be deemed offensive. For example, Ann spoke about the challenge of teaching some of the girls who live on the estate:

Ann: It’s tricky because obviously I see them here – at work and at home, if you like! But I’ve learned a lot about the culture of these families. The parents in which families are likely to side with you on Parents’ Evening, and the ones who will back their child. Also, I know families like the one upstairs who will tend to keep the elder lad back from school quite a lot. And, people might just think that’s, you know, really wrong – and I don’t really agree with it – but that’s Bengali culture. Particularly the families from Sylhet (a region in Northeast Bangladesh) who live here. He’s needed to help out at home. It’s not as simple as being ‘Asian’.

This kind of statement was echoed elsewhere and might be characterised as an instance of what have been called ‘granular essentialisms’. These are assertions about ethno-racial difference that draw on day-to-day experience and attempt to take stock of intersections across the axes of differentiation bound up with superdiversity (Rosbrook-Thompson, 2016). Such statements were more informed and textured than the stereotypes which typically circulate about ethnic groups outside superdiverse areas. Though less likely to be flagrantly racist and prejudicial, however, such statements could still be offensive and discriminatory. This was indicated by the fact that most residents would only air ‘granular essentialisms’ when at home or somewhere considered ‘safe’. Indeed, in many ways these essentialisms were the shibboleths of private space on LG. Spaces qualified as private if these kinds of statement could be made in them. Such a dynamic represented a challenge for us as white, male ethnographers. By uttering these statements people indicated that they were speaking privately and discreetly, and in our asking them as to whether they would be happy for their statements to be reported, residents responded that some could be noted, but not others. By posing the question itself the space in which a conversation took place was immediately disqualified as ‘private’.

These essentialisms also allowed middle-class residents to showcase the cultural capital they had amassed in engaging with neighbours across ethno-national (and social class) divides. It was perhaps no coincidence that Ann signed off her comments above with the remark, ‘It’s not as simple as being ‘Asian’’. This indicated that the granularity of her assertions about ethnic differences was hard-won. It had been etched during numerous cross-ethnic exchanges and encounters. However, though she identified with the spirit of superdiversity in setting ‘Sylheti culture’ apart from a wider South Asian set of cultural practices, and her comments hinted that intra-group differences rendered assertions of group difference problematic in themselves, she (and others) still made such assertions. As ethnographers, this pride in mixing across ethno-cultural lines expressed by middle-class residents could be harnessed. While reluctant to unpack statements about ethno-racial difference, they were far less inhibited when it came to telling stories about the engagement across ethnic and class boundaries which these statements were predicated on.

**Orderly Occupations? Employment and Opportunities**

It would be fair to say that, historically, residents of the estate – and until the 1980s these were exclusively council tenants – had ridden waves of globalisation, but hardly at the crest. They had made the most of something similar to what Gordon Matthews (2011), in his fascinating study of a mixed-purpose tower-block in Hong Kong, has called ‘low-end globalization’. This globalization concerns ‘the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes semilegal or illegal, transactions commonly associated with “the developing world”’ (Matthews 2011: 19–21). Though the developing world wasn’t as explicitly represented in the processes and transformations which afforded opportunities to people on LG – though, as we will see, it was certainly present in the guise of labour migration and networks of production and exchange – their jobs and activities are broadly consonant with Matthews’ description. If the ‘low’ in ‘low-end globalization’ signals a scaled-down version of larger shifts whose nodal points are situated in the developed world, enterprising tenants on LG had to actively seek out pockets of demand for labour which in many cases were a by-product of more profound, capital-driven bouts of time-space compression (Harvey 1989). Indeed, the estate’s positioning in relation to various hubs of globalisation and urban development was certainly propitious.

Retired labourer Hughie, a 74-year-old Irishman, described the underground labour market which had operated locally for four decades:

Hughie: From the late 50s until the late 1980s the Irishmen who arrived in the area laboured. They were the muscle behind building, be it property development, office block building, roads and motorways and tunnelling of any type. The work was long and often dangerous and by any standards quite brutal. The Irish – many from the poor, West of Ireland counties – were perfect for this. They were stoical and took pride in working in awful conditions. They were men who needed a job and shelter, and the area could provide that. What you had was a network of Irish contacts. The Irish pubs were informal work agencies. Someone would ‘have a word’ with someone who was employing and the next thing was you were to be outside the tube the next morning at seven ‘o’clock in work gear. Various vans would pull up and men would be invited to get in … The vans today are still there picking up in the morning but the only Irishman is likely to be the owner of the property that he wants doing up. He has the pick of East European migrants to labour for him.

Three of London’s (and, indeed, Britain’s) busiest and most iconic railway termini were located within fifteen minutes’ walk of the estate. Indeed, many local families owed their presence in the district and, furthermore, their Celtic heritage, to the hostels made available for tired Scottish train-drivers in need of rest before their return journeys. A number ended up either settling in the borough or unwound by striking up short-lived relations with local women, with predictable consequences. More recently, these stations have been a source of employment in roles as varied as ticket guard, shop assistant and cleaner.

The two hospitals situated within a one-mile radius were important for more than their medical services. As well as the fact that a significant number of LG’s residents had been born in one of the two, these hospitals offered job opportunities to some of the borough’s residents during a time when the possibilities of employment were beset with racial and ethnic discrimination. This was occasioned by the disintegration of the British Empire (which took place largely between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1960s), with global forces once again adding to the diversity of the area. Many first- and second-generation migrants from the ‘New Commonwealth’ – and, more specifically, the West Indies, South Asia and West Africa – settled in Northtown after landing jobs in the National Health Service (NHS). The same was true of arrivals from Cyprus and Portugal. Though they first lived within other council-owned flats and houses, some these migrants – and a number of their offspring – took up residence in LG after its construction in the mid-1960s.

Another boon for those of an entrepreneurial bent was London’s famous West End, situated around two miles away. The many establishments which together constituted ‘theatre land’ had a long history of providing employment to residents of Northtown. A one-time thriving piano-making industry and a manufacturer of bespoke stage costumes both answered theatre-related demand. Though these businesses have since closed down – in one instance making way for a duo of internationally-renowned fashion houses – the trade in theatre tickets remains. Indeed, a handful of ticket touts (one of whom, Jimmy, lived on LG) operated in a more diverse market that involved providing tourists with tickets to Premier League football matches and West End shows and music gigs. The shadowy entrepreneurial status of this trade mirrored other features of LG’s occupational culture which, in turn, had a bearing on issues of order and disorder.

**Crime and Punishment: Adornment and Negotiation**

Issues of security and the maintenance of order were immediately apparent to visitors of LG. Time-worn ‘Neighbourhood Watch’ signs were accompanied by the occasional CCTV camera and brightly-coloured burglar alarm. Those with a real concern about unwanted intruders had tried to combine fortification with adornment. The design of their heavy-duty security doors – installed in front of their wooden front doors – saw straight bars interspersed with a mixture of geometric flourishes. That said, form never quite triumphed over function; the decorative quality of lattices, spirals and incomplete figures of eight might distract visitors only momentarily from the fact that these elegant shapes were traced in wrought iron and ultimately there to exclude.

Matters of security and disorder were much more complex than a concerted attempt to banish any forms of criminal activity from the estate or one’s front door. Drugs and stolen goods changed hands. Illegal satellite dishes were mounted. Jobs ranging from carpentry, to childcare, to academic tutoring were done ‘cash-in-hand’ to avoid the recipient paying tax. And though it was difficult to map class difference against levels of involvement in crime it was easy to identify a threshold in terms of seriousness of criminal activity which residents were unwilling to move beyond. What concerned people was the possibility that signs of serious disorder would be observable to neighbours, visitors and passers-by. Families, markets and investments needed to be nurtured and protected. This also worried long-term council tenants who had seen improvements in safety and security over the years and were keen for this upward trend to continue. All residents were aware, though, that in their efforts to fight crime, they may have to be strategic and indeed tolerant of certain movements.

In the early 1990s the local council along with the Metropolitan Police had waged a concerted battle against the street prostitution which had taken root in the immediate environs of a nearby railway terminus some twenty years before. Their efforts had succeeded in displacing, rather than removing, the problem. Indeed, the market for prostitution moved to an area encompassing LG. Prostitutes would use another local estate and its quiet walkways and stairwells as a place to both solicit business and consummate it via sex acts. Located one hundred meters or so west of LG, Smithson Place was suited to illicit liaisons, with its underground network of garages and parking spaces originally built for council tenants but many of which laid empty. Due to the basement being utilised for prostitution and drug dealing these garages were closed in the early 2000s amid another ‘crackdown’ on street prostitution and dealing. The council attempted to substitute a legal for an illegal market; today the spaces are owned by a storage company and private car-park operator, respectively. One might think that drug-dealing was something residents would unite in condemning. The reality, however, was more complicated.

**Serving Up Tranquillity**

The conflicting moralities of residents were most apparent when it came to Carl. Most respondents who lived within two streets of Carl’s home were aware that he ‘served up’ (local slang for selling drugs). Living in a 30-square metre studio flat, Carl displayed little in the way of extravagant or brash behaviour. Indeed, it was this which had won him the qualified approbation of some of his neighbours. Barry spoke about the pros and cons of having a drug-dealer living nearby.

Barry: The boy – I say boy because I saw him grow up – he’s 30 now – sells drugs. He lives in his mum’s flat. She left London with a new fella years ago. Everyone knows what he does. He has people coming to the door all the time – well, ’drug-time’ – namely late afternoon till the early hours. They have a mission – to buy their drugs – it’s marijuana and cocaine from him. They do the deal then go. It’s cash on delivery and neither party wants to draw attention to themselves. It also means the street is monitored at night. The dealer wants to know that there are no plain clothes cops in cars watching him so he knows all the vehicles on the street and takes an interest in anyone walking by in the hours of darkness. I’ve always taken the view that as long as he keeps the trouble from my door, from my family and my kids, then he can get on with it. He knows that if any serious stuff happens here then he’s getting nicked. He’s got a market to protect. If the police are here or if there are addicts loitering outside his door, it could be game over. So he has to keep things sensible. He’s at home all day every day and in good weather sits on his front door happy to chat with any neighbour … Like the *de facto* Neighbourhood Watch. We don’t need a weekly rota!

Eighteen-year-old Hiba, whose Somalian parents had settled on LG in the 1990s, reflected on whether Carl’s presence offered greater security.

Hiba: In a weird way, I guess it does. Growing up here, you’re not proud saying to others, ‘Look, that’s where the dealer lives’. But then what if he didn’t live here? The real problems could start. Besides, everyone’s ‘ends’ has a dealer, right?

Undergraduate students Sheena, Sheri and Amy lived almost directly above Carl, in a flat rented from a landlord who also lived locally. They admitted to being conflicted about his trade, partly due to the fact they would occasionally avail themselves of his services. Sheri’s remarks also indicated that when middle-class customers were involved, Carl preferred goods to be delivered via a third party.

Sheri: Look – we’re students. We will smoke the odd zoot (joint) now and then. And to be honest we know where we’re getting it from. But it’s not like we’re knocking on his door. We have a number to ring and somewhere to meet to pick up. He has two or three runners and one of them will be there. To be honest I’ve never really spoken to him. Just say hello when we pass by.

This group of ‘runners’ was a curious sight. They seldom actually travelled on foot, shuttling from Carl’s to flat to various delivery points at the seat of cheap mountain bicycles. A signature accoutrement was the small ‘man bag’ strapped diagonally across back and chest; runners usually carried drugs in volumes only deemed sufficient for ‘personal use’.[[9]](#footnote-9) These bags proved popular with local schoolboys; in blurring the line between crime and fashion, the trend also made it harder for police officers to single out Carl’s runners.

**The Profits of Embourgeoisement**

Carl (and those further up the food chain) had done very well out of the steady encroachment of students into Northtown. This, along with an influx of young middle-class professionals struggling to leave elements of student life behind, had changed the complexion of his market for the better. His middle-aged Portuguese neighbour, Stefan, spoke about the implications of this shift.

Stefan: I mean, look at who’s buying this stuff now. I live next to and under students, teachers, people that have good jobs and everything. You can smell it coming over. They’re probably buying it from him. The police come hardly ever … Why should they bother when it’s mainly these kind of people that are his customers?

In speaking about Carl’s activities, Barry also mentioned the issue of noisy neighbours.

Barry: Someone once said to me, ‘It’s not how much noise, but who’s making the noise’. And that’s what happens here to an extent. If it’s students having a blow-out at the weekend or at the end of exam season, that can be irritating. But it could also be a hell of a lot worse.

In an extension of Barry’s maxim about noise, it wasn’t so much what was being sold that was important, but rather who was buying it.

Stefan: I mean, it’s similar with us. Years ago there was problems with crack-houses here. These people were squatting and serving up all day and night. You’d hear noise every day and then eventually police would raid, nick them all then board doors up with those big iron doors. That looked crap as it was empty for months until new tenants moved in. Now it’s (mainly) students and young people – students, the teachers – having parties, making noise. So it can still make you angry, but it’s different and not a real threat. To us or to police, really.

Another reason for the toleration of their shenanigans was the fact that students also offered more legitimate revenue streams, as explained by Ronnie.

Ronnie: From the early- to mid-2000s on many (students) came from small, posh towns and now many come here from abroad. They needed accommodation and this meant them who’d bought their council flats and were about to retire turned into landlords. They would give the flat over to a letting agency and go and live in Spain. The rent they got from the students more than paid for what they needed over there.

Here, again, we see the operation of ‘low-end globalisation’, with homeowners making the most of their freedom of movement with the European Union and the groundswell of room-seeking students – a sizeable proportion of whom came to study in the UK from foreign shores. These global networks, as well as the varying channels of migration which accounted for the presence of other LG residents in London, gave a cosmopolitan feel to the estate and the legal, semi-legal and illegal activities which took place there.

**The Tapestry Unpicked**

The stories told above reflect the staggering level of diversity evident on mixed-occupancy estates such as LG. This mixedness in terms of ethnicity and class is the result of waves of migration and the effects – intended and unintended, immediate and more remote – of various pieces of housing legislation. The day-to-day realities of life on LG can also be traced to numerous (related) processes of marketization, urban development and the time-space compression that global processes have brought in the past fifty years. In proclaiming that estates like this are laboratories for the study of ‘hyper-’ and ‘superdiversity’, we should not fall into the trap of arguing that all is rosy in the garden; that regular cross-ethnic contact will put an end to people appealing to group differences in a potentially offensive manner. Though it was difficult to point to any instances of overt racism, in many cases residents’ attitudes to migration-related diversity were ambivalent.

For the people who found themselves there, LG was home. In this superdiverse setting, however, somewhere called ‘real home’ was often mentioned in conversation, often for decades after arrival in Northtown. At times this was a source of comfort. When London was too chaotic, lonely or complex there was – in the mind at least – a place less complicated to retreat or return to. Few took this route, however. In its entertainments and opportunities this pocket of London was seductive and energising, albeit it could be manic, confusing, tiring, infuriating and unsentimental. Perhaps all extended families might be described in such terms – even those who celebrated such diversity used ‘granular essentialisms’ to make sense of the behaviour of their neighbours. It was the utterance of these essentialisms which seemed to qualify spaces as authentically private. The human quality of trust was integral in these encounters. Though the public and parochial realms were characterised by a host of cross-class and cross-ethnic encounters and exchanges, in the private realm it was commonality along the lines of class which shaped the forging of relationships. That said, there were signs that the complexity of their surroundings had led some white residents to question the basis of ‘nativity’ and develop a superdiverse, ‘settler’ sensibility. If everyone was from elsewhere, it was likely that one’s own ancestral trail would similarly lead to foreign origins, and this could be used to build bridges of commonality in convivial exchanges which took place in the public and parochial spheres.

In the most mercantile of cities, income streams could be sought out and forged in many different ways. As with its ethno-racial composition, people’s patterns of employment were complex. Whether residents worked in the public, private or shadow sectors, the tangle of legal, semi-legal and illegal activities witnessed on the estate cut across class boundaries and correlated with curious – fluid – attitudes to crime and disorder. More specifically, many respondents were more concerned with the relationship between crime and manifestations of disorder than criminal acts *per se*. Subtle indicators of disorder were tolerated providing they did not presage serious signs of urban decay. The noise generated and anti-social behaviour exhibited by middle-class students were an indicator of progress against a background narrative of continuing improvement.

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1. The Festival, which ran from May to October, was funded by the British government and directed by newspaper editor (with the *Daily Express* and the *Saturday Review*, among others), Gerald Barry. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lansbury was Chairman of the Labour Party between 1927 and 1928, and led the party between 1932 and 1935. He campaigned on issues as diverse as Workhouse reform, women’s suffrage and working conditions in the colonies and protectorates of the British Empire. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though the term ‘tenement’ strictly refers to an apartment or room rented by a tenant, it has come to denote a poorly-maintained and overcrowded block of apartments situated in a poor, inner-city area. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A decline in the number of council homes being built is important here. Whereas Clement Attlee’s Labour government of 1945 to 1951 sought to replace homes destroyed during the Second World War by constructing more than one million homes – 80 per cent of which were council houses – of the 2.63 million homes built under the New Labour government in office between 1997 and 2010, just 0.3 per cent were under local authority control. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. More than 1.8 million council homes have been sold to tenants at sub-market rates since the introduction of Right to Buy (Foster 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Estate agents and mortgage lenders play a role here. Mortgages are easier to obtain for flats situated in blocks that are under six storeys high and constructed using bricks rather than reinforced concrete. Being five storeys high and brick-built, LG was classed as ‘prime ex-local authority’ housing stock by nearby estate agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a detailed analysis of ‘white flight’, see Frey (1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Where universities have been less inclined to divest themselves of their estates, and/or when companies identify a market for luxury student accommodation not catered for by official halls of residence, these companies have bought up land and former office blocks in order to create rooms and self-contained flats for students. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In British law there is a distinction between possession of an amount of drugs consistent with personal use and intent to supply, respectively. Police officers infer intent to supply from a number of factors including possession of a variety of drugs and a substantial amount of drugs divided into individual denominations. The penalty for possession of a quantity consistent with personal use is police caution (though in many instances individuals are let off altogether), while for intent to supply the maximum sentence for class-A drugs is life, and class-B and -C drugs 14 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)