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A Disconnected Community? (Re)visioning the Heygate Council Estate Through Digital Activism

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ABSTRACT

From the wailing police sirens in *The Bill* (1984-2010), to the gun-toting bad boys in *Top Boy* (2011-2013), during the late 20th and early 21st century, London's Heygate council estate was a stage on which to enact terrifying anxieties about crime and social deviance. As if in answer to these visualizations, in 2010 the government announced a £1.5 billion regeneration project that will transform the area into a "brand-new town centre" over the next fifteen years. By demolishing the Heygate and replacing it with mixed-income accommodations, the council aim to counteract the area's association with concentrated poverty, organized crime and dependency on benefits. I propose that the dystopian vision of the Heygate in popular visual texts contributed to its notoriety in the nation's visual imagination, and consequently helped to influence its socio-spatial restructure.

This article considers the visual activism of residents who respond to the dominant visualizations of their homes with counter-narratives centred on an attachment to place. I focus primarily on the website, *Southwark Notes*, a dynamic and malleable digital text that facilitates and makes visible citizen action and a sense of creative ownership over the rapidly changing urban landscape in Southwark. The site is a practical manifestation of what I call usable memory – a place where residents reminisce about their deeply rooted past, utilizing this historical attachment to place to unite and prevent the uprooting of community landmarks in the future.



On November 22nd 2010, the British coalition government published a proposal for a radical overhaul of the nation's council housing. Addressing the BBC's evening television audience, then housing minister Grant Shapps told viewers of controversial plans to relinquish national governmental control of funding for council housing to local governments and private property developers. Southwark council stands at the forefront of these efforts with a £1.5 billion regeneration project that aims to transform the Elephant and Castle area into "a brand-new town centre" over the next fifteen years. In addition to rebuilding the area's dilapidated shopping centre and re-routing the gyratory system, the council recently completed the demolition of its high-rise Heygate council estate. The urban renewal initiative has been controversial from the off, plagued by forced evictions and a shaky 'Right to Return' policy. As reported in the Guardian recently, "Only 212 of the 2,535 flats going up where the estate once stood will be "affordable," and only 79 will be socially rented" (Cathcart-Keays 2014). The initiative has also been tarnished by a lack of resident involvement during the planning process; indeed, while the council originally convened a Resident's Regeneration Group enabling participants to develop their own "principles for effective regeneration," contributors soon realised that their opinions had little impact on the regeneration plans, which amounted to little more than "fait accompli" (DeFillipis & North 2004, 79). For a detailed timeline of the regeneration process, see the chronology provided by the website, [Heygate Was Home](#).

Built in 1974, the Heygate is one of the largest and most notorious subsidized housing complexes in Europe. The estate began its life in a respectable fashion at a time when a third of Britons lived in council homes, but this early optimism soon gave way to an image synonymous with inner-city crime, squalor, isolation, and deprivation. Planners and estate agents condemn the area as London's "Lost Quarter," while journalists invoke metaphors of disease and decay by labelling the Heygate "a sort of human dustbin," noting that, "it exemplified the notion that if you give people sties to live in, they will live like pigs" (Heffer 2010). Thus, Southwark council not only aims to create a physical architectural change through the construction of a "brand new town centre," but also to eliminate the social "pathologies" – concentrated poverty,



unemployment, and dependency on benefits – attached to its once 3000 strong citizenry. But while various politicians and journalists have promoted this representation over the years, there is no greater critic of the Heygate estate than popular culture.

From the wailing police sirens in *The Bill* (1984-2010), to the gun-toting bad boys in Michael Caine's vigilante thriller *Harry Brown* (2009), during the late 20th and early 21st century, London's Heygate council estate was a stage on which to enact terrifying anxieties about crime and social deviance. The high-density, multi-storey 'brick box' design of the buildings helped to underscore the discourse of dystopia surrounding the estate. In line with much cost-effective post-war subsidized housing both in the U.K. and U.S. (see Cabrini-Green in Chicago, for example), the physical shaping of the Heygate dispensed with street level play spaces and blocks in favour of tiny encased 'streets in the sky'. Aesthetically, these exterior hallways were the ideal backdrops for visual interpretations of a criminal underworld, inhabited by horrible hoodies, feral youth, or marauding gangs of kids; the Heygate's exposed concrete frames and futuristic elongated walkways became telegenic shorthand for storylines centred on gritty, urban life. The recent acclaimed Channel 4 series *Top Boy* (2011-2013) exemplifies this vision. Driven by a desire to be to South London what *The Wire* (2002-2008) was to Baltimore, *Top Boy* employs stereotypical tropes of Black urban criminality with storylines centred on weed-smoking, wanton expletives, copious drug-taking and fierce violence. For twenty-something lead character Dushane and pals, the future lies not in the promise of an education or fulfilling career but in the preordained destiny of incarceration.

To accuse destructive visual narratives like *Top Boy* of being the sole perpetrators of the rationale expressed in the regeneration project would be inaccurate. Nevertheless, a negative and restrictive representation of council housing undeniably limits not only *what* we see of this place, but also *how* we see it. In an article for *The Guardian*, for example, Heygate resident Adrian Glasspool linked the visual encryption of his home by "excitable media and film-makers who liked to use the Heygate as a set for gritty realist dramas" to its current demise, and the disempowerment and stigmatization of council residents during the transition process (Moss 2011). Glasspool states, "Suddenly the place was being labelled a problem estate. This is all part of this regeneration discourse. Because there's nothing wrong with the buildings, they have to find an excuse to regenerate the place, i.e. knock it down and replace it" (Moss 2011). Dominant ideological constructions of tenants as socially excluded, morally corrupt, and politically apathetic validates the implementation of the regeneration project as well as providing political *and* public justification for shutting tenants out of the redevelopment process.



Channel 4's use of Heygate as a backdrop for the archetypal "sink" estate in one of its current idents illustrates this dynamic [Fig. 1].



Fig. 1: Channel 4 ident (2004-2013).

Devoid of people save for the traces of human life left by a grubby washing line, Heygate's graffiti- and rubbish-laden walkways gives visual form to the suspicion that council housing is a lost cause. A slow motion camera pans over this scene, a technique that serves as a visual roll call of the design flaws associated with post-war neo-brutalist architecture; at the same time, this surveillant filmic approach also reconfirms and condemns residents as key orchestrators of this sight. By failing to articulate the government's culpability in the establishment of its problems – 30 years of government disinvestment in its housing stock, not to mention Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme and increasing levels of privatisation – such cultural narratives narrow the complexity of life in council housing. Instead, it exists as a problem in itself, and a burden to the world. Effectively, the dystopian vision of the Heygate estate in late 20th and early 21st century visual culture (cinematic, journalistic, and televisual) contributed to its notoriety in the nation's visual imagination, and consequently helped to influence, either ideologically or psychologically, the current socio-spatial restructuring of our urban landscape.

In spite of years of chronic mismanagement and ravaging visual treatments, some residents express a keen historical attachment to their living environment, reminding us that while the design of the estate may have been flawed, that does not always mean that those who lived there were failures. As Heygate resident Terry Redpath states, "People took pride in their



place and there was a community spirit. It wasn't badly designed and there was plenty of open space" (Tran 2011). According to a 2011 *Guardian* article, some Heygate residents oppose the demolition, arguing that it is unnecessary as living conditions in the flats are satisfactory (Guardian, April 15 2011). Indeed, contrary to dominant visual depictions, a Metropolitan Police report detailing crime statistics from 1998 to 2003 indicates that the Heygate experienced a crime rate a 45% *below* the borough average (Better Elephant 2014). A MORI poll questionnaire disseminated to residents at the start of the regeneration process, meanwhile, found that "70% of Heygate residents expressed a wish to move to a new home on the site of the Heygate estate" (Southwark Borough Council 1999). For some, council housing should be recognized as more than simply bricks and mortar. Rather, youth clubs, community allotments, and familiar market stalls serve as memory palaces, loaded with representational surfaces, which function as visual cues, reminding residents of their past. Moreover, for residents like Redpath, "community specific" landmarks function as sites via which to reminisce about their deeply rooted past, utilizing this historical attachment to place to unite against bulldozing property-developers and the narrow ontological frameworks circumscribed by popular culture (Kester 2004). Many current council housing residents are aware that they are heirs to a legacy deemed worthy of respect and emulation, and fight to maintain their cultural identity through their opposition to the regeneration project.

Some residents utilize traditional forms of activism by taking to the streets to fight for their homes, while others turn the council's propaganda material on its head by creating culture jam posters to vent their opposition to the regeneration process. Digital-media resources like Facebook function as extensions to and facilitators of this resistance, serving to re-connect displaced tenants on one level and as forums for ex-residents, activists, and non-profit organisations to share information and to facilitate greater awareness about the regeneration process on the other. In rebellion to some councilors and politicians who would rather that the Heygate was razed and forgotten than explored and commemorated, over the last two to three years a strategic strand of digital activism emerged in an attempt to reflect the social attachments and civic engagement that came to play a dominant role in life on the Heygate estate during its lifetime. *The Original Heygate SE17* Facebook page, for instance, currently boasts 883 "Likes" from ex-residents and interested parties. Sites and groups like [35 Percent](#), [The Elephant & Castle Urban Forest](#), [Heygate Was Home](#), and [Live from the Heygate](#) join this online activist community as dynamic and malleable digital spaces, which facilitate and making



visible citizen action and a sense of creative ownership over the rapidly changing urban landscape in Southwark.

Crucially, a number of these web-based initiatives seem primarily concerned with contesting dominant stereotypes attached to the Heygate. *Heygate was Home*, for example, is an archive of residents' oral testimonies, photographs and videos, proof if you like that the people who lived there did not always consider that it a waste space or an eyesore [Fig. 2].

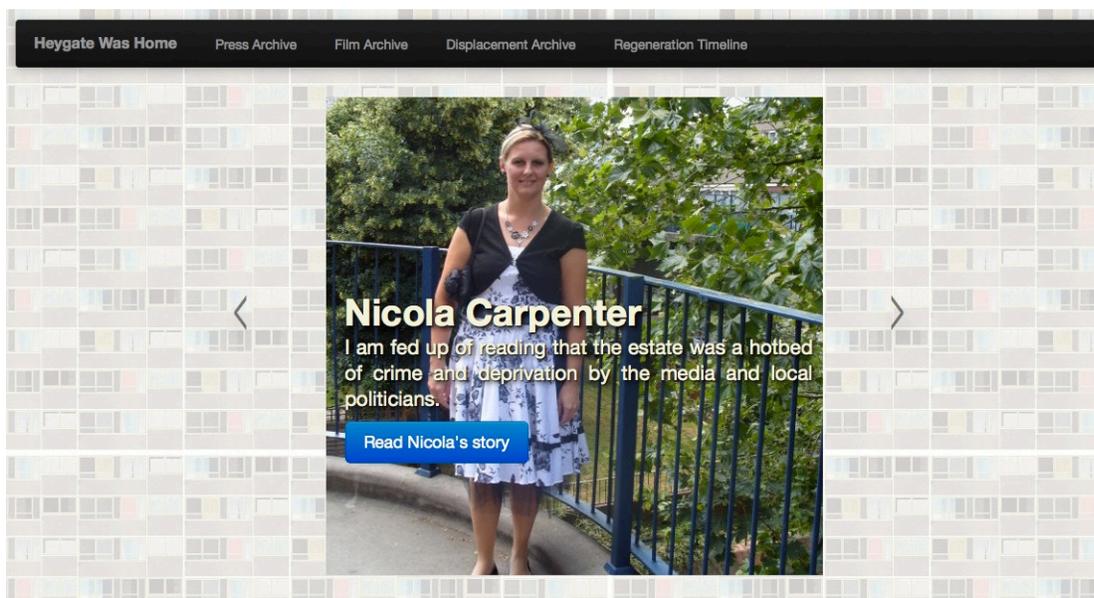


Fig. 2: "Heygate Was Home," 2014.

The simple design of the website enables participating residents to re-appropriate the estate piece by piece at the same time as it is being demolished, resulting in an active alternative online 'home' of oral and visual histories. *The Elephant and Castle Urban Forest*, meanwhile, charts the activities of ex-residents who, along with the *Elephant Amenity Network*, campaign for the retention of the neighbourhood's unusually large mature tree population. According to site, Heygate boasts 410 mature trees, valued at over £18 million using the council's (CAVAT) system. The site convenes meetings of local gardeners interested in preserving Heygate's so-called 'secret garden' via an online message board and map. The combination of face-to-face meetings with virtual exchanges publicizes information that might otherwise remain invisible without a representation online.



Much like other blogs of its ilk, [Southwark Notes](#) concerns itself with the politics of transparency – or digital whistle blowing if you will – in the form of the deconstruction of prevailing myths attached to the area. Written by a group of Southwark residents, the site provides frequent updates on the regeneration process as well as video, photographic, and poster tributes to the area. What sets *Southwark Notes* apart, however, is its strong awareness of the historical roots of this resistance, an appreciation illustrated in its repeated use of the elephant motif [Fig. 3]. Found centred on its namesake road intersection in South London, the original Elephant and Castle statue is symbolic of the area's extensive cultural history and utilized at every opportunity on *Southwark Notes* to support the idea of historical contiguity and perseverance. The name of the area can be traced back to the 15th century via its mention in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, while a large elephant sculpture – not dissimilar to the distinctive emblem attached to the soon to be demolished Elephant and Castle shopping centre – perched atop the entrance to the Elephant and Castle Theatre until the late 19th century.

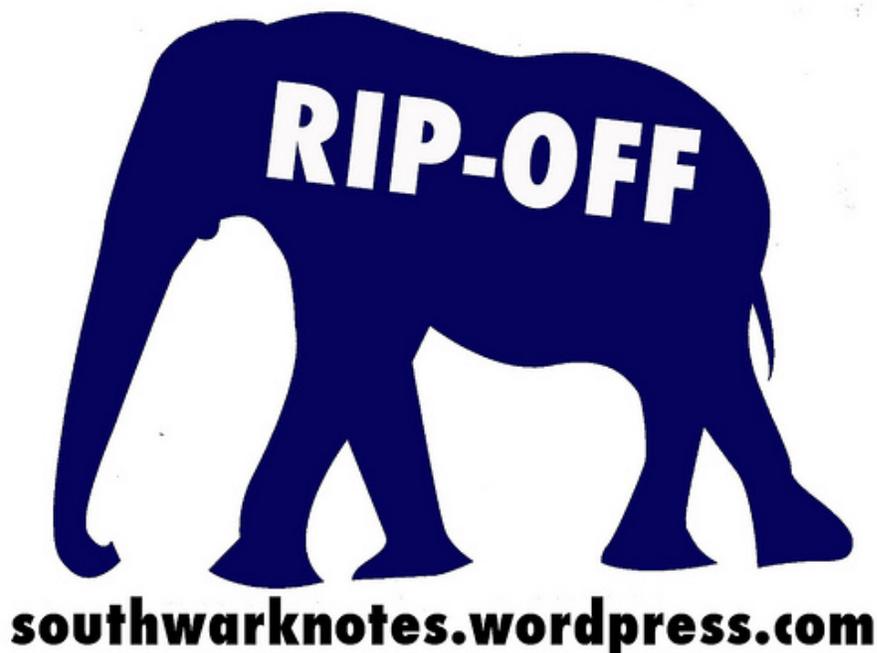


Fig. 3: Southwark Notes & Archives Group. 2014.



Southwark Notes' digital use of the elephant iconography extends to its employment in activist activity on the ground. In 2012, residents played cat and mouse with the council over a mural depicting the elephant, replacing it as soon as it was erased [Fig 4]. These two strands of activism, both traditional street-based activism and digital activism, unite in their use of the prolific use of the elephant image as a territorial tactic of resistance against the threat to their "homeplace" (hooks 1990, 42). By advertising the motif on the sides of buildings slated for demolition, the elephant designates that, for some, this is a site worth knowing about and identifying with, at the same time as instilling a sense of pride linked to historical attachments to the place. Much like the persistence of memory evinced via the *Heygate Was Home* website, the preservation of the Elephant mural is intimately tied to the idea of place-based memory; residents' personal memories interconnect with those of family and neighbours to create a spirit of shared identity through shared territory.

LET THEM KNOW THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE: We suggest that if you feel that this was an unnecessary, wholly unaccountable and aggressive act that you make your feelings known to those who carried it out and to CC in your email Peter John and Fiona Colley, who are the leading Council lights in the Regeneration Dept.

Write to:

Andrew Ashaye – andrew.ashaye@southwark.gov.uk

Peter John – peter.john@southwark.gov.uk

Fiona Colley – fiona.colley@southwark.gov.uk



Fig. 4: Southwark Notes & Archives Group. 2014.



This focus stems from the phenomenological principle that people and place are synergistically intertwined. As Edward Casey states in the Preface to his ubiquitous book on the subject, *The Fate of Place*, “To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be *in* some kind of place” (Casey 1997, xi). In other words, people do not exist apart from the world but, rather, are *immersed* in it. On a textual and conceptual level, the lack of foreshortening in both mural and blog removes depth and temporality, thereby situating the past – or more specifically, residents’ memories of the past – firmly in the present. This is a formal manifestation of what Marianne Hirsch has termed “postmemory,” described as the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births. Moreover, the mural illustrates what Hirsch terms “written-in” memory: “The writing... is both written in *memory*, out of one’s memory, and *written-in* memory, a memory inscribed on the skin of the image itself, as a tattoo might be” (Hirsch 2002, 86).

Entombed on both wall and cyberspace, the image of the elephant can be seen as a practical manifestation of what I call usable memory – as a site where residents reminisce about their deeply rooted past, utilizing this historical attachment to place to unite and prevent the uprooting of community landmarks in the future. This term is in many ways derived from “usable past,” coined by historian Van Wyck Brooks in order to identify forbearers from American history and literature whose works could be used to interpret and understand present disruption or chaos. Brooks writes:

The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens itself at the touch of desire; it yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone who comes at it armed with the capacity for personal choices. If, then, we cannot use the past our professors offer us, is there any reason why we should not create others of our own? The grey conventional mind casts its shadow backward. But why should not the creative mind dispel that shadow with shafts of light? (Brooks 1918, 339)

While Brooks’ “past” was Ralph Waldo Emerson’s humanistic New England, which the historian considered to be the model on which early 20th century U.S. culture and its literature would be built; so usable memory can be employed nearly a century later as a tactic reinforcing the importance of historical connectivity in the Heygate. When residents recount how “we” worked together to overcome past obstacles and “we” achieved unexpected successes, they emphasize



this sense of productive reflection. For what binds together the memories of council housing residents is not the fact that they are contiguous in time but, rather, that they are synchronized with a whole ensemble of physical and social structures common to the community (Connerton 1989, 36). This kind of community collectivism corresponds with geographer David Harvey's assertion that, "Community activism can be a very important moment in more general mobilization. In this context we have to think about the construction of community not as an end in itself but as a moment in a process" (Harvey 1997, 24). Much like the narrative temporality embodied in the mural, *Southwark Notes* superimposes time *onto* place, rendering photographs, maps, and notes on the flattened plane of the cyber interface, thereby suggesting the ways in which memory can be built into the fabric of a place. A database of oral and visual histories, *Southwark Notes* enables participating residents to re-appropriate the estate piece-by-piece parallel to its demolition. These counter-examples resist hegemonic interpretations of council tenants as a socially excluded 'underclass' by illustrating their significant innovation and creativity in the use of digital "space." [1]

More broadly, digital citizenship potentially provides a unique opportunity to wrestle the hegemonic stronghold on the initiative out of the hands of council gatekeepers and the mass media, opening up the management of current and future regeneration processes to include those traditionally marginalized in policy-making – women, minority groups and working-class communities generally. The Web 2.0 of social networking sites has, of course, experienced the rise of new powerful forms of digital activism in recent years, as seen in the adoption of Facebook and Twitter as a means of mass mobilization in the context of the Occupy Wall Street, for example. While on a notable smaller scale, websites like *Southwark Notes* likewise generate alternative public spheres – spaces within which to ask: What do *you* want? Participatory venues for gathering citizen input, these virtual spaces help to demystify the regeneration process, their low-tech form enabling people inside and outside the community with the opportunity to critique its faults and partake in its management. *Southwark Notes* and others of its ilk become democratic forums for a mutually beneficial dialogue between academia, urban designers, and community groups about the importance of visual legacy (e.g. the preservation of community murals) in the management of sustainable and inclusive urban futures. The answers to these questions demonstrate the power of digital technologies to bond social capital *within* communities, in addition to bridging social capital *across* communities, in the form of sharing national and international experiences and strategies.



For example, over the last two years *Southwark Notes*, in conjunction with *Heygate Was Home*, has been involved in a research project on the realities of residents' displacement. Contrary to council leader Peter John's promise to re-house residents in new homes, only around one in five Heygate tenants actually remain in the SE17 postcode (216 tenants out of 1034) (Southwark Notes 2014). In response to a FOI request to Southwark Borough Council, Glasspool discovered that out of 596 known relocated households, around half have had to move to suburbs such as Sidcup, St. Albans, Croydon, Bexleyheath, Cheshunt, Mitcham and West Thurrock (for more information on this see the [Heygate Leaseholder Displacement Map](#), created using data obtained by *35 Percent* during the Heygate Estate Compulsory Purchase Order Inquiry in February 2013). In June 2014, *Southwark Notes* published a downloadable anti-gentrification handbook on its site, designed "to help local communities learn about gentrification and the alternatives they can fight for. Through the experiences of council tenants, leaseholders and the wider community in London, it contains ideas, stories, tools and resources" (Staying Put 2014). These resources include a guide on how to organize local groups, strategies to negotiate the council's consultation process, and ways in which residents can tell their own stories. Indeed, as we see from the following quote, re-imagining the history of criminality attached to Southwark's council estates is of prime importance:

Our lived experience of crime on the Estate does not match the myth – and this is borne out by statistics. We need to counter these pernicious negative stereotypes. By listing and emphasizing the many positive features of our homes that we now enjoy, and celebrating our diverse community, we strengthen our bargaining position (Staying Put 2014).

By examining and deconstructing differing visualizations of social housing, *Southwark Notes* highlights the power of digital media to produce and maintain – but also challenge and question – common notions of life at the Heygate. Collaborative, self-motivated, socio-technical innovations resist the totalizing generalizations of abstract representations of council housing by demonstrating that other sociospatial processes occur beneath, behind and in spite of dominant visual ideologies.



NOTE

[1] Krista Brumley and Kevin Fox Gotham's conceptual tool, "using space" builds upon the "navigative" possibilities inherent in Bourdieu's *habitus* concept by focusing on the transitional link between socio-economic constraints and survival tactics employed by tenants in order to go about their daily lives. (Brumley & Gotham 2002).

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