Living through housing policy changes in twentieth-century England: some implications for today

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There were significant changes in the housing sector in mid–late twentieth-century England that are now attracting research interest, in particular in terms of the extent to which these changes affected people’s well-being and participation in community life. Information about people who rented accommodation in the private sector is particularly elusive, not to mention those who moved into (and out of) home ownership. The story of one artist’s experience of changes in the private rental sector of the 1950s and of their sequelae is provided, based upon auto/biographic and historical documents. This sets the scene for considering how these experiences might have been tied both to a sense of belonging in a community and a place, and resonate beyond this circumscribed story in the expanding and problematic private rental sector of today. It concludes with an assessment of the value of an auto/biographical and historical research lens.

Keywords: private rental sector; auto/biography; belonging; dwelling; social history

Introduction

There were significant changes in the housing sector in mid–late twentieth-century England that are now attracting research interest, in particular in terms of the extent to which these changes affected people’s well-being and participation in community life (Crook & Kemp, 2011; Gibson, Thomson, Kearns, & Petticrew, 2011; Tunstall, 2012). The trend, despite critiques at the time that are now seen as part of a stereotyped political fight, seems to be that the outcomes were primarily positive for the former residents of sub-standard accommodation, albeit creating more circumscribed social circles and with a rare few reporting some sense of loss of community.

Against a background of limited and context-specific data, slum clearance programmes are easier to research than is the ‘residual’ private rental sector of the period, one that nowadays plays an increasingly significant role in housing people on low incomes in both England and Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, in ABC Online; Ball, 2010; Kemp, 2011; Walker & Niner, 2010). In these two countries (where this life history is played out), house prices are rising beyond most people’s finances, and, whilst the growth in the private rental sector is unevenly distributed across jurisdictions and demographic groups, renting for life is an increasing probability amongst low-to middle-income earners (The Centre for Social Justice, 2013; Fenton, 2010; National Housing Federation, 2014; Stone, 2013; Stone, Burke, Hulse, & Ralston, 2013; Vitis, 2014).

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Ware, & Gronda, 2010; Wood, Smith, Ong, & Cigdem, 2013). Investment has widened rather than deepened, and the private rental sector is dominated by small-scale landlords, most of whom (and, therefore, most of whose properties) are highly vulnerable to changes in the wider economic market (Stone et al., 2013; Theseira, 2013). Larger scale investors may not provide greater security: the Church Commissioners, as recently as 2005, sold the Octavia Hill estate in SW1, disregarding tenants’ evidence that those in already-sold properties were suffering large rent increases and that people had had to leave (Boyle, 2006; Clancy, 2008; Collinson, 2006).

It is projected that between one-fifth and a quarter of households are likely to be housed in the private rental sector within the decade, with rent-free housing with friends and family catering for an unknown proportion of otherwise homeless people (Pearce 2013; Stone 2013; Stone et al., 2013; Theseira 2013). Tenancies do not disadvantage some people, particularly young students and the well-to-do who choose tenancy over home ownership or who are building towards home ownership; however, the sector also houses new migrants unable to obtain mortgages, people who have some educational qualifications but little money, and, increasingly, those whose life circumstances render them vulnerable to homelessness, and who are often on some form of housing support (low-paid workers with children, retired pensioners, disabled people and people who are unemployed) (Ball, 2010; Fenton 2010; Pearce 2013; Smith, 2012; Stone et al., 2013; Walker & Niner, 2010). With no savings, and no capacity to save, these tenants face financial housing stress, experience housing insecurity (mobility, housing instability, lack of privacy, feeling unsafe, lack of belonging and lack of physical comfort), and their high rentals bleed into their non-housing needs (e.g. diet, education and medical care) (Vitis et al., 2010, pp. 9–12). Living conditions are deteriorating, particularly for the ‘strugglers’ (30% of those renting, who have difficulties paying their rent) and ‘backsliders’ (10%, who once owned homes) (Yates et al., 2007, in Vitis et al., 2010, p. 11).

At a time, then, when the private rental sector is a growing feature of the housing landscape about which there are many questions (Lowe, 2007; Smith, 2012; Walker & Niner, 2010), exploring the impacts of 1950s changes may be of value. This paper follows up on Tunstall and Lowe’s (2012) suggestion that, because of the paucity of reliable data from the period, case studies and biographical accounts could be useful (Tunstall & Lowe, 2012, p. 10). It describes one artist’s experiences, stimulated by research into my family’s history.

With its focus on one woman and her connection to a particular community, this study is highly context-specific, and, given that it deals primarily with a minority in just one London suburb and my mother’s idiosyncratic later sojourns across England and New South Wales, all it can do is suggest the potential of fine-grained explorations in other contexts. In its favour, nonetheless, are several factors: my parents’ selection of where to live was not a forced choice, meaning that a sense of belonging was likely; I inherited and have had access to a variety of materials that concern my mother’s life, family and friends; and writers who lived in Hampstead wrote about their experiences of the place, so there is unsolicited material available that can negate or corroborate my potentially biased perceptions.

In this paper, I provide a means of conceptualising the nature of place, dwelling, belonging and identity in the urban context, consider the nature and limitations of the data upon which I am drawing, and summarise the history of Hampstead as it relates both to the street in which my family lived and to changes in housing and housing policy. I then consider, through the lens of my mother’s life, what it meant to her to belong in Hampstead in the 1940s and 1950s, and the consequences of the 1957 Rent Act for
her sense of belonging. The paper concludes with a summation of what this life narrative reveals about dwelling and belonging, and how this understanding might be of relevance to the private rental sector today.

**Conceptualising place and belonging**

A sense of belonging is intimately connected to a sense of place (Smith, 2011). Sense of place has attracted an increasing level of interest amongst urban studies scholars concerned about globalisation, population mobility and sustainability, and its potential value in addressing forced relocations, planning safe environments and fostering pro-environmental behaviour (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006; London SE1 Website Team, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Even so, how people come to feel they belong, and how they develop connections with others, is ill understood (Doff, 2010, p. 1), perhaps because who we are emerges in and through place (Malpas, 2007, p. 6, 2012, p. 3). Thus, notions of place and belonging resist reductive analysis, because they are constructed through enculturated and historical mutual relations at every level, always involving relationships of inside and outside, limits and possibilities, in a particular person’s and group’s (unfinished) journey through a particular time (Malpas, 2012, pp. 2–4).

Heidegger, writing in the decade after the Second World War, argued that dwellings in a place are an extension of our identity as human beings: ‘We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because […] we are dwellers’ (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 2–3). Dwelling in a place suggests familiarity with that place, and a sense of putting down roots, doing things there, staying close and so connected that we are part of it and it is part of us, pervading relationships with other places, people and objects – we belong to it as it belongs to us (Malpas, 2007, p. 76). People seek to dwell in places where they feel secure, can work on ways of coping with local and personal stressors, and confirm their norms, values and identities. According to Wheeler (2013), Heidegger suggested that ‘technology’ – an exploitative approach to the world, people and experiences, detached from processes of gathering and fashioning natural materials in artisanal ways – has closed off western societies from dwelling, ultimately reducing people to not-beings (Wheeler, 2013, section 3.3).

However, that Heidegger subscribed to National Socialism renders his poetic interpretation of what it means to dwell in a place suspect (this involves ‘the fourfold’, a unity of earth, sky, divinities – historico-cultural heroes – and awareness of mortality) (Malpas, 2007, pp. 18–23; Wheeler, 2013). Ardoin (2006), eschewing the assertion that notions of place and belonging are resistant to reductive analysis, separates the interconnected aspects of place and time into four distinct components: psychological place (place attachment), from which people derive a sense of self, a personal history and an anticipated future; social place, which is derived from the cultural processes, social networks and familial ties in specific places; political place, where the norms of collaborative action related to place-based interests and needs are founded; and biophysical place, which is derived from direct experiences (Ardoin, 2006; Ardoin, Schoh, & Gould, 2012). Nonetheless, these categories need to be viewed as research devices, rather than distinctions one would find in accounts of the lived experience of being and belonging in a place (Dewey, 1975, pp. 20–22, 44; Flaherty & Fine, 2001, p. 2).

Questions about urban built forms are, then, inherently political and ontological (de Beistegui, 2003, p. 140), and what these notions might mean in concrete terms, or an individual’s identity and trajectory is necessarily elusive. Whilst I suspect my mother lived the narrative of a ‘unitary’, potentially self-actualising individual (hero) with a
legible trajectory in an identifiable plot, her story illustrates an embodied and ecologically situated conception of the self that ties identities very closely to being in the world, and therefore to place. Bodies (active, sensate, responsive, creative, volitional, communicative, speculative and changing) act on and are acted on by objects, artefacts and people in the environment, and these activities form sensory and neural functions that, with repetition, become durable, but nonetheless adaptable, patterns of being (Burkitt, 1999, pp. 33–36, 85–88; Layton, 2004, p. 13). A sense of self, then, is embedded in and emerges out of relationships with and in particular places and times.

Aiming out of this relationship between inside and outside, bodies and places, self and other, in terms of natural and built environments, different places are derived from, and evoke, different states of being, different practices and differing relational assumptions in particular places over time, drawing on available landforms, space and materials (Seamon, 2000). Interpretations of these places and assumptions about them are political and contested: housing design in a place like Hampstead might reflect the otherness of the working class in row housing, the material aspirations of the middle class in Italianate terraces, or contemporary environmental concerns through construction regulations; dwellers and outsiders alike might have quite different interpretations, both initially and as the place changes. The resulting visually distinct and diverse places, created and experienced over time, constitute the ‘character’ of the place, and can attract people to a place who will have a heightened sense of belonging (defined in terms of participation and recognised membership of communities within a place) and more satisfactory lives because of that choice (Marsh, Bradley, Love, Alexander, & Norham, 2007; Seamon, 2000; Smith, 2011).

**An auto/biographical case**

Given the challenges in translating the intricacies of place perception and of belonging into practice and research, urban studies research since the 1990s has increasingly drawn on interpretive research traditions, to the extent that these have been described as the ‘new orthodoxy’ (Jacobs, 2008, chapter 11; Maginn, Thompson, & Tonts, 2008, chapter 1). A common range of approaches would include case studies that aim to capture these complexities, through, for example, community stories, observations, interviews and public forums, supported by triangulation with other data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stake, 1995; Van Maanen, 1999).

An interpretive stance also underlies auto/biographical and historical research, where remembered and recorded experiences and events are reviewed and re-storied in the light of current understandings. An auto/biographical approach emphasises the individual’s place in a nexus of social connections, historical events and life experiences, rendering ideas such as ‘belonging’ or ‘community’ more accessible, going beyond the individual to address the lives of groups, and potentially undermining official or outsider interpretations of events (Allport, 1942, in Scott, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Griffiths, 1995; Kader, 2005; Rak, 2005; Roberts, 2002; Stanley, 1995). An historical interpretation requires a hermeneutic process of tacking between individual events and meanings, and reviewing them in the light of the initial question/s and an emergent whole, then re-framing and reconstructing these in iterative cycles that build towards a scholarly argument (Hallett, 2007, chapter 10; Lewenson & Krohn Herrmann, 2007).

As a hermeneutic process, then, in this exploration of my mother’s life, there is no coding system for the data, besides a crude analysis of correspondence, rather, the process has combined a search for isolated needles in several large haystacks, set alongside...
my recollections of her, the conversations we did and did not have, and the griefs and joys she did and did not share, interspersed with emergent perceptions of what I was reading. My initial aim had been to create a record for my children, and the process began with transcribing my mother’s writing, and noticing that the factual descriptions ceased in the mid-1930s. Other documents (letters, published autobiographies, leasing agreements, etc.), along with my recollections and diaries were drawn upon to try and fill in the gaps in her life story; only at the end of this process did the question come up as to whether the 1957 Rent Act might have been the critical turning point in my mother’s life. This generated a more careful reading of the existing materials, and a search for other documents that might expand my understanding, and so on in an iterative process. Besides my recollections of the period, then, the second type of document is the correspondence, leases and press clippings my mother kept, which came to me when she died; in all, there were 166 items. Then, too, I had kept the 25 letters I had received from my mother — the bulk of these sent in years when we felt close enough to each other to tell each other what we were doing. Other materials upon which I drew included those found on the Camden local history site and the leads they provided to key authors on Hampstead; internet searches, which yielded original nineteenth-century texts as well as contemporary official websites with historical pages; online bookshops selling second-hand copies of out-of-date books; and my own recollections and personal library.

Interpretive case studies can be assessed on their trustworthiness, defined as trusting the account enough to act upon it (Griffiths, 1995, p. 78). The validity of the interpretations lies in the richness and holistic nature of the accounts, the transparency of researcher involvement, as well as the extent to which the story resonates beyond its immediate context. The central issue becomes how the reader can dialogue with the narrative, recognise themselves in it, and read it against the grain, so that their active engagement generates insights out of the writer’s purview (Pickering, 2008).

Scepticism is essential. Auto/biographies are written for an imagined audience, constructing a coherent trajectory out of remembered events and experiences (Allport, 1942, in Scott, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stanley, 1995), and, to be effective, they need to capture feelings as well as facts, meaning that they may be a manipulatively seductive read. Moreover, they address matters with connotations that are perhaps inaccessible to ‘outsiders’, articulated with difficulty by ‘insiders’, and which are not reducible to an impartial account (Berger & Luckmann, 1985; Malpas, 2007, 2012). In her autobiography, my mother tried to capture her formative years, largely keeping to happy times and, later, her spiritual experiences. My interpretation of the missing aspects of the 1950s is based on my reified childhood understandings; anyone who could clarify and modify these is long gone. My position in the story is therefore complex and obscure — as Berger and Luckmann once said about the validity of sociological knowledge, you cannot push the bus in which you are riding (Berger & Luckmann, 1985, p. 11). There are, though, traces of a confessional tale — personalised, and perhaps self-absorbed, self-pitying and self-congratulatory (Webster, 2008, p. 68). My biases may lie in the fact that the eviction formed a disjuncture in my life, too; that my relationship with my mother was often uneasy; and that the types of work in which I have been involved have revolved around social justice (including action research into caravan living by families and the de-institutionalisation of disabled people; research on, and teaching in, crime prevention through environmental design in the context of police education reform; and teaching across cultures in the higher education context, particularly engineering, to name those with a housing focus). However, bitterness at
lost housing and economic opportunities is not one of my drivers; I am a player in the private rental sector ‘cottage industry’ (Crook & Kemp, 2011, p. 179), and my retirement is funded, in part, by investment property. I have as much to learn as any other landlord.

Ethical considerations preclude identification of some of the characters in this story, not the least of whom is my father, whose perspectives I have excluded. Whilst my mother, in handing me her autobiography in the hope that I would prepare it for publication, clearly gave consent for me to use what she had written, there were deliberate gaps. In order to go beyond her story, because I think the gaps in the story are the critical elements in addressing the question of the impacts of policy changes in the housing sector in the 1950s and beyond on individuals and their sense of belonging to a place and in communities, I have made my family members, and the people upon whose letters I draw, anonymous. Most helpfully, records from this period that might assist in identifying any players in this particular story are scant.

A changing Hampstead

In the 1800s, over 90% of Britain’s population was renting, often as sub-lessees (Cahill, 2001; Crook & Kemp, 2011). The primary land-owners were the Crown, aristocrats and large institutions, such as the Church of England, and the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge (Cahill, 2001; Spencer, 2000). The sale of some of these estates to developers, both for working-class housing as industrialisation took off, and for the burgeoning middle classes who wanted to rent homes commensurate with their changed status, have, in combination with a far-reaching range of political, legal and economic factors and housing policy changes, transformed the physical and social environment (Rodger, 2011).

Hampstead has long been seen as a residential district for the well-to-do; its public face was derived from its topography, its position away from the industrial heartland of London, land ownership characteristics in the area before the 1820s which allowed the retention of the Heath (the only ungroomed landscape in London), and the intended clientele of the developers of the small number of estates (Thompson, 1974, p. 3). In terms of where my parents were to rent in 1939, the 26 large Italianate terraces of Belsize Crescent, each with 10–14 rooms, and with a mews of three-roomed terraced ‘cottages’ at the bottom of the hill, were developed in 1865 on church land for the middle classes. In 1898, residents in this area still tended to be slightly more comfortably off than those in the rest of Hampstead (Booth, in Thompson, 1974, pp. 47–49).

An overall decline in the English private rental sector gained momentum as the First World War got underway, when rent controls were introduced, as a temporary measure, to reduce profiteering in high-demand industrial areas (Crook & Kemp, 2011, p. 4). After the war, the housing shortage worsened, and this meant rent controls were both continued and expanded between 1919 and 1939, leaving only new builds exempt. Early in this same period, the Government also introduced subsidies for local authorities and private builders, as well as social housing, and owner-occupation rose (by 1938, only 58% of the housing stock was rented); importantly in a place like Hampstead, private rentals, and the poor, became concentrated in the older housing stock (Crook & Kemp, 2011, pp. 4–6; Lund, 2012/2013; Rodger, 2011).

The predominant picture of the living circumstances of those in the cheap accommodation in 1930s Hampstead was that of ‘mingy, lower-middle-class decency’ (Orwell, 1989, p. 23). This was, though, ‘the most significant and influential period’ in Hampstead’s cultural history (Stanton, 1976, p.1420), and, as a cheap place to live where a
bohemian lifestyle was possible (art for art’s sake with scant attention to money), it was ‘filled with writing people and haunted by young poets despairing over the poor and the world’ (Grigson, 1984 and Muir, 1954, in Norrie, 1987, pp. 91, 92). Resident leading British artists and writers, highly involved in the anti-fascist movement that was communism in those times, attracted and supported European refugees, mainly painters. The percentage of foreign-born residents in Hampstead rose from 4.9% in 1921 to 6.4% in 1931 and had reached 16.4% in 1951 (Elrington, Baker, Bolton, & Croot, 1989).

By 1942, ‘seediness and dilapidation were in the air’ (Thompson, 1974, p. 431), with lack of maintenance being the main issue. Bed-sitting rooms multiplied (Thompson, 1974, pp. 428, 431). Air raids briefly regenerated a sense of community, but, other than this, any sense of social cohesion was confined to ‘certain select groups, artists or left-wing intellectuals [who] were highly successful in forming vital, close-knit, elitist communities in the formal structure of Hampstead’ (Thompson, 1974, p. 422). By 1952, there were about 133 clubs, from the general or literary, through art and films, ballet and drama, music, politics, sports, science, a protection society and many branches of national organisations. The creative arts thrived, despite the poverty: the Hampstead Artists Council (HAC)’s open-air art shows was a place where you could find ‘struggling artists’ displaying their work (British Pathé, 1952).

Britain’s post-war housing situation was particularly problematic. Bombing, demobilisation and the baby boom made the supply inadequate, but money, materials and skilled labour were lacking (Mathieson, n.d.). Immediately following the war, the Labour government, in the spirit of Keynesian economics and a commitment to the welfare state, had given local authorities sole responsibility for its house-building programme (Glynn, 2009, p. 22). When the Conservatives were returned to power in October 1951, a series of rent-related acts took power back from the local authorities, focusing on redeveloping private property. In 1954, the Rent and Repairs Act, for example, allowed for small increases in rent once repairs had been made (Crook & Kemp, 2011, p. 9) – a change viewed with suspicion by left-wingers (e.g. Sommerfield, 1954). First World War rent controls, later consolidated, extended, and amended, were finally repealed in 1957, with the Rent Act.

In Hampstead, the Council ‘tidied up’ some less appealing areas, providing ‘high standards of accommodation’ in ambitious developments for low-income families (Thompson, 1974, pp. 432–433). However, in Belsize Crescent, where the Church owned the land, there was another driver of change. In 1951, the Ecclesiastical Commission’s firm of consultant surveyors, Cluttons, recommended that the church sell off the freeholds before the leases reverted to them, to avoid handling decayed housing stock. By 1953, everything the Dean and Chapter of Westminster owned in Belsize Crescent had been sold to ‘obscure property companies’ (Thompson, 1974, p. 432).

Belsize Crescent became part of the wider trend away from private rentals. In 1953, the proportion of renters in the housing sector had dropped slightly, from 58% in 1938, to 53%; by 1961, it had fallen to 31.9%; by 1971, it had fallen to 18.9%; and, then, after the 1988 low point, it began to rise (Balchin, 2003, p. 212; Crook & Kemp, 2011, p. 8; Haffner, Hoekstra, & Oxley, 2009, p. 37). The largest percentage drop, then, in privately rented housing was in the period between 1951 and 1961 (a drop of just over 20%).

In terms of the magnitude of the effects of these changes, compulsory purchase orders for houses that were classified as slum dwellings had the biggest, and the most public, impact. The literature on slum clearances suggests that, whilst these clearances forced moves, dispersed neighbourhoods and modified social circles, the positive effects
of the change to better quality housing probably outweighed the disadvantages (Kearns & Mason, 2013, p. 177; Tunstall, 2012, pp. 23–24). Certainly, around that time, it was possible to express the view that the social life of the slums was not a precious flower in need of transplanting, and that, in any case, people did not necessarily like their neighbours or friends (Cullingworth, 1960, as quoted in Tunstall, 2012, pp. 26, 29). This represents a very narrow conception of the relationships between individuals, their homes, their communities and the local economy, as well as the intangibles of belonging. It also underplays the potentially deleterious effects on individuals and communities of the changes. In terms of individuals’ experiences, Stef Pixner (1985), a Hampstead contemporary, provides an excerpt from her diary:

Mum is tired these days and worried about money. She was crying today because we are going to be moved from this home very soon. Mrs Grant from downstairs bet me two bob we will have to move out in two months. It’s this damned Rent Act that will come into force. Our rent will go up, and hundreds of people have already had notice to quit. So my brother thought of throwing a home-made bomb at Henry Brooke the housing minister’s expensive house. (Pixner, 1985, p. 94)

In terms of communities, as the 2012 BBC programmes on the secret history of England’s streets reveal, it was small business people who had the most to lose and who initially fought successfully against clearance activity, in Deptford at least (The Open Learning Team, 2012). Those who had a stake in a place appeared to have remained, whilst those whose social life was not a precious flower left – altering the ‘balance’ of the community within a few years. Were the Hampstead artists the equivalent of Deptford High street shopkeepers, at risk of losing the communities that sustained them?

**My mother in the 1930s**

This is where I move into one family’s story of belonging, starting in the 1930s, when my mother had obtained a place at the Royal College of Art (RCA), and moved to London from her staid middle-class home in the north. It is probable that, on my mother’s arrival in Chelsea, her first home, she had to search hard for a room without bed bugs or wallpaper heaving from the maggots – even luxurious hotels were filthy behind the scenes (Nicholson, 1941; Redman, 2012). However, in recollecting these years, my mother was more interested in what it was she was able to do in the metropolis than in describing her housing situation. Indeed, her ‘home’ was elsewhere. She wrote:

> Our home is that wonderful palace of treasures, the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is silent in those huge, stately rooms. The stories of Gormanghast are based on this labyrinth, and we spend most of the first year exploring and making studies of its mysteries. We gaze in fascination at stained glass windows, medieval embroideries, Islamic tiles, French and German wooden sculpture, the great Bed of Ware, in which five couples could sport the night away, watched only by the rich Spanish lustres. […]

Entertainment is amazingly cheap, and, even living on a pittance, one could visit the Old Vic or Sadlers Wells for a shilling in the ‘gods’. […] You could go to the Bond Street galleries to see the latest exhibitions of Paul Klee, or Picasso, or Dali. You could go and see Henry Woods at the Prom concerts. There was the Old Vic with Laurence Olivier […]. There were the riches of the British Museum […]. I saw the Impressionists and Van Gogh and it made all the art I had seen before in places like the […] Gallery look like brown soup.
The RCA had originally been established, at the time of the Great Exhibition, to produce designers who would ensure high quality in the industrial production of pots (cultural capital drawing on aesthetic values typical of the leisured classes, oriented towards middle-class consumers) (Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1986, p. 82). When my mother was studying, the focus had switched to studio potteries, small-scale commercial ventures in which pots carried the stamp of the individual potter, and traces of the fingers and thumbs drawing up the clay could still be seen. Some of the socialisation was clearly at what Bourdieu called the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of cultural capital; according to my mother, one staff member, when a student complained about his teaching, stormed out of his disciplinary interview with the words, ‘I don’t teach, I create an atmosphere!’ But it was the thirties, and the Great Depression, and, following her father’s injunction to ‘Never be poor’, having completed the extra year of teacher training for which she was eligible, my mother then began her working life as a school teacher.

In early 1939, my parents married and moved into a large maisonette in Hampstead, where they were to stay for 20 years, with the rent frozen at its pre-war level (Crook & Kemp, 2011, p. 8). The maisonette had five rooms, three on the first floor and two in the basement – originally the public and service areas, respectively. Importantly, there was room in the passageway for a ceiling-height kiln, and for a kick wheel in the pantry. There was room, too, for a lodger to help pay the rent. My mother summarised this period of her life thus:

Came the war. Never a prayer said I, even though the buzz bombs and the V2s crashed around us. In the 1930s, six years was spent in training as an artist; before 1940 I was married, and by 1950 I was the mother of three children. In 1940 my husband was in the air force, and sent to Africa where he contracted dysentery and malaria, leaving him weighing only six stone and with brain damage. He could not remember anything from one minute to the next, so clung on to me like a child. However, he could still do his accounting work very well, so could earn a living, but not really enough for five of us. I therefore reentered the teaching world, and became a tutor in child art in the teachers’ training department of London University. (11 August, 1987)

Belonging in Hampstead

At this point, I move on to the ways in which my mother might have felt she belonged in and to the Hampstead of this period, starting with formal memberships of four organisations: the Hampstead Artists Council; the Artists International Association; the Asian Music Circle; and Subud.

- The HAC was founded in 1944 by UNESCO Arts Councillor, Richard Carline and fellow artist, Fred Uhlman. My mother was amongst the founding members, helping establish the three-month-long weekend open-air art show near the Heath in summer in 1949.
- She was a member of, and exhibited with, the Artists International Association, which was founded in 1933 as a left-of-centre political organisation, with the aim of promoting the ‘Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy and Cultural Development’. Most British artists working between 1933 and 1971, when it ceased to exist, were associated with it.
She was a member of the *Asian Music Circle*, set up in about 1953 to introduce eastern culture to Britain through regular concerts featuring, for example, Ravi Shankar and Ram Gopal.

Finally, from the 1956, there was *Subud*, an international and non-denominational spiritual movement, through which she was later to sell some of her work.

These communities had both social and cultural capital, and an important financial function for those exhibiting their work or performing.

What I remember of my childhood is what was called, at the time, its bohemianism – cultural and social capital without economic capital. It was my mother in her Finnish dirndl and open-toed sandals, when others’ mothers wore Chanel-style suits and black court shoes. It was the fancy-dress parties, with paper sculptures around the walls that she cut without a pattern, to which famous people came. It was Richard Carline, chair of the *HAC* and the tramp with his pram packed with all he owned who turned up occasionally, who would both sit in the same collapsing armchair for a cup of tea. It was the ping of pots as they cooled on the oak table under which the family had hidden during the war, and the clay dust that was swept into corners. It was the summer weekend traipses up to the open-air art show to exhibit (and sell) the pots, the flowers for which my brother and I picked from around the public lavatories opposite. It was the Sunday walks on the Heath, where our mother would point out this or that colour, texture, plant or vista. It was our varied neighbours, from the German inventor of an anti-gravity machine, through the author whose visitors included Dylan Thomas, to the hardware store manager who lived in the basement flat next door.

This was a rich, urban life of interconnectedness between places, diverse people, activities and the local economy. However, by the early 1950s, family finances became an increasing problem, despite the 24% increase in real incomes of the poorest people that were typical of the period (Crook & Kemp, 2011, p. 8; Royle, 2012, p. 173). By the early 1950s, my mother’s part-time teaching had become very difficult. A loan from her father allowed her to turn what had once been the lodger’s room into a large studio with two kick wheels and to take on a few private pupils. This was not a profitable venture, and new problems followed. Her father died, and my mother was one of many who joined Subud at about this time. She thought its spiritual practices helped her through the crisis of what was called in those days a ‘nervous breakdown’. Whatever the dynamics, she was eventually hospitalised for several months.

Meanwhile, the *Rent Act* of 1957 decontrolled most rents, at which point, newly empowered, landlords simply found ways to get rid of their tenants, and rents began to rise; Flask Walk, for example, ‘was seized from longstanding working class families and converted into luxury “bijou period residences”’ (Carter, in Norrie, 1987, p. 174). All tenants in the 19 properties owned by our landlady in and around Hampstead were given notice to quit. Some quickly complied. My parents kept returning to court to fight the order, but this was an individualised battle, not a coordinated struggle. The left, members of which I remember being in my mother’s network, was still reeling from grasping the full extent of Stalin’s terror and the Hungarian Revolution (Smith, 1978, p. 151). For us there were several court cases, but eventually the bailiffs came. They gave my mother and sister a half hour to gather some things, standing at the front door and making jokes about my sister having to put on her ‘Helena Rubenstein’®.

Nowadays I imagine it was the lack of any viable alternative, and both of my parents’ weakened planning capacities and relationship, that had kept the family in the maisonette when they lost the last court case. The eviction was also the death knell for my
parents’ marriage. It followed some time after the policy-driven relocation of my father’s employer to a new town. As my mother had refused to move from Hampstead, my father lodged cheaply in a monastery near his work and effectively my mother had become head of a single parent family. There was no place for my father in the two rooms in a boarding house on the maligned Willoughby Road that was found after a week of separate living with various friends and acquaintances.

The family was allowed a day for friends to take out what could be taken out, and the windows and door were immediately barred and boarded (it was still boarded up one year later). Of course, the kiln and the rest of the studio materials that were not useful to others, or were too bulky, were left behind. After all, the remaining four of us were about to cram into two rooms. Thus began two years of transience in increasingly expensive inadequate accommodation, before we were priced out and moved north to live with our widowed grandmother in her small semi-detached house, leaving behind what had been left of our furniture.

**Nowhere to dwell**

After two years up north, my mother returned to Hampstead, illegally sub-letting a friend’s high-quality Hampstead Garden Suburb Council flat for several years. When she revealed what she was doing, she was told to go, and she and the remaining family temporarily moved into a house that was to be demolished to make way for a road. Afterwards, she stored what was left of the family’s possessions in a friend’s garage; but a discontented wife destroyed these as rubbish, so she joined friends in the country. There, she negotiated a price for half of a tumbledown cottage with a well 50 yards away, before saying she could only afford to pay in half-yearly installments. Luckily for her, the farmer accepted the odd deal. She used a £50 pounds pools win to buy a caravan to live in during the reconstruction, and borrowed the rest of the money from Hampstead friends. Within a year, she had found a better place, put a deposit down (borrowed), and then eventually after being lent the whole purchase price in £50 lots by a number of friends for the second home, sold the first at a profit. Thus began a decade of renovating dilapidated cottages in the countryside, always near at least one old friend but never where there were enough people of like mind to feel she belonged, interspersed with stays with various members of her family, particularly her mother.

Her mother’s death, and that fact the two of the children lived in Australia, contributed to her spending the last 20 years of her life ricocheting between England and Australia, always bringing boxes full of her artwork and some furniture, not always fully unpacked. Whilst, in her Australian stints, I would help with her accommodation on arrival, her subsequent moves (searches for artistic companions that never lived up to her expectations) were always in train before she mentioned them. In England, her letters from the mid-1980s when four-fifths of housing was either privately owned or reserved for the most disadvantaged (Heywood, 2011, pp. 7–8), reveal the difficulties she faced:

- January 1984: accompanied by a Hampstead friend, she bought a caravan for her intended home and a geodesic dome to display her pots (‘and please keep my pension coming’);
- July 1984: ‘I’ve not been too successful in finding somewhere to live’ – she just missed out on a derelict farm at £10 pounds a week, and said she was arranging an illegal sub-let for £25 per week (and she’d just done 12 watercolours);
- September 1984: she moved into a semi-basement with room for a kiln, wheel and weaving, with friends up the hill (she was receiving the pension, had sold a few watercolours at £16 each, and some jerseys she’d knitted at £35 each);
- January 1985: a thief had stolen her cheques and letters, and her semi-basement was so damp she had become ill and had moved out;
- January 1985: ‘I’ve had a pretty dreadful time since I’ve been here, searching, searching for a home’, and she had put a deposit on a caravan in a council park where the manager would give her the former gents’ toilet as a pottery;
- March 1985: ‘Rented accommodation is almost non-existent and I haven’t enough cash to buy. So now I feel really depressed about it all, and am thinking of returning to Australia’. She mentioned making contact with a major art gallery about her work.

These letters to me are typical of the documents my mother kept: income, creativity, recognition and home are the issues that predominate, and those from her friends tell similar, albeit less dramatic, tales of difficulties in pursuing their art, wrangled accommodation and lack of income. Just under a half of the correspondence comprised official documents, and over a third were from friends: the majority of letters (22%) came from seven long-standing HAC friends, and smaller proportions were from Subud friends (9%) and fellow weavers or potters (7%). Ten per cent of the documents are invoices for the odd paintings she had sold, with two dockets for kilns and pottery equipment. Another 8% are carbon copies of letters to, or letters from, people who might have helped her publish her 1970s novel, her later poems and spiritual insights (largely polite rejection slips), or the video of her life’s work she had commissioned. The clippings, 4% of the material she kept, concern Hampstead friends.

In terms of potential dwelling places, she lodged, rented and bought at the bottom of the market, but stayed nowhere long enough to put down any roots or to ameliorate her increasingly precarious finances as she lost money on hastily selected properties; where I organised her rentals, the places offered considerable amenity; where she organised them, she sometimes put herself at risk, including one crime-prone flat near a railway station in which a hallucinating young man broke down the door and attempted to strangle her (she was 81 at the time). She would join pottery and weaving groups in Australia, but saw herself as a professional amongst amateurs, and she lacked the identity-bolstering creative dialogue with other professional artists (however impoverished) amongst whom she had lived, and for whose company she craved. Attempts to rekindle relationships during her stays in England also failed, and, although I have no access to the reasons, I suspect that this might relate to the difficulties of relying upon one friend rather than a network. Rather than migration being a journey to another identity (Hall, 1999), her migrations appear to me to have been driven by a desire to reclaim a lost identity and to belong.

For me, the document that had most poignancy, in terms of the loss of intellectual and creative companionship and a fitting place in the world, was an email sent by a distant relative, reporting on my mother’s condition in a nursing home in England after a stroke, not long after another stressful move. The stroke had paralysed her left side, but had left her cognition intact. It is clear our relative forwarded the nursing home director’s cut and pasted information about the ersatz ‘community’.

She appears to be happy and making lots of friends, according to the Super […] She is also involved in all sorts of ventures and loving every minute of it. They keep her
occupied. She also attends a day centre three times a week, and they have a grand old time of it. Now that summer is approaching, they will go on trips. [...]

In fact, my mother hated it there, and had stopped eating. She died a few weeks later.

**Concluding remarks**

As her daughter, I would say that my mother was creative, intelligent, unconventional, self-absorbed, and, in later life, whilst still hopeful and fascinating, was difficult to live with and had impaired problem-solving skills. She had dwelt in a dilapidated and bohemian part of Hampstead for over 20 years, putting down roots and confirming her identity as artist in and through the place, perhaps particularly strongly because of her artisanal practice and its related diverse, cross-cultural and engaging social and creative life. The particularities of the place, alongside the broader social, political and economic drivers and sequelae of the 1957 Rent Act, were such that she never found an equivalent dwelling, even in her initially successful forays into home ownership, and despite her pleasure in the natural world. She was probably not alone in experiencing a loss of belonging, nor being left with a postal relationship with the diaspora, and an ongoing desire to recreate what had been lost.

It has been suggested that an individual’s story can resonate beyond its original context to encompass others’ lives (Kader, 2005, p.1; Rak, 2005, p. 3; Stanley, 1995, p. 63). As a worst-case scenario, my narrative will be seen as an appeal for sympathy, an expiation of guilt for not playing a more effective role in my mother’s life, or a demonstration of the ways in which vulnerable people fail to look after themselves. On the other hand, my mother’s story may resonate with readers at a personal level, in terms of parents’ desires to see their resilient and promising children fulfil that promise when the future is not looking good (Never be poor), or children’s incapacity to influence a parent’s judgements about what best to do (as was the case with me). As such, it gives subjective life to the ‘otherness’ of objective accounts of the people in the growing private rental sector who are known to be at risk, and whose marginal links to communities, often attributed to personal failings, are seen as constituting a wider social risk. In terms of belonging, my mother’s life suggests that this develops over time amongst congenial people in shared community-relevant activities in particular places, and it is not necessarily or simply the quality of the housing or the place, nor ownership vs. tenancy, that are the issues, but the interconnections between and co-constitution of psychological, social, political and biophysical place and the opportunities that housing offers to foster all these aspects of belonging. More importantly, however, in the context of this paper, this auto/biography unusually provides longitudinal, sequential evidence about the ways in which the broader structures of opportunity and constraint in the housing market were interwoven with my mother’s agency and sense of belonging (May, 2000; Mayock & Sheridan, 2012); her story illustrates that resilience is not just an individual matter (Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013). In my mother’s case, historical happenstances that influenced her capacity to dwell in Hampstead included the rise of Nazism, which enhanced intellectual and creative life there before and after the war; the Second World War itself, which hit home; and the demise of communism, which meant that the pre-war voice of renters was silenced. More broadly, her life chances were structured by land and home ownership patterns and policies, as well as gendered childcare and opportunities for employment and success in her chosen profession.
The potentially deleterious intersection of housing policies with unpredictable yet progressive vulnerability that resonates through my mother’s story is re-emerging in the contemporary private rental sector. Renting for life – not necessarily a bad thing – is an increasing probability; disadvantaged clusters of insecure tenancies house approximately 10% of the population who are in some form of distress. It would be ill-advised to wait for these renters’ auto/biographies to be written before reviewing the impacts of any contemporary housing policy changes. The early warning sign of media reports of dissent is also too late. As suggested by welfare economics, mechanisms are needed to capture life-enhancing and/or potentially deleterious impacts as policies are developed for, and implemented in, dynamic economic, political, demographic and sociocultural environments where imperfect information, limited resources and uncertainty about conditions, motives and the feasibility of intended outcomes are to be expected, to allow for adjustments in the light of this emergent data.

As pragmatic tests of policy directions, and setting aside the improbable task of locating and interrogating other auto/biographies, close attention could also be paid to promising responses across many countries to the problems of displacement and insecurity in, and the changing demographics of, the private rental sector. These include shared equity housing and community land trusts (Norway, Sweden, the United States and Canada), the education of landlords and tenants (Europe), ensuring good governance and standards (Australia), and longer tenancy agreements (Ireland) (Crook & Kemp, 2011; Galligan, 2007; Goodman et al., 2013; O’Sullivan & De Decker, 2007; Sen, 2013, in Malik, 2013; Vitis et al., 2010).

Lastly, there remain the questions of validity and trustworthiness in such a particular and highly edited story, and one with such an opaque interpretive process. Unfortunately, confining the narrative to a select few events inevitably removes the digressions that indicate that they actually happened (Layton, Nixon, & Lee, 2007; Vrij, 2000), and anonymising the actors means that none of the story can be checked. Thus, the aim of this article is necessarily modest, that is, to generate a response in the reader that allows for a clarification of what it means to dwell in a place and perhaps trigger further explorations as to how this notion might then translate into urban policies, practices and research. I do not propose that my interpretations override other interpretations, merely that they stand alongside other narratives and other life stories. At the very least, each should be raising questions of the other, and this type of ‘dialogue’ (a long process of comings and goings by everyone involved) is a key process in effecting social change that benefits otherwise marginalised people (Foucault, 1981, pp. 12–13; Pickering, 2008).

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